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From Access to Adoption: Strengthening Citizen Engagement with Cambodia's Digital Government Services

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Key messages

- More than three-quarters of Cambodians aged 16 or above (76.9 percent) had not used a government digital service in 2025, despite near-universal mobile coverage and rapid uptake of commercial digital finance.
- Among respondents who did not use government digital services, the main barriers are capability and awareness, which together account for 92.1 percent of non-use; data-security and connectivity concerns account for barely 2 percent.
- The two barriers fall on different citizens. Younger, better-educated non-users mostly do not know the services exist; older, less-educated non-users know of them but cannot yet use them.
- Education and digital skill separate users from non-users; location does not.
- Roughly one citizen in five would reach a digital service through a relative or government official. Delegated access is a durable channel, not a transitional stage.
- Some 64.5 percent of respondents expect to visit an office even after applying online, highlighting that digital interfaces have modernised faster than the underlying administrative requirements.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the Cambodian government has made substantial public commitments to the digital transformation of the state administration. Successive national policy frameworks, culminating in the Pentagonal Strategy–Phase I (RGC 2004) and the Cambodia Digital Government Policy (MPTC 2022), position the digitalisation of public services as a central pillar of the country’s modernisation agenda. Across ministries, line agencies and the One Window Service Office system, digital platforms and online application systems have been introduced with the aim of reducing administrative friction and improving service responsiveness.

The supply-side foundations are strong. Mobile network coverage extends across nearly all populated areas, active cellular subscriptions exceed the total population, and Cambodian society has adopted commercial digital finance—mobile money and banking applications—with considerable speed (DataReportal 2024; David 2024). Attention has understandably concentrated on what is being deployed. Considerably less evidence exists on the demand side: the returns to public investment depend not only on what is available, but on whether citizens are positioned, willing and able to use it.

This brief presents findings from the first nationally representative study of citizen engagement with government digital services in Cambodia (Chunly, Khath, and Sak 2026). It examines who uses these services, who does not, and the barriers driving this divide. Crucially, it argues that understanding the specific demographics of non-users—rather than just the overall non-adoption rate—is essential for designing effective interventions. The brief concludes with targeted policy

recommendations for the Royal Government of Cambodia and its development partners.

The analysis draws on a nationally representative survey of 1,200 Cambodian citizens aged 16 or above across twelve provinces, conducted face-to-face by CDRI in 2026 using a multi-stage stratified random sample. Respondents were asked about their use of government digital services over the preceding twelve months, the reasons for non-use where applicable, their digital skills and confidence, and how they would choose to complete a government transaction if an online option were available.

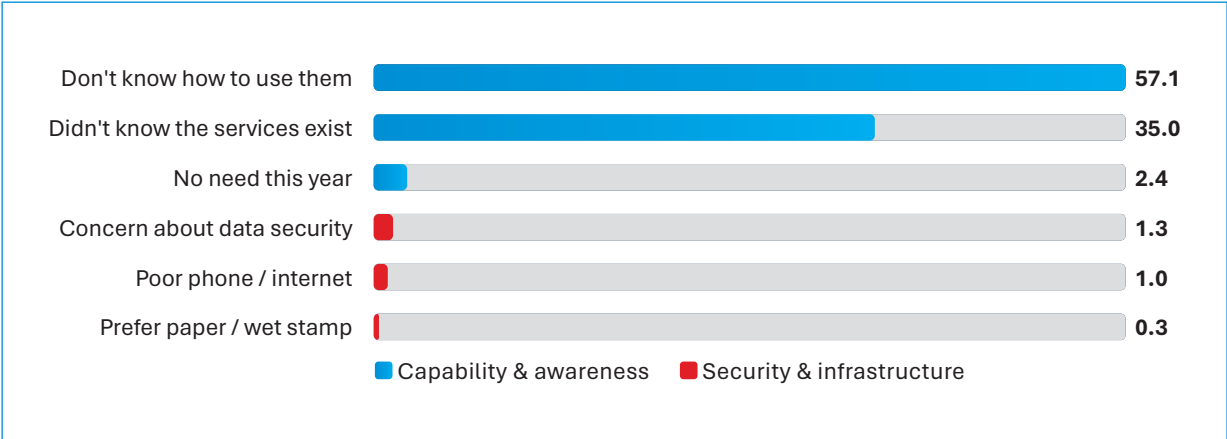
Findings were examined using descriptive analysis and three regression specifications—binary logistic, multinomial logistic, and ordered logistic—to identify which characteristics independently predict engagement once other factors are held constant. Differences reported here as established are statistically significant; where the survey found no reliable difference, this is stated explicitly.

Key findings

Use of government digital services remains low, despite strong foundations and rapid commercial adoption

Some 76.9 percent of respondents had not used a government application or website in the preceding twelve months, while 21.4 percent had done so at least once. This pattern does not appear to be explained by connectivity or by unfamiliarity with digital technology in general: many of the same respondents transact regularly through mobile money and banking applications. The contrast between commercial and public digital adoption indicates that the

Figure 1: Main reason given for not using government digital services



Note: Percent of non-users (n = 923).
Source: CDRI Digital Government Citizen Survey, 2026.

constraint lies in the particular conditions of engaging with the state, rather than in digital technology as such.

Nine in ten non-users point to capability or awareness rather than to security or connectivity

Asked to give the main reason they had not used a government digital service, 57.1 percent of non-users reported that they did not know how to use such applications, and a further 35.0 percent reported that they had not been aware that government applications or websites existed (Figure 1). Together these account for 92.1 percent of non-use.

Concerns about data security were cited by 1.3 percent of non-users, poor phone or internet quality by 1.0 percent, and a preference for paper documents or a wet stamp by 0.3 percent. A further 2.4 percent reported that they had simply had no occasion to transact with government during the reference year. The barriers respondents describe are practical, specific, and addressable through programme design.

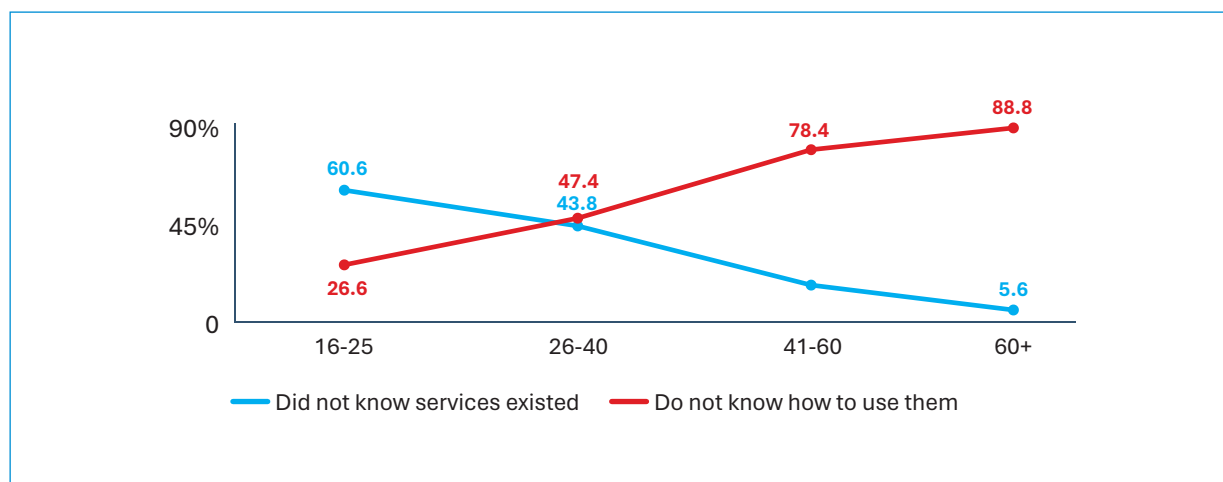
The awareness barrier and the skills barrier fall on different citizens

These two constraints are not evenly distributed across the population, and this is where the findings bear most directly on programme design. Among non-users aged 16 to 25, 60.6 percent had not known the services existed, while 26.6 percent pointed to a lack of digital skills needed to use the services. Among non-users aged over 60, the proportions are close to reversed: 88.8 percent cited skills and 5.6 percent awareness (Figure 2). Educational attainment follows the same gradient.

What appears in aggregate as a single capability gap is therefore better understood as two distinct constraints affecting two different groups of respondents. Younger and better-educated non-users are, for the most part, already equipped to use these services and would be likely to do so once informed. Older and less-educated citizens are often aware that the services exist but do not yet feel able to use them.

The implication for programme design is direct. Public communication is likely to reach the first group quickly and at low cost, but will do considerably less for the second, who benefit instead from sustained support in digital skills. A single undifferentiated approach would address one constraint well and the other only

Figure 2: Main reason for non-use, by age group



Note: Percent of non-users within each age group; $\chi^2 p < 0.001$. Education shows the same gradient.
Source: CDRI Digital Government Citizen Survey, 2026.

partially—and would risk reading the group it failed to reach as uninterested, when the evidence suggests otherwise.

Education and digital skill, rather than location, distinguish users from non-users

Usage of government digital services rises steeply with educational attainment: 10.2 percent among respondents with primary schooling or less, 29.1 percent among those with secondary education, and 73.7 percent among those with post-secondary qualifications. A comparable pattern holds for basic digital skills: 7.7 percent among respondents who could not install an application unaided, against 40.3 percent among those who could (Figure 3). In the regression analysis, educational attainment, the ability to install applications independently, and confidence in handling administrative tasks on one's own were the strongest predictors of engagement.

Location, by contrast, did not distinguish users from non-users. Rural and urban respondents reported similar levels of engagement, at 23.8 and 20.5 percent respectively, a difference

that is not statistically significant, and location did not predict engagement in the regression models once other characteristics were taken into account. Sustained public investment in national mobile coverage appears to have removed geography as a primary axis of exclusion, which suggests that outreach and capability programmes need not be designed on a capital-first basis.

The difference between women and men operates through digital capability

While the survey found no statistically significant difference between women and men in their overall use of government digital services (19.7 percent versus 23.9 percent), there is a substantial and robust gap in underlying digital capability. Only 35.8 percent of women reported being able to install an application unaided, compared with 49.2 percent of men. In the regression models, gender did not independently predict engagement once digital capability was accounted for. Therefore, to prevent a usage gap from opening in the future, policy interventions must target this underlying disparity in digital skills.

Roughly one respondent in five would reach digital services through another person

Respondents were asked what they would do if a government service could be completed online. Some 11.4 percent would complete the transaction themselves on their phone, and 69.2 percent would attend an office in person. A further 19.4 percent would ask another person to act on their behalf—most often a relative or friend (9.6 percent) or a government official at the relevant service office (8.4 percent), and in a small number of cases a paid agent (1.4 percent), as shown in Figure 4.

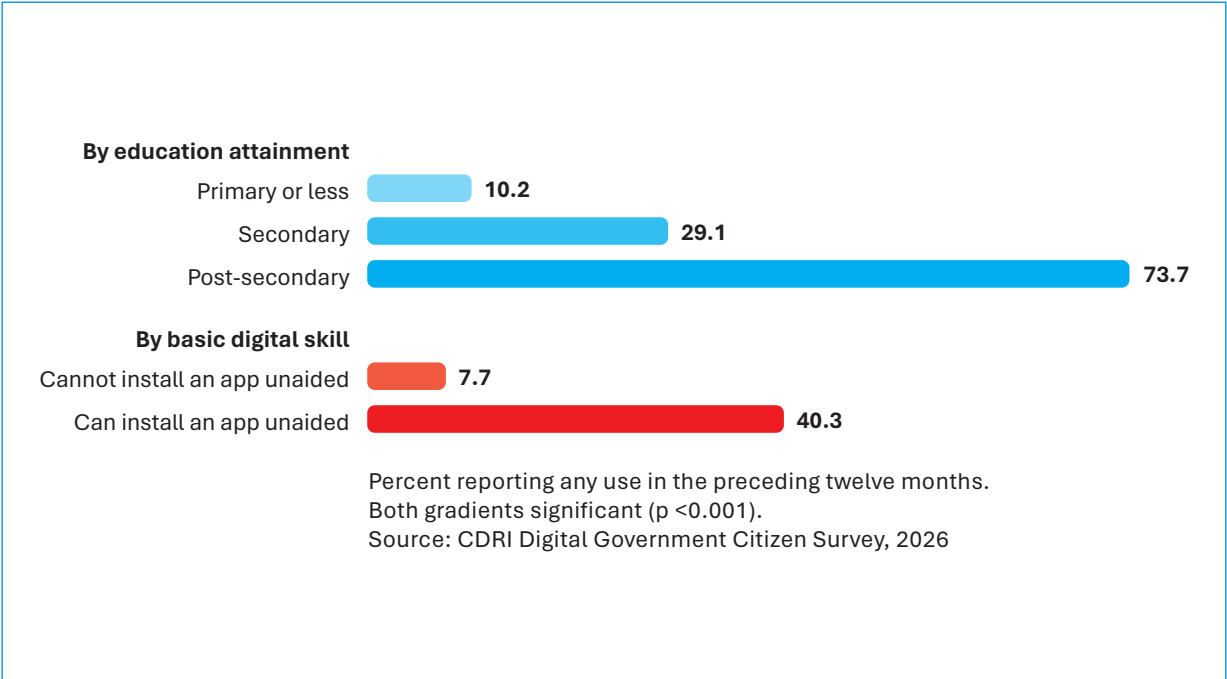
Those who said they would rely on another person generally had lower levels of educational attainment than those who would complete the transaction themselves, suggesting that assisted access may remain important for some groups even as digital

government expands. While cognitive self-efficacy predicts both autonomous use ($\beta = +0.937$) and asking another person to act on one’s behalf ($\beta = +0.595$), the stronger association with autonomous use indicates that greater confidence is associated with a higher likelihood of completing digital transactions independently.

These findings are reinforced by another survey result: around 70 percent of respondents agreed that they would wait for local authorities to tell them what to do rather than proactively seeking out digital government services. Together, the evidence suggests that many users of citizen-facing services expect digital government to involve guidance or assistance rather than purely independent self-service.

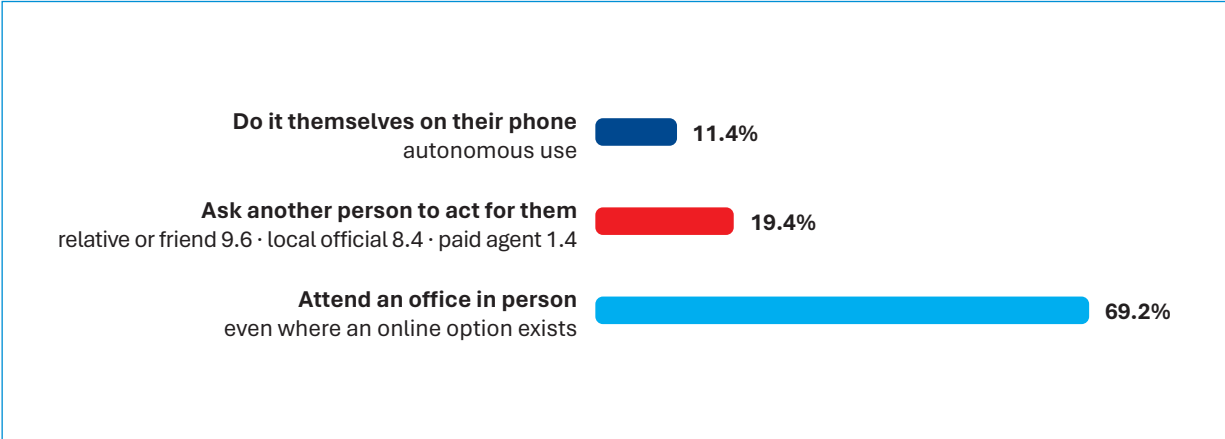
Two-thirds of respondents expect that applying online will not remove the visit to the office

Figure 3: Respondents who have used a government digital service, by education and digital skill



Note: Percent reporting any use in the preceding twelve months. Both gradients significant ($p < 0.001$).
Source: CDRI Digital Government Citizen Survey, 2026.

Figure 4: How respondents would complete a government transaction if an online option were available



Note: Stated preference under a hypothetical online option; n = 1,200.
Source: CDRI Digital Government Citizen Survey, 2026.

64.5%

of respondents agreed that, even after applying for a state service online, they would still be required to attend an office in person to complete it.

This expectation is widely held, by users and non-users alike, and it reflects a genuine feature of current procedures. Wet stamps, ink signatures and in-person verification remain conditions for the legal validity of many official documents. Front-end digital services—the citizen-facing platforms where applications are submitted—have modernised faster than the internal legal and procedural frameworks needed to process them (the back-end).

Where an online application does not remove the physical step, the time saving available to service users is reduced, and the returns to further investment in front-end platforms are correspondingly limited. This front-end/back-end gap is the principal supply-side constraint identified by the study, and it compounds the demand-side constraints described above: respondents who overcome the capability and awareness barriers still encounter a transaction that does not finish online.

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations provide a practical roadmap for expanding digital government service adoption. They are addressed primarily to the Royal Government of Cambodia and its development partners, and are ordered by the sequence in which they can realistically be delivered.

- **Adopt a dual approach that addresses both awareness and digital capability:** While around one third of non-users were unaware that government digital services existed, others face genuine digital skills barriers. Increasing adoption therefore requires both sustained public communication to raise awareness and targeted digital skills training to build confidence and capability, particularly among groups with lower levels of digital literacy.
- **Formalise and equip the intermediaries who provide essential assisted access:** Because many respondents—particularly those with lower digital confidence—expect local authorities to guide their

interactions rather than proactively seeking out digital services, assisted access must be treated as a core delivery channel. Currently, people rely on ad-hoc help from whichever official they happen to interact with at a given agency.

Rather than leaving this assistance fragmented, governments should leverage the public's reliance on local authorities by equipping village or commune officials (or similar locally accessible frontline institutions) to provide unified, first-line support across multiple digital services. Formalising these assisted-digital and by-proxy models will require targeted training, technical support, clear protocols on handling personal information, and explicit prohibitions on informal fees.

- **Target digital capability support, and design it to reach women:** For the larger group of non-users whose constraint is skills rather than information, sustained practical support is required. Programmes should concentrate on the competencies that state interaction actually demands—administrative navigation, comprehension of formal language, data entry, and error recovery—rather than general computer literacy. Additionally, digital interfaces should be designed with lower-secondary education as the working baseline. Because the measurable difference between women and men lies in digital capability rather than in engagement itself, these programmes should be designed with women's participation explicitly in view.
- **Synchronise back-end reform with front-end scaling:** Progressive extension of the legal status of digital signatures, integration rather than duplication of physical authentication steps where these remain legally necessary, and

interoperability between ministry systems would together allow a growing range of transactions to be completed without a counter visit. These reforms take longest to deliver and should therefore begin now. They would also benefit the majority of citizens who continue to attend in person, since a joined-up back-end shortens the procedure at the window as well as online.

- **Differentiate programme design by mode of engagement, and monitor accordingly:** The three modes identified in this study face different binding constraints, and a single undifferentiated strategy would serve at most one of them well. Digital government roadmaps and sector plans would benefit from planning against this heterogeneity rather than treating the citizen base as uniform. Monitoring should likewise extend beyond the share of transactions completed online to include awareness levels, completion without a counter visit, transactions completed through recognised intermediaries, and the capability gap between women and men. Re-fielding this survey every two to three years would allow progress against each to be tracked.

Conclusion

While Cambodia has established the foundational infrastructure for digital government, a key challenge now lies in reaching the majority of Cambodian adults who remain unengaged. The evidence indicates this is a targeting issue rather than a persuasion problem: non-users are generally not sceptical, but rather lack awareness, face capability barriers, or prefer to rely on intermediaries. Translating existing investments into widespread use requires addressing these distinct, segmented constraints. Ultimately, the objective is not to

convert every service user into an independent application user, but to build a responsive system that serves people effectively, however they engage—whether autonomously on a smartphone, through a formalised intermediary, or at a modernised physical counter.

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