

# The Proof is in the Pudding: The Value of Research in the Establishment of a National Online Family Dispute Resolution Service

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## Abstract

Online technologies extend the reach of traditional family services by reducing barriers to access. However, research suggests that technology must also be usable, useful and trusted if it is to be accepted. Recently, the Telephone Dispute Resolution Service (TDRS) was selected to pilot an innovative national project; Online Family Dispute Resolution (OFDR). The aim of the research was to identify barriers to the use of OFDR technology by clients and service staff. Quantitative evaluation of an empirically-supported model of technology adoption and qualitative staff interviews enriched the development of OFDR capabilities. We conclude that research embedded in an action learning approach to technology innovation offers significant benefits to inform and benefit implementation methodology.

## Introduction

As technology matures, community organizations are beginning to consider the virtualization of client services; however, little is known about efficacy (in terms of client outcomes), or the equivalence of electronic methods to traditional face-to-face or phone delivery. The Telephone Dispute Resolution Service (TDRS) is a national family dispute resolution (FDR) organisation operated by Relationships Australia Queensland (RAQ). During mid 2009, the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department provided funding to conduct a pilot of Online Family Dispute Resolution (OFDR) utilising the infrastructure of the TDRS.

The application of technology to a mediation context is not new. Online negotiation systems have existed for nearly two decades<sup>1</sup> and have been used primarily to settle financial disputes via email- or Web-based negotiation systems<sup>2, 3</sup>. To our knowledge, no research has been conducted to date regarding the design, implementation and adoption of online family dispute resolution services utilising video-conferencing technology.

Research conducted in the information systems literature has suggested that user uptake of technology is contingent upon a number of factors; ease of use, usefulness, social influences and access to required knowledge and resources<sup>4</sup>. In addition, recent literature has suggested that trust<sup>5</sup> and web innovativeness<sup>6</sup> could play a role in further predicting users' intentions to adopt online mediation services. We developed an extended version of the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) to assist with the development of OFDR capabilities. Thus, in the context of establishing an innovative national service such as OFDR, preliminary research was conducted to explore client and staff factors affecting the uptake of an OFDR system.

## Method

*Clients.* A total of 560 clients participated in an online survey evaluating attitudes and intention toward the use of an OFDR system. The sample was equally represented by males and females with a mean age of 36.41 years ( $SD = 8.79$ ). A sizeable proportion (56.3%) reported gross weekly earnings under \$600. This voluntary survey was administered to clients by phone following registration for the TDRS.

*Staff.* 127 staff (47% of the organisation) participated in an online survey evaluating attitudes and intention toward the use of an OFDR system, commitment to organisational change and computer self-efficacy. In addition, qualitative research (in the form of a detailed job analysis and open-ended survey) was undertaken by 19 service delivery staff. The qualitative survey required staff to outline concerns, suggestions and barriers regarding OFDR use.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the utility of technology acceptance research during the establishment of an innovative online service. Considering both staff and client perspectives assisted in implementation planning; moreover, an action learning approach ensured that findings were considered at each stage of the project. In addition to a replication of previous technology acceptance research<sup>4</sup>, findings demonstrated that trust plays a key role in OFDR uptake. Thus, Internet users may still hold reservations about the trustworthiness of online technology, as suggested by previous research<sup>7, 8, 9</sup>. In addition, clients reporting high innovativeness were more likely to intend to use OFDR; capitalising on the enthusiasm of early adopters may assist in the diffusion of OFDR<sup>10</sup>. During this study, client inconvenience had to be minimised; consequently, single-item measures were used with the client sample. Staff response rates were also low (47%), suggesting a biased sample. Future research should consider the relationship between intention and actual usage, which may success in further validating the extended UTAUT within an OFDR context. Exploratory analysis indicated that contextual factors (such as the presence of domestic violence) may further impact on client uptake; future research should investigate these factors in more depth.

## Results

The extended UTAUT model was supported for both clients and staff; respectively, 54% ( $F[11, 538]=56.99, p<.001$ ) and 57% ( $F[6, 78]=18.49, p<.001$ ) of variance in behavioural intention to adopt OFDR was explained by the UTAUT. Across client and staff samples, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence and trust in technology significantly predicted behavioural intention.

*Clients.* Survey data indicated that the majority of client respondents had access to the technologies required by OFDR. Specifically, 85.4% of respondents indicated that they had access to a computer in a private location; of these, 98.1% were connected to the Internet. Approximately half (54.1%) of the sample reported access to a web camera.

*Staff.* Generally, staff were committed to the organisational change ( $M=4.28, SD=.88$ ) required by OFDR. Moreover, affective commitment to change was significantly related to behavioural intention to adopt OFDR ( $r=.7, p<.001$ ). The effect of staff computer self-efficacy on behavioural intention to use OFDR was completely mediated by effort expectancy.

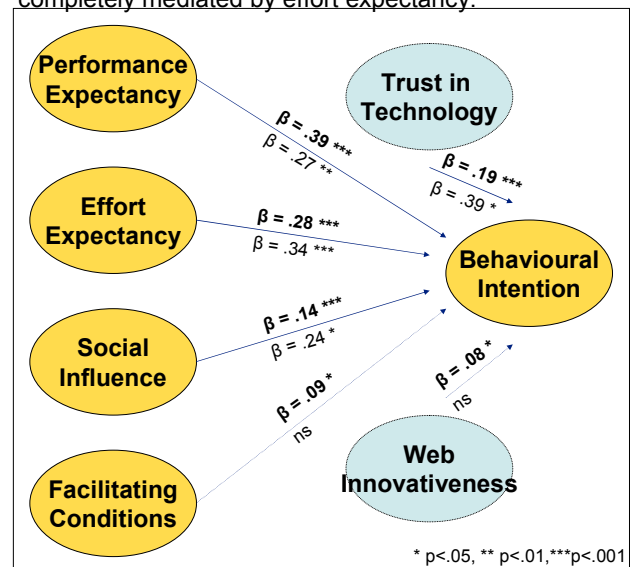


Figure 1

Regression results of the extended UTAUT for client (bold) and staff (italicised) samples.