

# Public Service Customer Experience And Equity

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Providing Seamless,  
Intuitive Experiences  
To Populations With  
Diverse Needs

How public service leaders around  
the world can pursue digital innovation  
while refocusing on equity



**WORLD  
GOVERNMENT  
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# To Inspire And Enable The Next Generation Of Governments

The World Government Summit is a global platform dedicated to shaping the future of governments worldwide. Each year, the Summit sets the agenda for the next generation of governments with a focus on how they can harness innovation and technology to solve universal challenges facing humanity.

The World Government Summit is a knowledge exchange center at the intersection of government, futurism, technology, and innovation. It functions as a thought leadership platform and networking hub for policymakers, experts and pioneers in human development.

The Summit is a gateway to the future as it functions as the stage for analysis of future trends, concerns, and opportunities facing humanity. It is also an arena to showcase innovations, best practice, and smart solutions to inspire creativity to tackle these future challenges.



# Executive Summary

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The COVID-19 pandemic has driven many public service agencies to increase their investments in digital technologies.

Their aim is to become more efficient, flexible and better equipped to handle sudden upswings in demand during times of crisis.

Tight budgets, along with economic and political stress, make this a difficult task - all the more so given the public sector's mission, mandate, and commitment to equitably serve a diverse customer base. Governments must meet the needs of people with different preferences, digital skills, and access to technology. These range from the 80-year-old most comfortable talking live with someone on the phone, to the 18-year-old digital native who prefers to seek the help they need online.

To help government agencies develop a more effective, equitable, and human-centered approach to the service experience, Accenture Research conducted a global survey of government service users, homing in on the challenges and preferences of different types of customers organized into three broad user personas. The findings reveal four key actions that, taken together, can help public service agencies reach their goals:

1. Embed equity as a performance metric
2. Actively engage with underserved communities
3. Simplify digital tools and processes, and
4. Redeploy the workforce and provide training to ensure that services are delivered with empathy and designed to center diversity, equity, and inclusion.



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# Introduction

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To meet customer needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations in both the private and public sector introduced or expanded online channels for their operations and services.

To meet continually growing and changing demand, all organizations are under pressure to become more modern, personalized, and efficient. However, the universal mission of the public sector requires them to serve a far more diverse population than market-driven firms. As a result, when modernizing processes, they face a bigger challenge to ensure equitable access for multiple groups with varied demographic, geographic, economic, and other characteristics.

This imperative becomes especially critical in a crisis, such as the recent pandemic, or an economic recession. Research shows that events like these have a disproportionate impact on low-income groups and minorities (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. Adopting a one-size-fits all solution may work well in the private sector, but public agencies would risk leaving vulnerable groups without access to the services they desperately need.

Further complicating this issue is the fact that public sector agencies often face a

trade-off between efficiency and equity when implementing new management systems (Jimenez, 2014)<sup>2</sup>. This is particularly the case in times of crisis, like the pandemic, when a sudden and significant increase in demand for many government services makes efficient solutions essential to reduce wait times and serve as many citizens as possible.

Unfortunately, the implementation of efficient solutions can compromise equitable access to services. While internal stakeholders (i.e., government leaders) often prioritize efficiency in public sector performance ratings, external stakeholders (i.e., citizens) prioritize equity (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021)<sup>3</sup>. For citizens, the perceived equity of public sector services may have a significant impact on trust in government. Research shows that equity in administrative processes leads, for example, to increased trust in the courts and the police (Jimenez, 2014)<sup>2</sup>. Bottom line? Agencies cannot afford to compromise equity in pursuit of efficiency.

# But does there have to be an efficiency/equity trade-off? If so can its impact at least be minimized?

Accenture's 2022 research aimed to explore these questions by better understanding the needs of different citizens and how government agencies can deploy digital tools to improve all citizens' experiences while still addressing equity.

The research highlights the importance of governments taking action to improve service accessibility **before** additional crises arise. This is essential to ensure

existing inequalities do not deepen. Agencies can prepare by establishing equity as a key performance metric, investing in outreach to understand and engage with different customer types, simplifying digital tools and processes, and redeploying the workforce to provide well-informed, compassionate, human-based services to those who need them most.

## Methodology

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Accenture's 2022 survey of 7,500 public service users in 14 countries highlights their challenges, expectations, and preferences. Overall, the results emphasize the importance of simple, intuitive, human-centric and secure government services. Further analysis reveals even more nuance. Using a cluster analysis, Accenture was able to group customers into three broad categories (or user personas) and demonstrate how citizen needs are shaped by frequency of engagement, level of digital skills, access to digital tools and internet access. To provide and design effective services to all, agencies must consider these factors as well as how they relate to characteristics such as income, gender, age, and race. Equitable customer service starts with understanding the variety of user profiles.

# User Portraits

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User needs are influenced by personal preferences, demographic factors, and, crucially, how these intersect. As agencies explore ways to improve customer service, it is critical that they develop a deep understanding of their user base and how their needs may vary. Accenture Research conducted a K-means<sup>1</sup> clustering analysis to group respondents with similar preferences into three personas. Figure 1 shows how the three personas vary according to their degree of digital prowess and familiarity.

By examining the key demographic traits and varying preferences of these personas, government agencies can gain insight into how best to serve their diverse customer base.

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<sup>1</sup>For an explanation of this data analysis methodology see the Technical Appendix

Persona 1

# The Digital Citizen

## The Digital Citizen Is Digitally-Savvy And Confident.

They have more confidence in and a better understanding of online government service processes. These users are very comfortable with technology and 65% are looking to increase their level of digital interaction with government (Figure 2).

Their top three channels for accessing government services are **smartphone app, website, and email**. They express a strong preference for smartphone apps, with 100% of respondents in this group selecting that option as a preferred channel. This group is predominantly made up of higher-income and younger individuals (65% of digital veterans were 45 or younger, 30% were 30 or younger).

## Digital Citizen Saif

Saif is in his 20s and uses digital channels in all aspects of his life. He pays all his bills using his phone and he bought his car using an app. When Saif recently renewed his driver's license, he had to take paper copies of his documents to an office. While he was able to book an appointment online, he still had to wait in a physical line. He wondered why he couldn't have just uploaded the required documents.



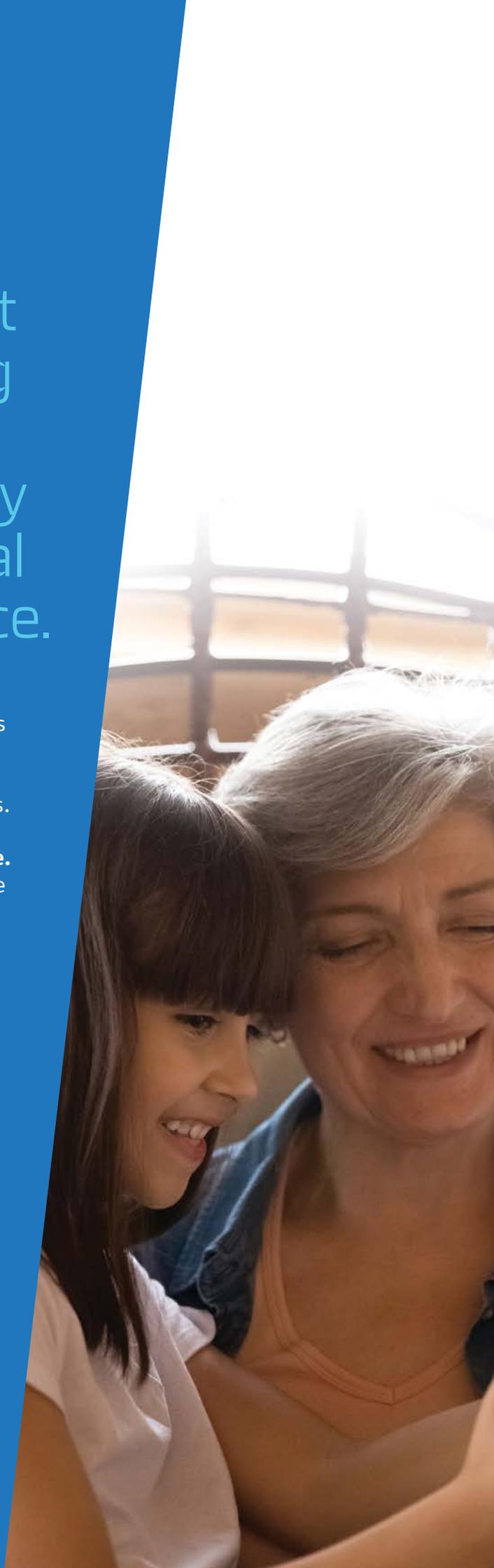
# The Digital Learner

For The Digital Learner, The Biggest Barrier To Accessing Digital Government Services Is Relatively Low Levels Of Digital Skills And Confidence.

Many may want to increase their digital interactions but need additional support to make them comfortable with newer technology such as smartphones, social media sites, or online chatbots. Their top three channels for accessing government services are **in-person, email, or through a website**. This group includes more middle and upper-middle income earners.

## Digital Learner Greta

Greta is a senior citizen. She has a simple question about her pension benefits. She uses a computer to answer her emails, but for more complex digital tasks she typically relies on her granddaughter for help. Greta has internet at home, but it isn't very fast. She does not want to increase her digital interactions with government because it often takes longer and is more frustrating than accessing services in-person. Greta prefers to have her questions answered in-person or over the phone.



# The Wary User

When It Comes To Accessing Government Services, Wary Users Are Intimidated By The Process Itself Rather Than The Technology.

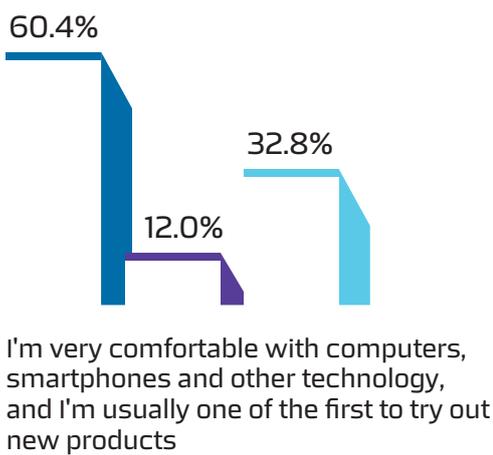
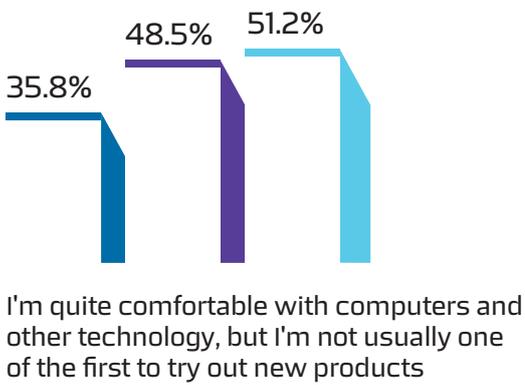
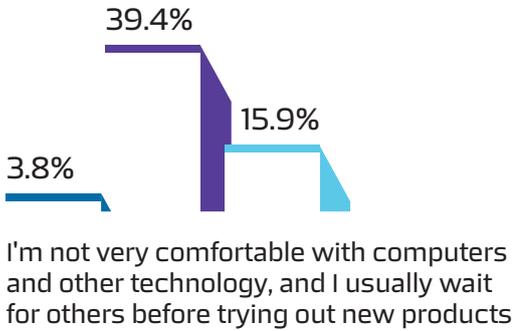
Despite possessing digital skills, wary users favor more human-to-human interactions. Their top three channels for accessing government services are **in-person, over the phone, or email**. Their preference for in-person services is unusually strong. 100% of respondents in this group select it as a preferred channel: they want a human on the other end. This group includes more low-income and lower-middle class individuals.

## Wary User Hana

Hana has a low income, and currently relies on government benefits for herself and her son. She applied for benefits shortly after losing her job during an extremely stressful time in her life. She visited the office to apply for benefits because she felt overwhelmed and was unsure how the process worked. She appreciated being able to talk to a public servant to set up her benefits.

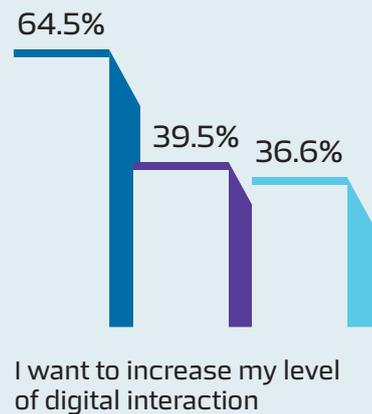
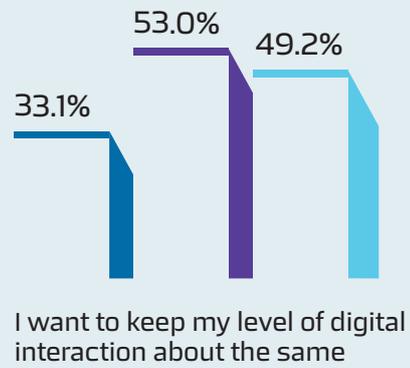
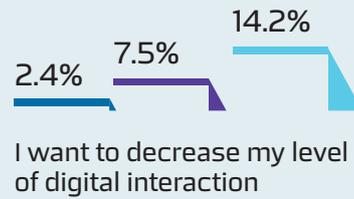


**Figure 1**  
**Digital Level Of Comfort, By Persona**



**Source:**  
 Accenture 2022 Citizen Experience Survey

**Figure 2**  
**Desired Future Digital Interaction With Government, By Persona**



**Source:**  
 Accenture 2022 Citizen Experience Survey

■ Persona 1   ■ Persona 2   ■ Persona 3



## Digital Comfort Dictates Channel Choice

Persona 1, the digital citizen, stands out due to their high levels of digital comfort.\* Unsurprisingly, comfort with technology has a decisive effect on users' preferred channels for accessing government services. Over half (65%) of digital citizens would like to increase their level of digital interaction with government in the future, compared with less than 40% of the other two personas. Digital citizens tend to be younger or have higher income.

Persona 2, digital learners, and Persona 3, wary users, are often from lower-income groups. Both are often hesitant to increase digital interactions but for different reasons. The digital learner is characterized by low digital confidence, while wary users lack confidence when it comes to interacting with government services. Just 47% of wary users agree that they typically know where to begin when accessing a government service (compared to 68% of digital citizens and 58% of digital learners). Only 35% of wary users agree that government agency processes are usually clear and understandable (compared to 57% of digital citizens and 45% of digital learners).

Age and income are key demographic indicators for digital comfort and preferences. Certain public services, such as social services or social security agencies, need to take this into consideration as, by their nature, they are likely to serve a greater number of lower-income and/or older customers.

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\*note: this survey was conducted online and there may be a bias towards users who are comfortable with online surveys

## Key Actions

# Our Research Highlights Four Key Actions For Providing Improved Customer Service To All Users

1. Define and measure equity as a key performance metric
2. Invest in outreach to understand customer needs and preferences, make services more accessible to vulnerable groups and communicate process requirements
3. Develop simple and flexible service platforms that a diverse user base can understand
4. Redeploy and reskill the public sector workforce with a focus on increasing 'human-to-human' services where they are most needed and to provide equitable services.



# 1. Equity As A Performance Metric

A 2021 literature review on equity in public service found that conceptualizations and measurements of equity varied across publications (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021)<sup>3</sup>. Equity may be measured through inputs, processes, or outcomes. Many academics in the field today define equity as a correction of existing imbalances. In contrast to simply advocating equal treatment for all, this view suggests that inputs for service delivery must be greater for those who experience the greatest degree of disadvantage. A 2011 article in the Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory outlines some key equity aspects to consider (Gooden & Portillo, 2011)<sup>4</sup>:

- **Procedural Fairness:** provision of due process, equal protection, and equal rights to all persons regardless of their personal characteristics
- **Distribution And Access** (equity in availability of services/benefits): distribution of services and benefits equally or in such a way that those who are less advantaged receive greater benefits
- **Quality** (equity in the process of providing services and benefits): ensuring that there is consistency in the quality of services and benefits delivered to all groups of people
- **Outcomes:** seeking to achieve an equal level of accomplishment or outcomes in the social and economic conditions for all individuals and seeking to eliminate differences in outcomes for groups

## Make Equity And Efficiency Equal

When reimagining government service delivery, a holistic and inclusive strategy is necessary to ensure all demographic groups receive appropriate levels of service. Most public service leaders agree that equity is crucial. However, in performance management systems, equity is often overshadowed by a greater emphasis on efficiency and efficacy (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021)<sup>3</sup>.

Agencies must not only consider equity an important metric of success for all new initiatives and reforms, they must also measure it. If they don't, equity will likely deteriorate. Historically, administrative and performance reforms in the public sector have had a negative impact on equity (Kroll, 2016)<sup>5</sup>. However, a more balanced performance metric system, backed by agency leaders, can improve equity. To measure and monitor equity, agencies must first define it.

**Agencies need to develop specific equity metrics that align to their operational functions and goals.**

## 2. Engagement & Understanding Customer Needs

To provide services equitably, governments must invest in outreach to understand customer needs and preferences, and encourage feedback, especially from underserved and minority groups. This allows public service organizations to provide users with their preferred channels for accessing the services they need. Strategic marketing campaigns can help raise awareness of available channels and service access processes for customers. This can help reduce both errors and the additional customer support burden required from unclear processes. Engagement is also important for communicating process requirements, deadlines and changes. This need is especially important for citizens without reliable internet connectivity.

To meet customer needs equitably, agencies may need to increase or reorganize their workforce capacity. Many agencies lack the staff allocation and expertise needed to engage effectively with underserved communities who may also be the hardest to reach.

**It is important that agencies identify the profiles of users that need in-person or over-the-phone service most, such as digital learners or wary users, so that they can target limited resources towards them.**

## Case Study: UAE Vaccination Strategy

The UAE was a global leader in vaccinating citizens against the COVID-19 virus, with over 70% of the population fully vaccinated by September 2021 (Suliman et al., 2021)<sup>6</sup>. This success can be attributed to a unified engagement effort. The UAE government was diligent in providing the population with relevant information on vaccination processes and eligibility. They used numerous websites, apps and media channels to provide the population with resources and keep COVID-19 top of mind. Information and FAQs were provided in several languages, including English, Arabic, Urdu, Filipino, and Mandarin, to ensure that all residents were able to easily understand vaccine resources. Residents receive consistent information regardless of the channel they use (El-Kinawi, 2021)<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. Simple & Flexible Digital Tools

## Investing In Equity Doesn't Mean Abandoning Digital Service Channels.

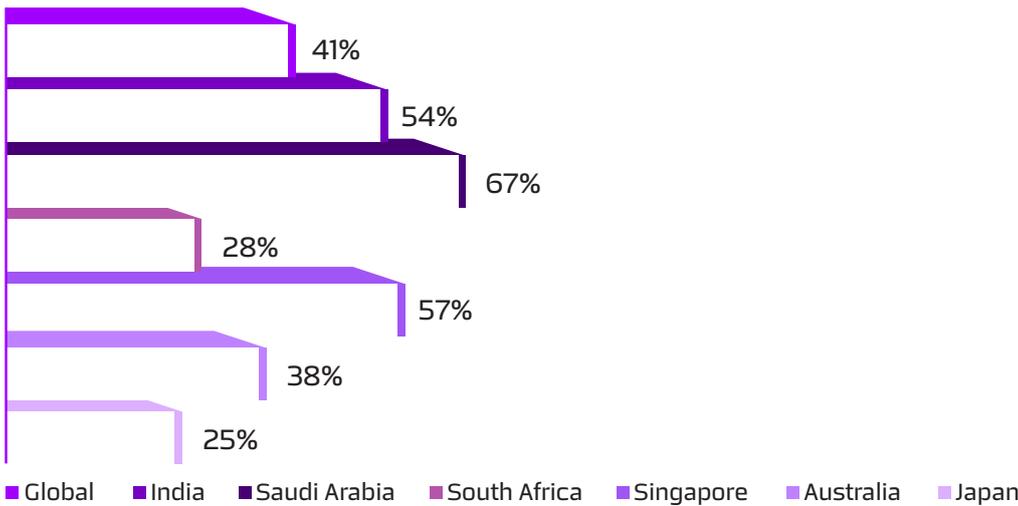
On the contrary, strategically deployed digital tools are essential to achieving the public service mission. A substantial proportion of the population are digital citizens who prefer digital services. Making online and smartphone channels available to them can free up workers to provide more complex and 'human-to-human' services where they are most needed. Back-end digital platforms can manage service requests and workforce efforts more effectively. Data analytics can be used to identify which channels are most effective for which services and AI can help identify high-risk customers that may need additional 'human-delivered support' to receive the services they need. Governments will also need to invest in flexible front-end digital platforms that enable users and workers to move seamlessly between digital and in-person interactions while maintaining service quality.

For all this to work, government agencies must have intuitive and simple digital processes for typical requests. For many public services, this is unfortunately not the case. Less than half (41%) of all survey respondents agreed that government agency processes and interactions are usually intuitive. The result is customer frustration as well as greater demands on human customer support resources than if processes were clearer from the start. Users of government services identified three areas of frustration:

- **The process is too long and confusing**
- **Users don't know what materials they need**
- **Users don't know where to start.**

Figure 3

## Intuitiveness Of Government Services, By Country



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## Case Study: Singapore's Social Security Platform

Planning for retirement shouldn't be stressful. That's why the Central Provident Fund Board (CPF), Singapore's social security organization, applied the perfect mix of technology and skilling to its online experience, making its digital services simple, more accessible and personalized. CPF modernized mainframe applications, migrating eServices to the cloud to lay the foundation for enhanced platforms and system interfaces. At the same time, the organization re-engineered business processes and focused on a comprehensive effort to train CPF officers to work in new ways. Now, everyone — whether they access their information via the web or a mobile device — can enjoy a personalized experience. The new system can handle significantly more user traffic and is easy to maintain and update, so it can age as gracefully as its users. User satisfaction ratings were consistently around 90% after the transformation (Accenture, "Social Security: Securing Life Goals")<sup>8</sup>.

## Getting The Basics Right

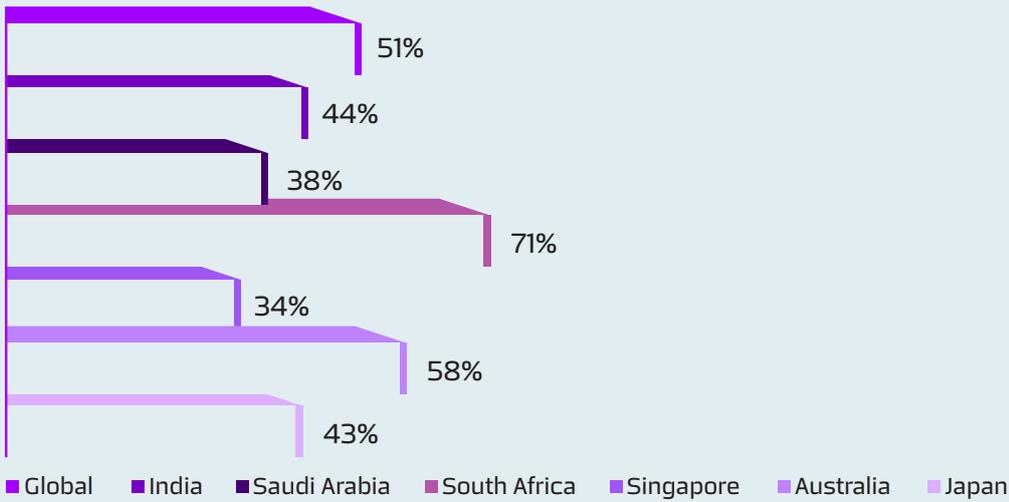
When it comes to public services, consumers want simple, effective processes rather than flashy digital tools. This is good news for public sector agencies with restricted budgets as they don't need to invest in the most expensive, cutting-edge technology - they just need to invest in getting the digital basics right. At least 45% of people say they would be more likely to use digital technology to access government services if the technology was easier to use. Nearly 90% of respondents say they are very or quite comfortable using technology. And yet, 39% still identify 'in-person' as one of their

preferred ways to access information from the government. This percentage is even higher among certain groups of users. Simplified processes could encourage more customers with internet access and proficient digital skills to use online channels, freeing up workforce capacity to serve individuals with greater need for in-person assistance.

**51%** of consumers find accessing government services to be frustrating

Figure 4

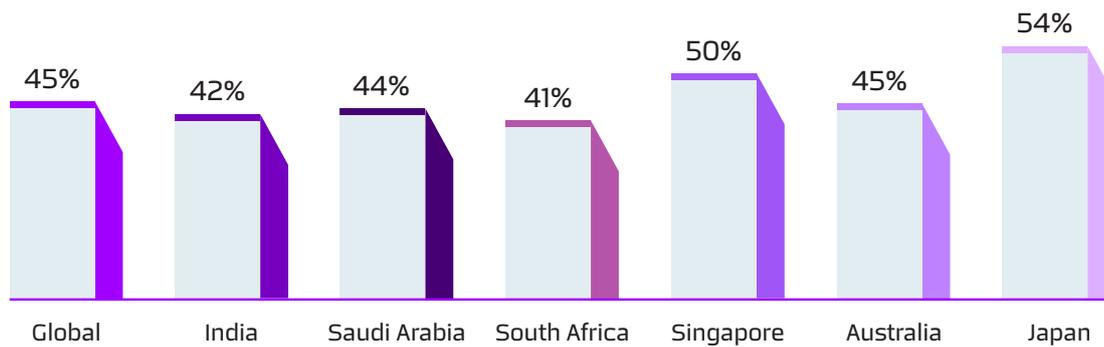
## Level Of Frustration With Government Services, By Country



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Figure 5

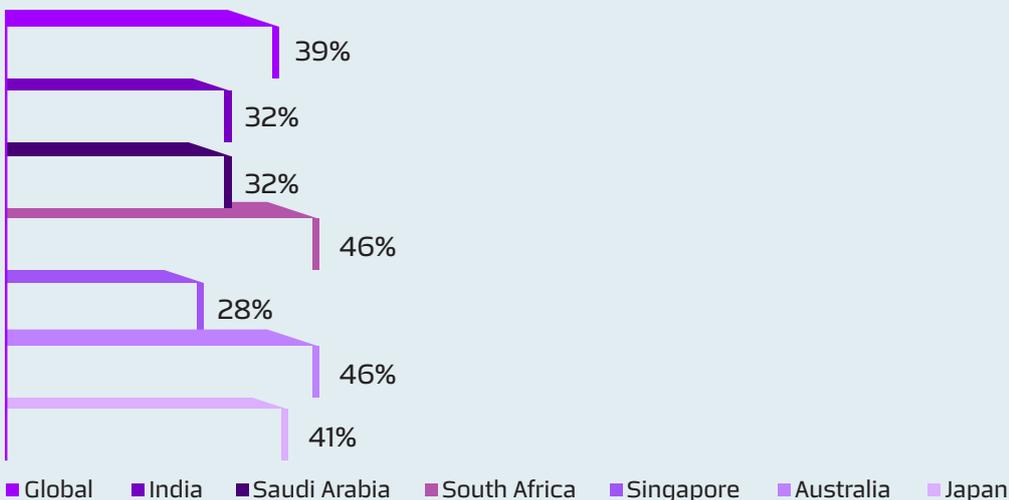
## Likelihood To Increase Use Of Digital Services



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Figure 6

## Preference For Accessing Information From The Government, By Country



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Deploying digital tools strategically allows agencies to provide better, more human-to-human services to those who need them most, without incurring prohibitive costs. Public sector organizations should implement digital solutions with the aim of streamlining and simplifying basic tasks for users, reducing demand on customer support channels for basic tasks. This type of reallocation of resources will benefit not only customers, but also the public sector workforce by allowing them to focus on more rewarding tasks directly tied to the organization's mission.

Simplified processes are only a starting point. Service design must also consider accessibility and equity. How can agencies make services accessible for customers with low levels of literacy, language barriers, disabilities or low tech skills?



## 4. Upskilling The Workforce For Equity Outcomes

Digital tools can enable agencies to redeploy their workforce in more impactful ways, but they'll only realize this benefit if workers are trained not only to perform their new tasks well, but also to ensure that their interactions with the public continue to build trust.

People's trust in public agencies depends on the quality of their interactions with the public sector workforce and government services. To provide efficient, convenient, and human-focused services, governments will need to provide training in how to work effectively alongside digital platforms, building interpersonal skills that complement users' online interactions.

### People-First Service

Governments often serve people during moments of crisis, for example when they are recently unemployed or in need of social services. These are the moments in life when people need additional support and guidance to navigate government services. These interactions should be compassionate and non-prejudicial. Frontline public servants have the power to elevate social equity and improve citizen confidence in government (Lee, 2021)<sup>40</sup>.

Yet, a third of respondents indicated that when interacting with a government agency they feel treated like a number, not a person. This indicates a strong need for customer service, sensitivity, and unconscious bias training. The public workforce must be trained in equity considerations so that they are equipped to serve with an understanding of the barriers that different customers face. Public sector leaders need to train and motivate the workforce to strive for equity in all aspects of service.



## **Case Study: Innovative Training Solution In The US**

Government workers are often called on to support people when they are at their most vulnerable or in need. Caseworkers, for example, might be called upon to assess if a family or individual should receive financial assistance or if a child requires care outside the home. To explore a better way to train caseworkers on the human side of social work, San Diego County turned to a virtual reality training approach. This voice-activated and handsfree training builds an immersive scenario in which trainees step into the metaverse to interview applicants, obtaining and validating information to make benefits decisions in a fully risk-free way. When trainees put the headset on, they find themselves in a cubicle with a family sitting across from them. Over 90% of participants say the training improved their skills in engaging people and provided a realistic expectation of their new role. And 100% would recommend the experience to a coworker (Accenture, “Caseworker Training Reimagined”)<sup>9</sup>.

## Conclusion

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It Is Vital That Agencies Actively Invest In Equity Initiatives, Otherwise Inequity Will Only Increase With New Digital And Performance Initiatives.

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This starts with defining agency-specific equity metrics and targets to ensure that all services are designed with inclusion, diversity and equity at the forefront. In addition, agencies must engage with underserved communities to understand their needs and provide convenient service channels. Through this engagement, agencies can better understand their specific user base.

Efforts should be taken to simplify digital tools and processes to minimize errors and customer service requests. This will allow digitally savvy customers to use less resource-intensive channels. This strategy will also free up the workforce to devote more time to customers who need the most support, such as those accessing public benefits, the elderly, and those facing stressful life events. Lastly, public service leaders should provide trainings to ensure that all employees have a deep understanding of equity goals and how to provide the highest caliber of compassionate customer service to the public.

# K-Means Clustering Methodology

## Clustering And K-Means Summary:

Clustering is one of the most common exploratory data analysis techniques used to get an intuition about the structure of the data. Its objective is to identify subgroups in the data in a way that data points in the same subgroup (cluster) are very similar while data points in different clusters are very different. In other words, we try to find homogeneous subgroups within the data according to a similarity measure. Clustering analysis can be done on the basis of features where we try to find subgroups of samples based on features or on the basis of samples where we try to find subgroups of features based on samples.

For this project, we used the K-means Algorithm which tries to partition the dataset into K pre-defined distinct non-overlapping subgroups (clusters) where each data point belongs to only one group. It tries to make the intra-cluster data points as similar as possible while also keeping the clusters as different (far) as possible. The less variation we have within clusters, the more homogeneous (similar) the data points are within the same cluster.

## The Model

In order to start working on the model, we had to select the survey questions in which the clusters would be created. All these selected questions were categorical variables and as the K-means model only works with numerical data, we had to transform our categorical values to numerical values. For example, if the answers for any specific question within the survey were 'Strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'agree' and 'strongly agree', we would change these values to 0,1,2,3 and 4 accordingly.

And since clustering algorithms including K-means use distance-based measurements to determine the similarity between data points, it's recommended to standardize the data to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one since almost always the features in any dataset would have different units of measurements. In our model, as the questions we selected for the clustering had different answers (meaning a different range of values) we had to also implement a Scaler (MinMax) so all our values satisfy this requirements.

After all the data-processing was done, we ran some model pre-processing tests to determine the optimal number of clusters in the data. For this, we used the "Elbow method" and the mathematical formula provided by scikit-learn. The result was to use 3 clusters, which for our project meant, 3 different personas.

With the results from the model, we then started to play with each cluster to identify the patterns for each 'persona'. This was mostly done by creating crosstabs and comparing each cluster to see the differences in preferences and demographic characteristics.

# About Accenture Research

Accenture Research shapes trends and creates data driven insights about the most pressing issues global organizations face. Combining the power of innovative research techniques with a deep understanding of our clients' industries, our team of 300 researchers and analysts spans 20 countries and publishes hundreds of reports, articles and points of view every year. Our thought-provoking research—supported by proprietary data and partnerships with leading organizations, such as MIT and Harvard—guides our innovations and allows us to transform theories and fresh ideas into real-world solutions for our clients.



# Citations

<sup>1</sup><https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13264>

<sup>2</sup><https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074014550703>

<sup>3</sup><https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13402>

<sup>4</sup><https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muq067>

<sup>5</sup><https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12289>

<sup>6</sup><https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2021.09.015>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-uaes-vaccine-drive-togetherwererecover/>

<sup>8</sup>[https://www.accenture.com/\\_acnmedia/PDF-177/Accenture-Central-Provident-Fund-Board.pdf](https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-177/Accenture-Central-Provident-Fund-Board.pdf)

<sup>9</sup><https://www.accenture.com/us-en/services/public-service/caseworker-virtual-reality>

<sup>10</sup><https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211029227>

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