

E-Participation – a Collaborative Approach

Matthias Breier, Jessica Oertmann, Konstantin Streißlberger, Stefan Fazekas, Christian Leeb

(Matthias Breier B.Sc, Vocita LVC, matthias.breier@vocita.com)

(Jessica Oertmann, Vocita LVC, jessica.oertmann@vocita.com)

(Konstantin Streißlberger, Vocita LVC, konstantin.streisslberger@vocita.com)

(Stefan Fazekas, Vocita LVC, stefan.fazekas@vocita.com)

(Christian Leeb, Vocita LVC, christian.leeb@vocita.com)

1 ABSTRACT

In late 2016 we conducted a survey with citizens in the German-speaking region. The aim of the survey was to investigate the relationship between citizens and politics and to figure the possibility of an online participation tool out. Our research is based on an online survey in which we received 155 answers from different countries, constituting that interest in politics is based on living environment, age and municipality size. The survey further showed that today's landscape of participation tools and forms is not enough for modern standards. Time as limiting factor decreases the political engagement of citizens, another restricting factor is the political-party-system. Most citizens are not able to identify themselves with only one specific political party. For some decisions they follow the one on other issues they follow the other party. Vocita is a tool developed for political issues. Based on a surveytool its target is to connect citizens to their municipalities and to create a new form of engagement. By giving the people a voice Vocita aims to democratize the political system.

Keywords: E-participation, public administration, consultation, decision making, ICT

2 E – CITIZEN PARTICIPATION – A BACKGROUND REVIEW

Governments are responsible for enhancing their citizens' possibility to participate. Due to the United Nations Public Administration Country Studies, this right on participation can be found in 150+ countries worldwide. Furthermore, some governments do not have the technological knowledge or the financial depots to fund solutions to complex problems alone, they need their citizens' help. However, with the use of modern information and communication technologies, new and cheaper solutions can be found. A new possibility of reaching citizens and communities has arrived (United Nations, 2014).

By using modern ICTs, governments are able to provide a new way of communicating with their citizens. Citizens are now able to engage easily and solutions can be detected together. Based on this foundation, the United Nations (2014) define e-participation as “the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy and decision-making in order to make public administration participatory, inclusive, collaborative and deliberative for intrinsic and instrumental ends.” (p.61)

Although e-participation is a growing field of interest in recent years it is important to mention that conventional types of communication cannot be substituted. Offline media like paper communication, face-to-face meetings, phone calls et cetera are as important as in former years. Nonetheless, to reach all groups within a community an online approach is needed (United Nations, 2014).

There are still some officials preventing e-participation to flourish while others have already recognized that a sustainable development can only be achieved with citizens' engagement.

Generally a three level model is used to describe e-participation. Based on the pillars of e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making a continuum from “active” to “passive” engagement is described. By getting on the active side of the continuum the complexity of a suitable solution is getting bigger. Due to this e-information as first pillar is the most common one.

E-information is a passive form of engagement and could be described as a one-way communication. Political institutions provide information online for the citizens. Examples are homepages of these institutions, Facebook pages or groups and online media. Nevertheless e-information is a very important part in the participation process. Without the possibility of providing information the following steps of consultancy and decision-making cannot be fulfilled. 95% of all countries already use e-information to communicate with their citizens. This pillar can be seen on all levels of institutions, independent of municipality, city or state.

E-consultation is an active form of the participation process. The institutions take advantage of the knowledge the citizens have and try to make it useable for policies, services and different projects. This special form of crowdsourcing is more complex than the pure information of people. However, the occurring results can have strong impacts on the future of a society (United Nations, 2016). For e-consultation Social media is mentioned to be important, because of the easy accessibility and the low costs.

The third pillar is e-decision-making, which aims for giving the citizens the power to decide online about future trends. This online decision-making process is very restricted and comes with major technical issues left to be resolved, resulting in only few countries already supporting e-decision-making. Nevertheless, this is the holy grail of e-participation and it should be the visionary aim (United Nations, 2014). Only 38 countries have mentioned that the outcomes of an e-consultation process lead to new decisions. An issue occurring within the decision-making process is the question on how the processes are planned and executed (United Nations, 2016).

In the recent two decades participation changed and further developed strongly. Starting from only conventional forms of offline participation, meanwhile first online tools were introduced. Different institutions are developing their own types of participation to get the greatest advantage out of those new tools. However, it still remains a problem to develop strategies for e-participation, which is mentioned as an important part before introducing different tools.

The first step should always be an analysis and the creation of a vision, as well as the aim that should be reached. Based on this analysis, a fitting tool can be identified. The second step mentioned by the United Nations is to ensure that legal frameworks are appropriate for the tools used. The following important move for institutions is to check if the human resources needed are all available. Knowledge on digital topics, social media and so on are necessary.

The citizens' motivation to participate is a crucial factor. In former years we could observe a stronger drive for participating in decisions - and a lot may have lead to much better results, if the affected ones were asked. Leaders often use the argument that people are not interested, however a study (Spiegel, 2012) shows that people's interest increase with the possibility to participate. So 83 % of 1.000 asked mentioned to be higher interested in political decisions if they can participate on the topic.

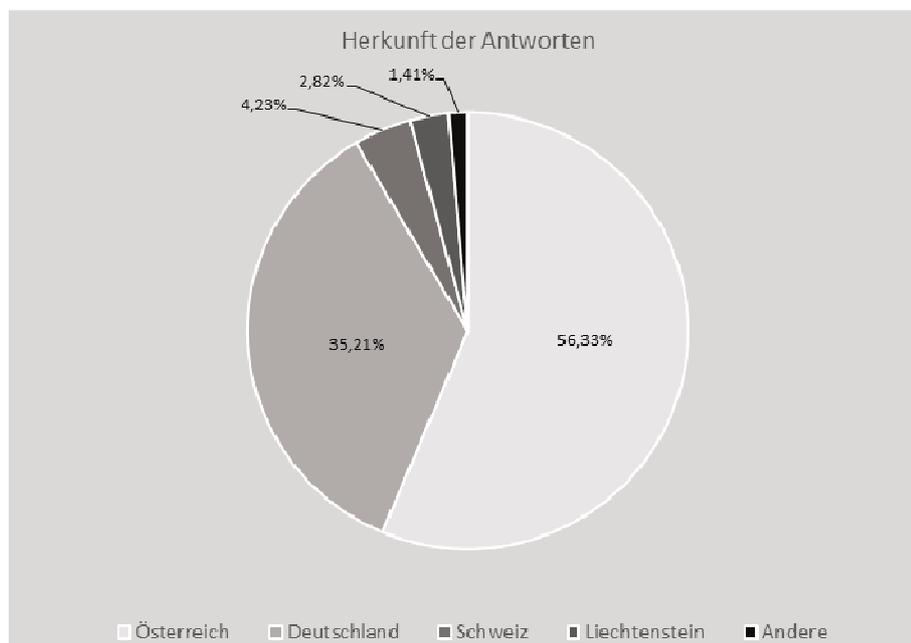


Figure 1: Distribution of Answers

3 METHODOLOGY

For this study the team conducted an online survey with SurveyMonkey. The survey was distributed among several online media and different communication forums in the German-speaking area. A total amount of 213 answers could be gathered. After deleting incomplete surveys, a basis of 155 answers were useful for the statistical analysis.

Correspondent to gender distribution we could reach 55% men and 45% women, whereas 50% of the answers came from urban regions and the other half could be gathered from rural areas.

Austrian citizens, followed by 26% (fig. 1) from Germany, provide 53% of all answers. Switzerland and Liechtenstein are represented by 14% and 7% of all answers. Data collection started in early October 2016 and lasted two weeks.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our survey questioned the interest in politics. The answers showed that political interest is depending on the living environment, municipality size and age. In rural regions the interest is higher than in urban regions. It further decreases with the growing size of municipalities. The bigger a municipality is, the lower is the citizen's interest in politics. From an age perspective we can observe that political interest starts with 31 years. Citizens younger than this age do not show political interest, however they give qualitative answers why they do not.

From a qualitative analysis side we can see that the main reason people are not interested in politics is missing implication. Citizens seem to be frustrated that political decisions often take a lot of time. On municipality level another problem is that they often do not follow a communication strategy. Municipalities should concentrate on communicating their implications to their citizens. With this stronger communication they can show their voters the implications and success stories.

Another question we asked was about political engagement. 85% mentioned that they do not engage in politics. Citizens mentioned that they do not have time or interest in engaging in politics. Another factor brought up by citizens was the lack of identification with a political party. To put it in a nutshell: A fitting solution for citizens' participation is missing.

In a final question we asked if citizens would be interested in participating if fitting online based solutions were provided. On a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 an average value of 4,45 showed high interest of citizens in engaging.

5 VOCITA – SHAPING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Vocita's purpose is to bring citizen participation into the digital age by enabling the democratization of the decision making process in closed communities with the aim to improve the decisions taken.

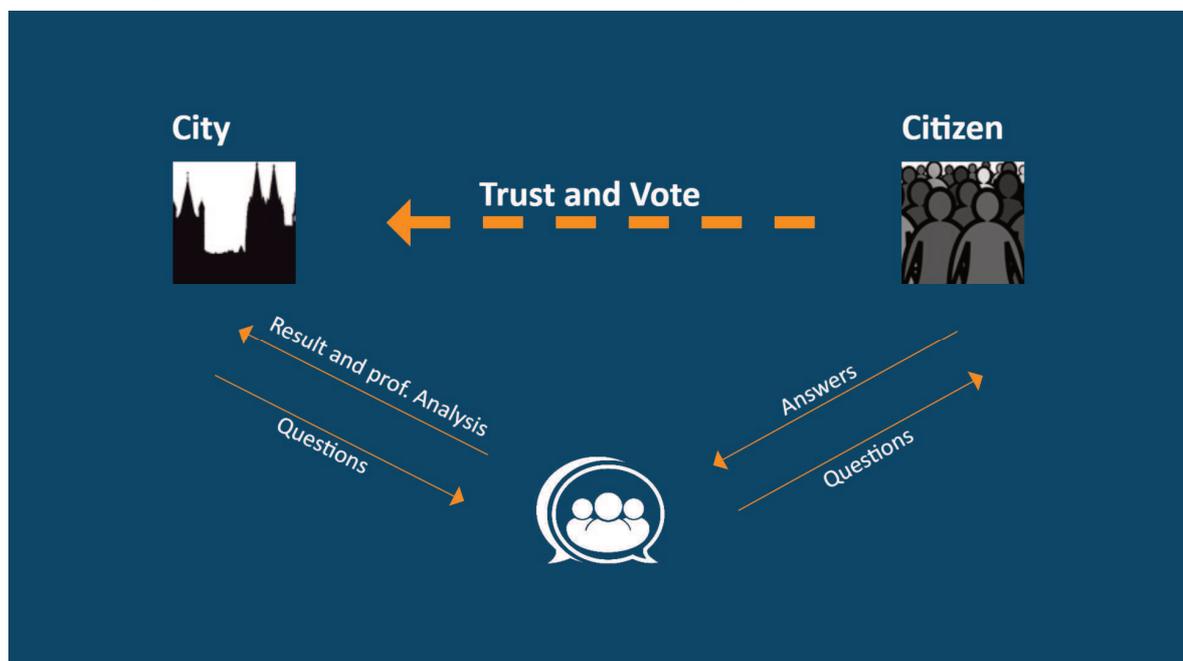


Figure 2: The Vocita Platform Solution

Vocita (fig. 2) pushes political participation into the digital age, by creating an online community, identically to the citizens living in a municipality. Thereby the citizens can participate in the decision making process of their municipality. Furthermore because of the low cost solution the mayor can ask more frequent questions,

resulting in an even better integration of the people. Based on the raw data of the answers collected and a detailed statistical report the mayor can take the best decisions and secure the trust of his citizens.

In this process Vocita offers the following advantages:

- Vocita ensures citizens can participate in the decision making process by an up-to-date method, saving them a lot of time in comparison to existing possibilities.
- Vocita ensures that know-how of citizens is transferred directly to the decision takers.
- Vocita ensures that citizens can participate anonymously.
- Vocita ensures a high level of user identification, so that the mayor can be sure that people, who take part in the survey are really citizens of his community.
- Vocita allows to ask selected groups within a municipality.
- Vocita ensures increased interest politics, as people are integrated stronger
- Vocita ensures a higher acceptance of decisions, as they are made by citizens themselves and compromises are based on well-grounded analysis.
- Vocita aims to increase trust and faith into the political system, resulting in a higher probability of reelection.

Community

To use Vocita (fig. 3) the mayor creates one or more communities. The overall community shall include all citizens. The different sub-communities can be separated without limitations. After setting up the communities they can be handled by the municipality. The municipality can check who is in the community and they can delete people of the community if they move.



Figure 3: Instance on how Communities could be Structured

Verification

Generally we are going to support different stages of security. For municipalities we are first integrating the safest stage. This one can be compared to the online application for a voting card in Austria. The safety stage is described in the following.

The user verification is an important factor for Vocita’s business model. We have to make sure, that only people allowed can use the Vocita service and attend at a questionnaire of a municipality.

For that reason the municipality verification process is divided into two separate parts:

- In part one Vocita makes sure that only people living in the municipality are able to get into it's community. To do so the municipality is able to download codes, which they can send to their citizens. These downloads are immediately integrated into a mass sending, that can get printed afterwards. The code is integrated both in form of QR code and in numbers to ensure a high safety level.
- In part two of the verification process, Vocita makes sure, that people can only get into one and the same community once. So they have to scan their passport to get into the new group. After an internal verification, we can ensure that the personal data and the person that applied for the community are identical. With this security standards we can make sure that no bots are on the service.

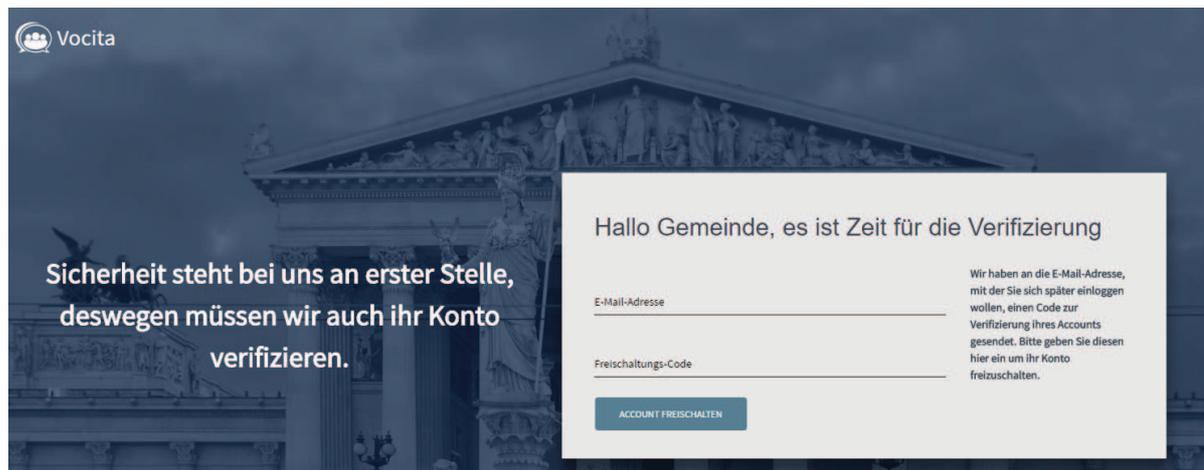


Figure 4: Screenshot from Product, Verification Process

For the second verification there are several potential third party services that could be integrated. Vocita already started negotiations with some of them. The most important factors for the negotiations are data security, customer experience and price.

Questionnaires

For our questioning tool we analyzed several existing tools. Starting with easy question types in the minimum viable product (first version people are willing to pay for) we are aiming to provide a wide range of potential question types in later versions. At the beginning we will start with easy yes/no questions multiple choice and single choice. In the next version we will add open questions with a special process to identify high value answers and low value answers.

If open questions are asked the questionnaire starts a two step principle. The first step is the answer of the question. After a specific range of time the municipality determines, we are starting the second step. With the second step the community can see all answers in a random way. Then they have the possibility to up- and downvote good and bad answers. With this second step we can identify highly valuable answers and answers without value.

As time is an important factor for the citizens we are limiting the maximum amount of questions, that mayors are allowed to ask in one contact. To do so we follow a point system. Every type of question counts for an amount of points. Adding up the questions they are not allowed to reach a limit. With this functionality we want to make sure that questions are short and easy to be answered. People should be able to answer the questionnaire within 30 seconds.

Analysis

After closing the questionnaire the municipality can download the answers in excel or csv data files. However at this point Vocita also offers professional analysis. We invite the users to share specific individual data with us. Resulting in a voluntary profile to improve analysis. With regression and correlation analysis we are going to do multi level testing to show the best decision for municipalities. These reports are customized and directly created through our program and add an extra value to the municipality, as most of them do not have the know how for statistical analysis in their city.

Gamification

We are integrating a gamification on both the user and the customer side. For the customer we are expecting a high response rate because of their intrinsic motivation to change their near environment, however we are also integrating a gamification part. The user gets 'experience points' for his actions (answering questions, evaluating answers, completing the profile, ...). With these experience points we allow him to compare himself with others of the community, the municipality, the district, the land or the world.

For the customer we are creating a gamification part that should increase their interest for asking more questions. We are rewarding them with points for asking questions, giving feedback to the community and implementing ideas. The citizens can compare their own municipality with their neighborhood.

6 VOCITA – SHAPING OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Our survey showed that there is a huge potential for online tools in the field of citizen engagement. To the current day an overall suitable tool is still missing. This gap should be filled with Vocita.

Based on the literature reviewed and the survey conducted we see a huge potential for municipalities and their mayors in engaging citizens deeper into the decision making process. The Spiegel (2012) could already show, that the engagement of citizens has a very positive effect on the reelection of a mayor.

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