

Hello Donauwörth, I'm looking for...: Searching for Administrative Services on Municipal Websites vs. Google

Helena Häußler^a

^a *Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Finkenau 35, Hamburg, 22081, Germany*

1. Background

In recent years, all areas of life have become increasingly digital, including public administration. In Germany, the Online Access Act (OZG) provides the legal framework for offering administrative services online. However, merely providing information on websites is insufficient; citizens must be able to complete administrative processes digitally by submitting required data and documents.

At the same time, the availability of digital services alone does not guarantee their use. Citizens must be aware of these services and be able to find them easily. A survey by Initiative D21 and Technische Universität München (2025) shows that citizens expect easy online access to services. While 51% of respondents use search engines to find public services, 42% rely on governmental websites.

2. Research Questions

Based on these search behaviors, the study addresses two research questions:

RQ1: How is search functionality presented and supported on municipal websites?

RQ2: How effective and efficient is searching for public services on municipal websites compared to Google?

3. Method

Using a comprehensive list of German municipalities, the largest city, town, small town, and village from each federal state were selected, resulting in a sample of 55 municipalities (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, o.J.). Two representative services were chosen: dog registration (citizens) and applications for the use of public space (e.g., outdoor seating) for businesses.

To answer RQ1, screenshots of municipal homepages were analyzed qualitatively. For RQ2, both municipal websites and Google search results were examined. The latter were collected using the Result Assessment Tool (RAT), focusing on the top ten results for queries combining municipality names and service descriptions in German (Sünkler et al., 2025). The analysis assessed whether an appropriate online service was found and the effort required. An efficiency score was calculated by dividing the reciprocal rank of the first useful search result by the number of clicks needed to locate the service.

4. Results

On municipal websites, search functions were typically located in the top-right corner or header, consistent with established design principles (Nielsen, 2001). In these cases, search functions were visually unobtrusive, suggesting lower priority compared to other navigation elements. Only 20% of



websites prominently featured search in the center, often with user-oriented prompts such as “How can we help?”, positioning search as a primary interaction point.

In terms of effectiveness, Google consistently provided the appropriate online service for citizens within the top ten results. Municipal website searches performed worse, with effectiveness increasing alongside municipality size. Searches on city websites were more successful than on those of small towns or villages. Regarding efficiency, Google searches required fewer clicks in all cases.

For the business-related service, Google also proved more effective and efficient. In contrast, many municipalities either did not offer relevant online services or made them difficult to locate.

5. Conclusion

Overall, Google outperformed municipal website search functions in both effectiveness and efficiency. The results are limited by omitting user research. However, since the results highlight where improvements are needed, the approach may support people in charge of municipal websites.

6. References

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