



**Regulation Matters:
a CLEAR conversation**

Episode 79: Digital Technologies within Regulatory Agencies: Usage and Perceptions July 9, 2024

Line Dempsey: Welcome back to our podcast, Regulation Matters: a CLEAR conversation. Once again, I'm your host, Line Dempsey. I'm currently the chief compliance officer with Riccobene Associates Family Dentistry here in North Carolina, and along with practices in South Carolina and Virginia. I'm also a board member and past president of CLEAR.

As many of you are aware, the Council on Licensure, Enforcement and Regulation, or CLEAR, is an association of individuals, agencies, and organizations that comprise the international community of professional and occupational regulation. This podcast is an opportunity for you to hear about important topics in our regulatory community.

Through CLEAR's new premier partnership program, we have the opportunity to partner with sponsors to undertake interesting research projects. With Tyler Technologies as CLEAR's 2023-2024 premier partner at the supporter level, we were able to conduct a survey in February of this year in 2024 to examine the use and perception of digital technologies within regulatory agencies.

Joining us today we have the authors of the survey report: Ronne Hines, regulatory consultant and past CLEAR president; Thomas Jackson, general manager of state regulatory with Tyler Technologies; and Michael Teeters, senior product manager with Tyler Technologies. We're glad to speak with you all today.

Ronne Hines: Yeah, thanks so much, Line, for having us. I'm excited to speak on the survey and this exciting project.

Thomas Jackson: It's a pleasure to be here today, Line.

Mike Teeters: Thanks for having us.

Line: Before we get into the details of the survey, CLEAR would like to thank our podcast episode sponsor. Today's episode is sponsored by Tyler Technologies. Tyler Technologies is the largest company

in North America that focuses solely on the public sector. For 40 years Tyler's wide range of software solutions has made it easier for regulatory agencies of all sizes to face their unique specific challenges. To learn more, please visit their website at tylertech.com/regulatory. Thanks again to Tyler Technologies for their support.

Now, I'm interested to hear about this survey. Obviously, technology is advancing and changing at the speed of light, continually transforming various aspects of our daily lives, from the way we communicate and work to even how we access information. It's a challenge to keep up. And regulatory agencies face the dual challenge of streamlining online interactions with licensees and improving online engagement with the public.

So let me first start these questions out with Ronne, who I've known for many years. As CLEAR and Tyler Technologies conducted this survey regarding technology usage in regulatory agencies, what were the primary objectives of the survey?

Ronne: Thanks, Line. CLEAR and Tyler really sought to examine the use and perception of digital technologies, including online services, payment systems, digital profiles, and artificial intelligence, within regulatory agencies. The goal was really to identify both the progress made and the challenges faced in enhancing licensee or public engagement.

Line: Well, that's great to hear. How many stakeholders participated in the survey, and what were their respective roles within their regulatory bodies?

Ronne: Sure. So, while the survey was offered to more than 7,000 individual CLEAR stakeholders, which represented more than 400 members, we had 69 self-selected participants primarily from the US and Canada, plus individual responses from Ireland and the Northern Mariana Islands. The initial insights drawn from that cross section of the regulatory officials really offer valuable perspectives on technology.

The organizations and stakeholders come in a lot of shapes and sizes, as you know, ranging from organizations that represented a small number of licensees to over 500,000 licensees, with specific responses from investigative staff, executive directors, college managers, agency administrators, facilities regulators, board and council members, examination staff, and legal staff.

Line: Thank you, Ronne. Well, let me move on to Thomas. Let me ask you a couple of questions, maybe first on online services. So, what were the key findings regarding the adoption of online services by regulatory agencies, particularly concerning mobile apps and interagency connectivity?

Thomas: Well, thank you, Line. I think the most important thing was that as we look down through the services and what we had, I think we had about 61 people answered that said they're actually having an online user portal. Fifty-three of them said that they actually had mobile access through a browser with a mobile access. But only 12 of them actually had a mobile facing app. Two of them actually do

not provide any type of online services for their mobile licensees or registrants.

To me, that's kind of an interesting fact, when you think about it in today's age of not actually providing any services all. But I also think when you start to compare it, that we're beginning to see that where there's a big difference between actually having that mobile app versus having mobile access. I think as long as you're providing mobile access through that browser and having those types of good, mobile browser-specific functionality that you can reach the audience through those mobile devices, though.

Line: Yeah, I mean, I get frustrated even just dealing with a website that doesn't work well on my phone. I was trying to do a reservation in Colorado for upcoming trip at a campground, and it was unbelievably difficult. I can't imagine how, as a licensee, trying to be able to navigate something like that when they're trying to do something important with their license.

Thomas: Well, and that's the case now. I mean, there are applications out there where you can actually fill out the whole application online now through your mobile device, because a lot of our constituents actually, that's all they have. You know, when you think about it, 15 or 20 years ago, people were using desktops, or they were starting to use laptops at that time. But now you don't even see that anymore. I mean people don't own desktops. They don't own laptops. The thing that they use most often is their mobile device.

But they've come such a long way in the fact that you are able to use those mobile devices even through the browsers now that it's not as big a deal where you don't necessarily have to have that mobile app. It's nice to have, and it's a good thing to have, but as long as you can have that responsiveness in that mobile browser, then you've come a long way of being able to allow people to actually be able to access your services 24/7.

Line: Well, Thomas, how do regulatory agencies view the importance of providing a centralized payment system? And with that, what steps can be taken to address disparities in access between licensees and maybe the public?

Thomas: Well, I think that's the key. As you look down through the years, I mean, people are using their phones now to pay for everything. So having that ability to have that centralized payment system and have that one payment system for everything is important.

The biggest difference now is whether they're coming through the online system and paying through credit card, or whether they're still sending a check. And it's really broken down or whether it's a constituent or a business. Businesses now are really the ones that are really paying with check. Although there are still some constituents out there that are still paying with check, it is much more few and far between. If you look at it now, I mean kids graduate from high school now, some of them don't even understand how to get checks. I mean, how many of us actually remember when you ordered your checks, you used to have to order higher numbers on your checks just to make sure that

somebody would actually accept it. So there's a there's a big difference now between what it was 25 years ago and what it is now.

So, having that centralized payment system and having that ability to be able to accept those credit cards and accept those electronic funds transfers are just much more important now than what they were.

And I really think, from a public standpoint, that it really depends on what you're accepting.. . You know, most of our agencies are really providing the information on the web. So unless they're performing some kind of service like a complaint, or they're trying to perform some kind of enforcement service, or if they're providing some kind of FOIA request where they're trying to allow some Freedom of Information Act, most of the time, the public really doesn't interact as much as they do with as a licensee or a registrant about being able to pay for services online - that is at least in the regulatory industry, anyway.

Line: Great; thanks for that, Thomas. I appreciate it. Well, Mike, let me move over to you. I guess, looking at it digital profile wise, what are the perceptions of regulatory agencies regarding the importance and implementation of digital profiles for both licenses/registrants and the public?

Mike: Yeah, Line, great question. And I think, highlighting that there are really two different stakeholders that we're talking about here as Thomas was kind of touching on. We've got public users, and we think about things such as submitting complaints or making FOIA requests. Those are really good examples.

And on the other hand, we have our actual licensees or registrants that are gonna have an ongoing relationship with the agency over time. And so really, when you think of those two groups, what we've noticed in our research, number one, was that nearly 90% of the folks surveyed do provide some or consider a digital profile to be highly important. It's really a key engagement tool. And you can imagine that for things such as license renewals or notifications, the types of interactions that are really critical for regulatory agencies and the folks that are actually utilizing those services.

On the public side, even then, nearly 50% of the folks that we surveyed noted that they do provide some kind of digital profile. And that could be as simple as, I submitted a complaint and I want to be able to get updates on the disposition of that. So, a very basic profile could just be having that kind of notification recorded. I would say that we find needs to be a lot more typical nowadays than we did in the past, you know, as Thomas noted.

If you were to go back several years, a lot of times the online experience was very basic, more informational. Now, really, there's a much higher level of expectation, both from a public user as well as from licensees/registrants that they're gonna be able to do a lot of those agency interactions online.

So, the other aspect of this would be, how do we personalize that experience? So, think about it from the agency perspective. We also asked that question. We got really good feedback. Again, rating how important is a personalized experience for your agency with these two different types of users. Again, over 50% of the respondents indicated even for a public user, it was important or very important.

Again, I suspect a lot of that is just based on the experience that we all have in our retail experiences or online experiences where we're expecting that there's some level of personalization. I'm getting information that's relevant to me, I'm getting it in a timely manner, that kind of thing.

Obviously, if you look at the licensee/registrant side - even more important, right? You know, we had almost three-quarters of our respondents indicate that that personalized experience was really critical.

I guess the other thing that I'll kind of highlight here - Thomas mentioned that what we're also seeing is a real digitization of the process. So, if you think about a lot of your experiences with retail, you go out, you make a purchase, you can go back, pull up your profile and actually see a receipt, right? Or you can see your order history. So, another example of a question that we asked and got really good feedback on, what was the importance of connecting those digital services and forms around agency engagement?

So this idea of really digitizing the experience. Thomas used a really good phrase that we hear quite a bit, this idea that you're open 24/7. So again, whether you're a public user or a licensee/registrant, really making the agency services available all the time, or as much as possible. Again, very high response rates from both sides of the coin with our respondents. And just to give you a good sense of this - considered very important, 44% of our respondents when it came to public users. So, this idea of a digital experience was really key. Even greater for our licensees and registrants at 92%.

So essentially, it's kind of a baseline capability to have that digital experience. They rated it either very important or important. And I think that really mirrors a lot of what we're seeing in the market, both at the agency level and for a lot of what we see happening at the state level, you know, across agencies across the states.

Line: Well, you know, as we talk about digital experiences, we can't help but talk about artificial intelligence, right? And so, I guess, do regulatory agencies perceive the role of AI enhancing these interactions with the stakeholders? And if so, what are some of the barriers that exist to its adoption?

Mike: Yeah, great question. And obviously very timely, when we think of all the activity and news around AI. Really, the emergence of generative LLMs and all these kinds of new techniques now that are very quickly becoming mainstream when you think about how they're being applied to a lot of the commercial solutions that are available. So, we asked a couple of questions around AI, and we got some very interesting feedback.

One is, is your organization currently using AI to facilitate interactions with licensees or members of the public? 75% of our respondents said No. We have about just under 20% that said I don't know, and less than 10% that said Yes. Probably not a huge surprise because we've seen that really evolve quickly. And typically, we do see a lag between the commercial application of new tech and obviously what gets applied in public sector.

However, really good examples where we would see AI being beneficial for our regulatory users are areas such as virtual assistants or chat bots. That's a really common example where it's been implemented in the commercial side. So again, you could imagine that would be a very good fit for a lot of the types of users, whether they're public or licensees or registrants.

The other question we asked is, (and obviously we had quite a few people that haven't started using AI) are they planning to implement AI in the next two years? Well, again, we had a small number that said Yes conclusively. We had about a third of our respondents that said No, but we had a very large number, almost 60%, that said they don't know. Just based on what we're seeing happen in the market, I do expect that probably quite a few of those I don't know's will probably translate into yeses, in large part because it's evolving so quickly.

The other thing I just point out is that a lot of the underlying commercial technology that our agencies use, whether those are through some of the large technology companies, you can look at your news today and you'll see that they're applying AI to a lot of their solutions. So, to a large degree, you're probably gonna see AI tooling baked into some of the tools and applications that they use today. So, I think we'll see some real uptake happening just from that perspective.

What we would, of course, encourage members to do is keep their eyes open. Gain as much familiarity around AI as they can. And certainly areas like chat bots or virtual assistants, you know, that's where I really encourage people to keep an eye open, because we do think those will probably be the areas where they'll most be able to benefit.

Line: Now, if in the off chance that some of these regulatory agencies have watched the movie *The Terminator*, what can you tell them to help demystify AI basically and kind of emphasize its practical benefits to the stakeholders?

Mike: Yeah, great, great question. I do feel like we're not quite at the Skynet takes over stage of things. So that's the good news.

Line: That's good. That's good.

Mike: Yeah, that's the good news. So typically, when you talk about something like a chat bot, what we're doing is seeing a lot of the transactional data or interactions - you know, the types of questions that people come in, the interactions they might have on the support website, frequently asked questions. They're able to really kind of take that data, run it through a model, and then that means

that somebody comes in, a chat bot pops up, they start to ask a question in regular language - you know, hey? How do I do this? - and the chat bot will basically leverage all of that data and say, Oh, well, sounds like you're trying to do X; you'll need form ABC in order to do that. I can link you over to that form right now. So that kind of experience.

That's in contrast to the way a lot of our chat bots operate today. There's typically a lot of people behind scenes. It's just like a support website, and so that's really the big benefit. We can leverage all this activity that's already occurring with the agency, and we don't need to have quite as many hands on keyboards in order to respond to it. The example I gave you that you could see there's no Skynet involved. I don't think you have to worry about the machine uprising yet. That'll probably take at least a few more years [laughing].

Line: Fantastic. Well, I know I started with Ronne. Let me finish with Ronne now, a couple more questions for you. So, what are the implications of the survey findings regarding the satisfaction rates of stakeholders with the quality of technology tools? And how can agencies address this issue?

Ronne: Thanks, Line. Survey results really show an agreement with the potential of technology to improve engagement with licensees as well as the public, but a minority are unsure. So, the uncertainty could just indicate a perception of complexity associated with the technology implementation.

I think that there were a lot of average satisfaction rates above 80%, which consider that users' needs and expectations are being met. Respondents did perceive that stakeholders were at 87% satisfied with accuracy of information and with 85% with data privacy.

So I think, as indicated earlier and as a previous regulator, technology needs have vastly expanded and rapidly continue to grow and did during my years in working in the state of Colorado. It is essential that regulators can depend on technology experts to aid in meeting the needs of applicants, licensees, and the public.

Line: Great! And, in conclusion, what are the key takeaways from the survey findings, and what future steps are recommended for future research and improvement in regulatory agency technology usage along with stakeholder engagement?

Ronne: Well, I think the key takeaways and recommendations are pretty clear - to enhance user portals; to facilitate broader, more efficient services; to expand and simplify digital payment acceptance; to unlock the potential of digital profiles for a more seamless experience; and to demystify AI, emphasizing its practical benefits. I think those steps will not only address current challenges but also set a path for continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement within the regulatory landscape.

Line: Excellent! Well, it's certainly been some interesting research on a topic with significant impact

for regulatory organizations and the public that they serve. So thank you, Ronne, Thomas, and Mike, for speaking with us today.

Thomas: I appreciate you having us on today. And it's been an interesting topic to discuss today.

Mike: Thank you, Line. Appreciate it.

Ronne: Yeah, thanks. Thanks, Line. And thanks to Thomas and Mike. It's been a fun conversation today. I appreciate being here.

Line: Absolutely it has been a pleasure. So, the full survey report is available on the Tyler Technologies website, tylertech.com under Resource Downloads. The authors presented the research at Tyler's CONNECT conference in May, and they'll be presenting a session at CLEAR's conference in September. So, we look forward to hearing more.

And we'd like to continue this conversation with our members. This podcast episode will be posted in the CLEAR Regulatory Network along with some questions for our members to consider. What is your organization currently doing to facilitate online engagement with your licensees and registrants? What about with members of the public? How satisfied are your stakeholders with the online interactions with your organization? What challenges or barriers are preventing your organization from using emerging technologies? And how can technology better support you and your organization when engaging licensees and registrants and members of the public?

We greatly appreciate and thank our members for your discussion and feedback in the CLEAR Regulatory Network. If you haven't already, we invite you and encourage you to join and take part in our online discussions.

I also want to thank our listeners for tuning in for this episode. We'll be back with another episode of Regulation Matters: a CLEAR conversation very soon. If you're new to the CLEAR podcast, please subscribe to us. You can find us on Podbean or any of your favorite podcast services. And if you've enjoyed this podcast episode, please leave a rating or comment in the app. Those reviews help us to improve our ranking and make it easier for new listeners to find us.

Feel free also to visit our website at www.clearhq.org for additional resources and a calendar of upcoming programs and events. Finally, I'd like to thank our CLEAR staff, specifically Stephanie Thompson. She is our content coordinator and editor for this program. Once again, I'm Line Dempsey, and I hope to be speaking to you again very soon.

The audio version of this podcast episode is available at https://podcast.clearhq.org/e/online_engagement_survey/.