Identity in the Society of the 21st Century Advocating for Electronic Governance - Modern Information Society or Modernization of Information Society?

SZAKÁLNÉ SZABÓ, ZITA*

"Everybody knows that some things are simply impossible until somebody, who doesn`t know that, makes them possible."
Albert Einstein

ABSTRACT *We can evaluate the quality of the state's activities primarily through the functioning of the public administration, and if clients often feel that administrators are in a position of power, this can greatly affect the dynamics of their relationship.*
With the formation of communities, the range of issues that affected the entire society and the effective solution of which was felt to be everyone's, naturally appeared. The citizen's expectation is that administration should be simple, fast and should ensure equal treatment. The relationship between public administration and the client is very important, as the quality of public services and the satisfaction of citizens largely depend on how public administration communicates with clients. Therefore, it is important that public administration takes into account the needs and expectations of customers in every case in order to improve customer satisfaction. In parallel with the trust of the client, public administration will be efficient.
Nevertheless, in today's customer-friendly public administration the question is how well electronic administration meets the expectations and possibilities of citizens. In what way do the clerks who perform office work serve according to the possibilities available to them?

KEYWORDS *electronic administration, e-government, NPM, customer satisfaction*

1. Introductory thoughts

The 21st century is undoubtedly the age of information revolution and information society. The rapid development of computing devices and their proliferation have opened up many new ways of obtaining information, and the Internet has made it easier and faster to access almost any kind of public

---

* PhD student, Széchenyi István University, Deák Ferenc Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Doctoral School; notary, public administration organizer, graduated economist in leadership and organization.

information, such as to pursue any business activity without having to go out in person, or to purchase without leaving the house. Nowadays, there are various means of transmitting paper documents electronically as well, with a never-ending list of advantages and disadvantages. However, the development of e-government and the attitude of the public towards it are largely determined by the way in which it is accessed.

Today, information has no borders – it can be considered global – but we still see that the most common reason for a citizen to go to an office is to obtain information, followed by general administration and complaints. What is the reason why very few people use e-government, and e-administration? To understand the essence of the relationship between public administration and the customer, to see what rights the customer has, it is necessary to briefly review the change in the status of the customer and to understand where the customer's exact place in information society is. Furthermore, the question may arise as to whether information society itself needs to be modernised in the already fast-paced and customer-centric world of the 21st century. I have examined this question by studying and researching relevant legislation, academic literature and my own experience, and have tried to provide a picture on the advantages and disadvantages of electronic administration and administrative aspects of customer-friendly administration in our modern information society.

2. The development of the relationship between public administration and the customer

In Europe, it was not until the emergence of the monarchies in the 17th century that the foundations of central administration were settled, and it was only in the 18th century that the discipline of chamberlaincy created an institutionalised framework for public affairs under the rule of law, with social participation, which became an important factor in the bourgeois transformation. Later, however, the changes brought about by the economic boom, in the second half of the 20th century meant that public administration could no longer adapt flexibly, and the need for a service character began to emerge, with the citizen, who over the centuries had evolved from being a subject to a client, becoming an active participant in the administrative process.

However, when can we talk about public administration in the modern sense? In Lajos Lőrincz's view, public administration comes into being where community issues, that are felt by the whole of society, arise and where the whole of society contributes to their resolution. It is a process that has taken place over a long period of time in which a social effort, integrated to serve individual interests, has been elevated to a dimension that can be called community. This is why the first systems of community administration can be said to have emerged in societies based on irrigation and water management, where the growing needs of society could be met through close cooperation in advance, with the administrative elite being made up not of those with birthright privileges but of

selected individuals chosen on the basis of professional merit.[1] At the same time, public affairs were elevated by social consensus to private affairs, public functions were separated from individual private interests, public money from private money, and a vertical and horizontal division of labour and hierarchical administration were established.[2]

Both overseas and in Europe, the First World War and the subsequent recovery process, the Great Depression and the preparations for the Second World War brought about the need to strengthen public administration. Everywhere, strong and consistent enforcement, concentration of power and absolute obedience to the head of the executive were expected, but to no avail. Personal relations were – are and will be – present in the administration, which go beyond the principles of organisation. By the 1930s, citizens' trust was based on professional administrative activity and the term 'service administration' emerged. A term which referred to the economic nature of the administration's activity, i.e. the main purpose of public services was to meet needs. By that time, however, the not entirely clear-cut theory of public administration organisation, i.e. New Public Management (NPM), established that the measure of customer-friendly public administration was citizen-friendliness, which meant clear rules, simpler procedures, deregulation of unnecessary regulations and quality services. However, the methods and principles of NPM cannot apply to all countries and cannot have a universal impact.

The 1990s also saw the emergence of another dominant trend within NPM, namely the idea of electronic public administration which emerged in the Anglo-Saxon area, more specifically in the United States. This not only brought citizens closer to public administration, but also enabled them to be involved in economic and political processes, since from then on the Internet was available to everyone. It can therefore be said that the Internet, the global network, opened up the possibility of easy exchange of information. It must also be clear that the customer is generally unable to judge whether a given public administration is operating legally or cost-effectively, but can in any case judge whether it is able to deal with his or her affairs quickly and conveniently. It can also be argued that traditionally rigid administrations are no longer able to meet the challenges of the technological age[3] and that administrative reforms need to be redirected towards citizens' charters, in line with quality objectives.

3. The development of e-government

One of the characteristics of public administration is that it is a very complex and intricate team effort, requiring the simultaneous application of a variety of

---

[1] Edgar Norman Gladden, *A History of Public Administration: Volume II: From the Eleventh Century to the Present Day* (Routledge, 2019), 87.

[2] Karl August Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (Yale University Press, 1957), 556.

[3] David T. Osborne & Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing government: How the entrepreneurial spiritis transforming the public sector* (Addison-Wesley, 1992), 212–220.

different approaches. Another is that it has a direct or indirect impact on almost every aspect of people's lives. The huge administrative burden and the rigidity of administration, which is bounded by strict rules, are still one of the main problems facing public administration.[4] The main difficulty, however, stems from the very nature of public administration, in the case of which it is extremely difficult to make any changes to a complex bureaucratic organisation. and the inevitable conflict with the staff working in the office adds to the difficulties as well.[5]

Public administrations are constantly changing and transforming. Since 2010, one of the main thrusts of this transformation has been to improve customer-friendliness.[6]

"For the term 'customer friendliness' to be more than just a slogan, and for the customer to leave the customer service department truly satisfied, a number of conditions must be present at the same time."[7]

Just as the institution itself has changed over the decades, so has the legal position of the citizen and his or her status with the state transformed. Sometimes earlier, sometimes later, the interaction with the customer has become the alpha and omega of the output of the administration, the success of which depends on the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the customer.

The customer has clearly become the focal point of administrative modernisation processes. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the idea of e-government[8] has been created as a defining feature of NPM,[9] with the advantages

---

[4] Balázs Benjámin Budai, *Az e-közigazgatás elmélete* (Akadémia Kiadó, 2016), 285.

[5] Due to the characteristics of a bureaucratic organisation, the workload of the administrative workforce is very unevenly distributed: there is a contrast between often overburdened staff and those who can easily be replaced by more efficient organisation and automation.

[6] By customer-friendly administration we mean an administrative model and its practical expression, which provides an adequate response to the problems and challenges of practical life through the methods, procedures and tools used. This model is flexible and adaptable to real challenges, thus helping citizens in their daily lives and helping market players to be competitive.

[7] Andrea Bajnok, "Ügyfélbarát kommunikáció," in *Ügyfélszolgálati készségfejlesztés. Tréning háttéranyag,* ed. Jenei Ágnes (Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem, 2017), 11.

[8] There are two main national models for eGovernment solutions: (i) eID model, (ii) service-centric solutions. The eID model is based on the use of an ID card, which can identify the user electronically, to request e-services. The core of this model is that it focuses first on enabling the state to connect with citizens and organisations, and then on extending the range of electronic services. This model is used in Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium, among others. The service-centric model strongly promotes the quantity and quality of services in particular, by bringing together the different services in a single portal and allowing for personal identification. Among the countries that have adopted this approach are Denmark, Germany and Hungary.

[9] In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister John Major's Citizens' Charter, drafted in the 1990s in the spirit of the NPM, made the issue of public service quality a central theme, and considered citizens as consumers with a right to expect quality service. It gave customers safeguards such as choice, accountability of the authority, transparent

of speed and convenience, and the disadvantages of impersonality, cost and lack of security guarantees. It was developed in response to pressure from several quarters: on the one hand, pressure from the European Union, which had to comply with the requirements of the European Union, and on the other, pressure from below, that is to respond to information society. However, the compulsion does not mean that this is a necessary evil, since the arguments in favour of it are considerably weightier than the arguments against it.[10]

A modern, service-oriented state takes the opposite approach, i.e. it does not advocate the exclusivity of efficiency and effectiveness, but looks at the necessity and effectiveness of services. At the heart of a service provider state is the client, for the sake of whom the state removes all barriers, including distance, physical, communication or even electronic access barriers.

3. 1 Information society in the context of global transformation

In the context of the emergence of e-government, the phenomenon of information society should be mentioned, which has become very widespread in recent decades. The concept of information society has become a catch-all term for social transformation taking place in the second half of the 21st century. It has been defined in many ways over time, as it is a highly abstract concept based on assumptions about the areas of life in which significant changes are taking place. "A new type of society transformation and development is driven by the production of information [...] goods [...]" - Yoneki Masuda.[11]

"A society in which [...] information is used as an economic resource, the community makes better use of it, and behind all this, an industrial sector develops that produces the information it needs." - Nick Moore.[12]

"A society that organises itself around knowledge to control society and manage innovation and change [...]" - Daniel Bell.[13]

It can be seen that the concept of information society is a quite complex concept. This complexity is due to the fact that the phenomenon itself is not clearly analysed and presented in scientific discourse. It is also important to note that e-government is also driven by the imperative of information society itself, in which the awareness and training of citizens are of key importance.

---

procedures, code of conduct, complaints handling, etc., aimed at improving the quality of public services.

[10] The use of info-communication technologies and networks has improved the flow of information and, along with it, the consultation on policies. With better communication, trust reaches a higher level, so that citizens' commitment to achieving goals is also improved, which consequently can strengthen the will to participate and pursue a dialogue.

[11] Avornicului Mihai, László Seer, Benedek Botond, *Identitás a XXI. század információs társadalmában, az internet hatásai* (Budapesti Gazdasági Egyetem, 2016), 70.

[12] Mihai, Seer, Benedek, *Identitás a XXI. század információs társadalmában, az internet hatásai*, 70.

[13] Mihai, Seer, Benedek, *Identitás a XXI. század információs társadalmában, az internet hatásai*, 70.

As the developed countries of the 21st century gradually began to enter information society, it began to have a significant impact on the future, since effects of mass communication mean that individuals are less and less likely to make decisions on their own, but are more and more often under the influence of others. At the same time, even the most technophilic theorists acknowledge that technology will not resolve all social and economic contradictions in the future, as social inequalities will always be reproduced in some form. In the long term, however, the winners in information society will be those who use and benefit from info-communication techniques on a daily basis and are able to learn new skills. On the other hand, the losers will be those who do not have access to these technologies and are not able to develop their skills. Consequently, digital divide[14] between the two will be created. Implicitly, it is the task of all governments to address this divide and bring the lagging groups back onto the 'winners' side, which can only be done through strategic means. The role of the state in its own public administration is the most important task for the study, and it must also encourage itself to make progress.

More and more information is wanted, as fast as possible, at the same time and even through the same channel. We are constantly multitasking and spinning, dictated by newer and newer emerging technologies, and we feel the need to keep up with the times to be and stay winners in the long term. Nevertheless, information dominance is only one feature of information society, and overemphasizing it can lead us astray.[15] It is the task of public governance to recognise the problems that arise and to recognise that information society will helping the economy to move to a higher level of development, and it is the task of public administrations to create the conditions for success and to use their own knowledge and networks to stimulate economic innovation.

3. 2 An axiomatic approach to e-government and platforms for modernisation

Nowadays, e-government is a well-known and increasingly suggestive expression. However, only few can actually grasp its essence due to its interdisciplinary nature, which often presents itself as a complex and intangible task that is approached by many in various ways. Its essence is holistic, as it focuses on the more efficient and effective performance of tasks necessary for the functioning of the country's bureaucracy, allowing the maintainers of the system to handle their affairs in a more convenient and carefree manner.[16]

---

[14] The digital divide, also known as the e-gap, occurs where per capita income does not allow a household to afford access to the internet and the requirements to learn, maintain and develop computer skills. The existing e-gap cannot be solved and can only be prevented through public and private support. As a consequence, the user may develop a hatred of the unattainable, as he or she will not see the benefits of digitalisation.

[15] László Z. Karvalics, "Információs társadalom – a metakritika hiábavalósága és gyötrelmessége," *Információs Társadalom* 7, no. 4 (2007): 107–123.

[16] Budai, *Az e-közigazgatás elmélete*, 39.

By taking a horizontal approach, we can examine the characteristics that permeate the entire public administration, which is suitable for uncovering its regularities. Where we observe regularities, the axiomatic approach naturally arises. By fitting the identified findings together , we obtain a more and more seamlessly describable system of e-government operations. It is clearly visible in the diagram below that e-government emerged at the intersection of three fundamental fields. However, we must also include other fields around this resulting triangle, not forgetting about sociology, psychology, and social psychology. Considering that continuous and substantial educational and methodological background is necessary for e-government, we must mention the fields of pedagogy and andragogy. This illustrates that the development of certain e-government services follows a specific cycle, where the interactions of various fields of study are repeated. It is also an interesting experience that following a specific direction when traversing the established triangle and the areas circumscribed around it aids understanding.
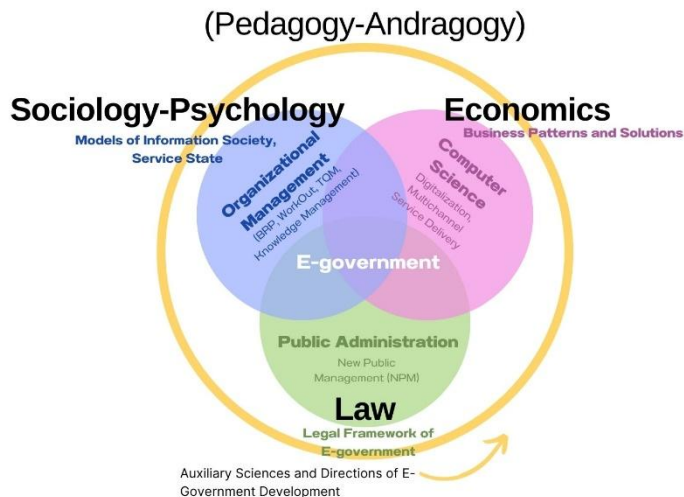
FIGURE 1: AREAS OF E-GOVERNMENT APPEARANCE
SOURCE,[17] OWN EDITION

The above-described activities are referred to as service-oriented public administration, the main element of which nowadays is for the administration to go to the client, not the other way around. In practice, this means that administration should be present where the clients are, and since a significant portion of clients already handle their affairs online, administration should also integrate into the digital life cycle. On the other hand, it is important to note that e-government is not synonymous with the internet, as the internet is merely a communication channel.

---

[17] Budai, *Az e-közigazgatás elmélete*, 39.

It is generally believed that the application of various technologies has brought about fundamental changes in the operation of public administration, as it has created the opportunity for electronic administration and has resulted in a significant improvement in the quality of the municipality's relationship with the population. It is crucial, however, that the mindset of those working in public administration changes appropriately, that sharing of information and knowledge flowing beyond institutions is strengthened, and that political leaders are committed and set an example for their civil servant colleagues. In terms of skills, it is necessary to highlight and strengthen the development of digital literacy, and to establish the routine use of information and communication tools for both the population and the officials involved in handling matters and last but not least, the wider use of m-government.

3. 3 M-government as a mobile technology for responsive governments and connected societies

M-government, or mobile government, refers to the strategic use of government services and applications on mobile phones. It aims to facilitate the connection between citizens and government and enables convenient access to services anywhere, anytime. M-government solutions significantly align with citizens' growing expectations for convenience, speed, transparency and inclusivity.[18] However, for m-government to meet its full potential, challenges such as digital literacy, privacy concerns, and data security need to be continuously addressed. In some regions, not all citizens may have access to smartphones or internet connectivity, and some might not be comfortable with digital interfaces either. This calls for efforts to improve digital inclusion and to provide alternative access points.[19]

Fortunately, there are states where m-government has recently been adopted which align with citizen expectations: Estonia is a global leader in digital governance, and its *e-Estonia* platform is one of the best examples of m-government. Estonia's e-Government system offers a range of services through smartphones, such as e-residency, X-Road, Mobile e-ID. India's "*m-Government" Services* – e.g., UMANG, DigiLocker, and MyGov –, have made substantial strides in m-government with apps designed to bridge the gap between citizens and government services. South Korea has developed a robust mobile platform called *Government 24* that offers over 3,000 public services, including birth certificate applications, tax filing services, access to public housing information, and national health insurance registration. The government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain has integrated m-government solutions such as *GOV.UK*, which enables citizens to securely access government services via their

---

[18] "*m-Government*," https://www.commonwealthgovernance.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/m-Government.pdf.

[19] Thamer Alshammari, Chris Messom, Yen Cheung, "*M-government continuance intentions: an instrument development and validation,*" https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02681102.2021.1928589#d1e206.

mobile phones. Some services include accessing tax records, renewing licenses, registering births and deaths, or signing up for benefits.

Today's m-government apps do meet citizens' expectations significantly for convenience, transparency, and engagement. By offering efficient, accessible, and user-centric services, they help create a more customer-friendly public administration. At the same time, for m-government to be truly universal, challenges related to digital divide, privacy, and security must be addressed, ensuring that all citizens can fully benefit from these advancements in governance.

4. Customer satisfaction/satisfied customer and quality of service

The basic question of customer satisfaction[20] is what is customer satisfaction defined by? As this is a fundamental issue not only in public administration but also in the world of business, there has been a great deal of research and development work in this area in various countries around the world. However, one of the most important questions is whether there is any correlation between customer satisfaction and the quality of service, i.e. whether customers are more satisfied if they receive a better service.[21]

The relationship between the client and the administrator is fundamentally a very fragile one, given that the client may often feel that the administrator is in a position of power over him or her. This can trigger a hostile attitude from the client - not infrequently aggressiveness out of fear - which the case handler has to deal with. In most cases, however, the client is not even in a position to judge the professional quality of the work carried out. Similarly, we do not know how good a doctor is in his field or how much he follows the literature, but rather we can identify satisfaction with the health service by his personal attitude towards the patient. Consequently, by shaping this, customer satisfaction could be significantly improved. In the same way, the client often does not understand the professional aspects, for example, if he is not entitled to what is requested, he cannot receive it, etc. It is therefore possible to improve satisfaction through personal attitudes, which would require, first and foremost, a reinterpretation of the professionalism of professionals, which is a rather difficult task.[22]

In order to understand the key to increasing customer satisfaction, we need to understand that it stems first and foremost from the tension between expectations and experience, which can be formulated as satisfaction = customer

---

[20] By customer satisfaction, we mean where the customer subjectively perceives his or her level of satisfaction, on a scale from imaginary very dissatisfied to very satisfied, primarily with the service as a whole, and possibly with specific aspects of it.

[21] Another important question and research topic is what and how to improve in order to increase customer satisfaction.

[22] György Gajduschek, *Ügyfélkapcsolatok és ügyfél-elégedettség a közszektorban* (Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem, 2014), 16.

experience/expectation.[23] The following figure summarises the factors that determine the level of expectations.[24]

FIGURE 2: EXPECTATIONS AND ACTUAL CUSTOMER SERVICE
OWN EDITION

The academic literature has distinguished several aspects of administration, which can be grouped in a variety of ways. The resulting data are extremely useful, as the analyses provide a picture the aspects of which are important to citizens or, on the contrary, which are less important. SERVQUAL,[25] a method also used in the market sector, looks at the following aspects:

---

[23] Gajduschek, *Ügyfélkapcsolatok és ügyfél-elégedettség a közszektorban*, 16.

[24] It is also worth mentioning that four types of electronic administration can be distinguished according to the degree of electronic communication: (i) the application can be submitted electronically, the rest of the procedure is paper-based, (ii) electronic communication, (iii) electronic internal administration, (iv) the decision is also electronic (automatic).

[25] As quality systems have evolved, there has been a growing need for measurement tools in the service sector that can be used to analyse the quality of a service and, if necessary, to support decisions to improve quality. The SERVQUAL model, a model for measuring the quality of services, developed in 1990 by US researchers Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, is a suitable method for providing a central method for the decision support system to be developed. The model is based on the assumption that there is a mismatch between customer expectations and perceived service characteristics. It aims to be a generally applicable tool that can be used to measure service quality. Norbert Becser, *Analysis of the applicability of the SERVQUAL (service quality) model using multivariate data analysis methods* (Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem, Vállalatgazdaságtan Intézet, 2005).

Perspective	Interpretation
Tangibles	The appearances of the company's facilities, equipment, personnel and communication tools.
Reliability	The company's ability to deliver the promised service accurately and reliably.
Responsiveness	The company's willingness to assist customers and provide prompt service.
Competence	The skills, knowledge and expertise required to provide the services.
Courtesy	Friendliness, respect, attentiveness, courtesy
Credibility	Reliability, honestly, sincerity
Security	Risk, no-doubt
Access	Easy accessibility, contact
Communication	Informing the customer in an accessible format.
Understanding the customer	The effort to get to know the customer and their needs.

TABLE 1: SERVQUAL'S 10 DIMENSIONS (ZEITHAML, PARASURAMAN, BERRY, 1990.)[26]

If one accepts that there is a correlation between satisfaction and case handling, but that correlation is not perfectly directly proportional, then it is legitimate to ask what the discrepancy is. Nevertheless, if we know the answer to this question, we can increase customer satisfaction even with relatively little effort. "Given the strong association between customer experience and product branding, leading organisations are now aware that customer experience is the key to strategic synergy in the consistent delivery of value to consumers."[27]

Nevertheless, does customer satisfaction really matter, and if so when and why? The importance of customer satisfaction was first brought into the professional mainstream by NPM. However, it should also be stressed that, while customer satisfaction is a crucial aspect of public services, particularly in the field of public human services, it plays almost no role in the application of public law, and in many cases customer satisfaction can be an indicator of poor performance. Customer satisfaction therefore plays a crucial role in public services.[28]

Dealing with clients requires constant concentration and flexibility on the part of the administrators, which is very demanding, as they need to deal with every situation on the basis of appropriate professional knowledge, empathy and

---

[26] Mohammad Tahir Che Umar, Yusuf Haji-Othman, "*Customer Loyality In Hotel Kasih Sayang Kedah Malaysia A Quantitative Research Side*," https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365825890_Customer_Loyality_In_Hotel_Kasih_Sayang_Kedah_Malaysia_A_Quantitative_Research_Side.

[27] Samsinar Md Sidin, Alexander Tay Guan Meng, "The Effect of Expectations and Service Quality on Customer Experience in the Marketing 3.0 Paradigm," *Journal of Marketing Advences and Practices* 2, no. 2 (2020): 65–84.

[28] The NPM has developed a technique that can make customer satisfaction a reality in the practice of public services. Indeed, the importance of customer satisfaction is present in public administrations in a cross-system way. Gajduschek, *Ügyfélkapcsolatok és ügyfél-elégedettség a közszektorban*, 5.

preparedness. Public administrations can regulate a lot of factors in the workplace, but not how the administrator uses non-verbal means of communication in response to the client's presentation. This is why, in Hungary, since 2010, steps have been taken to reform the public administration system, with the primary aim of restoring public confidence in the state. This has been achieved through the development and continued implementation of the Magyary Programme[29], i.e. the public administration development programme, and the establishment of an office system that establishes a permanent link between the state and citizens, in short, a customer-friendly and customer-oriented public administration.[30]

5. Summary and Concluding thoughts

In this study, I have sought, among other things, to answer the question of how much e-government in today's customer-friendly public administration meets citizens' expectations and opportunities, and how it is served by the administrators who carry out the work of the office, in relation to the possibilities available to them. It is essential that the creation of a win-win situation requires both the attitude of customers and the supportive approach of administrators and, given the constantly changing circumstances, that citizen-customers on the one hand need to be flexible in their approach and that administrators in public administrations on the other hand need to be ready to evolve and to adopt new methods.

The study also discussed the characteristics of the citizen and administrator aspects of customer-friendly administration in the 21st century, concluding that this identity consciousness is not automatic for everyone and can be demanding and require flexible adaptation on both sides. The basis for improving this field is the establishment of a good communication channel, since it is through the means of communication that the relationship between the administrator and the client is established, from the first moment of the client's arrival to the last one. The development of e-government has opened up a new era in customer communication, meeting the needs of society.[31]

---

[29] The public administration development programme, which bears the name of Zoltán Magyary, assumes that administrators have the right professional knowledge and pay constant attention to communication with customers.

[30] Mónika Balatoni, *Közszolgálati Kommunikáció. Ügyfélkapcsolatok Alapismeretei* (Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem, 2017), 17.

[31] Balatoni, *Közszolgálati Kommunikáció*, 38.