Barriers to government services

Digital literacy

Digital literacy exists on a spectrum.

At the high end of the spectrum are people who are technologically savvy. They have few barriers to online services, and the barriers they do face tend to be trust-based — that is, centered around whether an online channel will yield them the best results.

In the middle, you have folks who are familiar with basic online interactions but struggle with complex ones. These people may more frequently opt for offline channels, but could be converted to online channels if those were made easier to use and helped the user feel confident that they will achieve their goals, freeing up offline resources for those who truly need them.

At the low end of the spectrum are people who are unable to tell that the www in a link indicates a web address and the @ indicates an email address. These folks will always need offline channels, such as call centers or physical offices, to access government services. Seniors and people with low income are more likely to fall at this end of the spectrum.

Digital access

A correlation exists between digital literacy and digital access. People who are able to afford good internet access at home and own multiple devices are also more likely to be digitally literate. These people have no technical issues connecting to online resources.

Others may have a smartphone but no internet or computer at home. For these folks, responsive web design and intuitive interaction patterns are crucial; otherwise, they will avail themselves of offline channels, which are often more resource intensive for agencies. Often, people in this group rely on public computers (at libraries or senior centers, for instance) where they often cannot get assistance, so it's especially important that online services be easy to use.

People without access to any devices or the internet are also the least likely to be digitally literate, and vice versa. They may use public resources to go online, but if they do use the internet, they are more likely to do so recreationally. This group is the most likely to seek government services through offline channels such as call centers, mail, or visits to an agency office.