

Chapter 3

User Involvement in Service Innovation Processes

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a study investigating user involvement in the idea generation phase of service innovation, and discusses advantages and limitations of such involvement. Specifically, the study compares the use of social media such as blogs and future workshops to generate idea for service innovations in the context of a research library. Our study shows that the blog is good in opening up for user contributions, while the future workshop involving users and employees is particularly good at qualifying and further developing ideas. The findings suggest therefore that methods for user involvement should be carefully selected and combined to achieve optimum benefits and avoid potential disadvantages.

INTRODUCTION

User involvement in innovation processes has been on the agenda of organizations and a subject of innovation research for quite a while (Chesbrough, 2003; von Hippel, 2005). This is also the case for service innovation in which user involvement has been argued to have particular potential (Sundbo & Toivonen, 2011), among other things because services are produced and consumed simultaneously (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) through face-to-face or ICT supported interactions between users and employees (Sørensen, Sundbo, & Mattson, 2013). Developments within technology and especially social media have paved the way for a wide range of new technologies such as blogs and wikis which can support user involvement in innovation processes (Bjelland & Wood, 2008; Scupola, 2017a). More dedicated software has also been developed such as idea competitions and innovation contests (e.g. Bullinger,

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Neyer, Rass, & Moeslein, 2010; Ebner, Leimesister, & Kromar, 2009). Organizations also apply methods without information technology support for involving users in innovation processes; some are old and well known, others are developed or refined due to the intensified user involvement focus. These methods include for example development workshops, focus groups, innovation labs and anthropological approaches (Sundbo, Sundbo, & Nicolajsen, 2012; Scupola 2017b).

However, there is a lack of studies comparing the value of such different methods, supporting companies in choosing the right methods given their specific organizational and contextual circumstances. This article takes a step in that direction by comparing different methods for user involvement in innovation and analyzing the benefits and limitations of selected methods in one specific context. More specifically, we discuss and compare two different methods for involving users in the early phase of the innovation process, that is the ideation phase. User involvement in the ideation phase treats users as a resource (Nambisan, 2002), who may for example provide ideas (describing needs, problems and solutions) and help in prioritizing them (Alam, 2006).

The paper is based on three innovation experiments (Sørensen, Mattsson, & Sundbo, 2010) made for and in collaboration with Roskilde University Library (RUB). The experiments were part of a longitudinal case study (Yin, 1994) in which innovation processes were investigated at the library. From the early phases of the case study it became clear that the major sources of innovation at Roskilde University Library were technological development and inspiration from other university libraries initiated by the management group. Employees sometimes suggested minor innovations if they saw opportunities, for example inspired by the service encounters. Thus users were primarily indirectly represented in the early phases of innovation (Scupola & Nicolajsen, 2010).

To challenge the lack of user involvement in the library and the top management's skepticism towards user involvement we proposed to run three field experiments involving the users through different methods both in terms of technology used and degree of interaction with library employees. In the first experiment a blog was developed, where library users were invited to submit new ideas (Nicolajsen, Scupola, & Sørensen, 2010). The other experiments consisted of two different workshops based on the Future Workshop method: one of these involved only users while the other involved both users and employees (Nicolajsen, Scupola, & Sørensen, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to compare such methods. The reason for choosing and comparing the specific methods is twofold. First, they were chosen to compare the potential of currently popular methods of user involvement based on social media with more traditional face-to-face interaction methods. Second, they facilitate the comparison of the role of different degrees of interaction between users and employees – from no interaction, to ICT based interaction, to direct face-to-face interaction. Thus, the combination of experiments helps illustrate the benefits and disadvantages of different dominant modes of user involvement. Nevertheless, the blog and future workshop methods are rather different methods and not straightforward to compare. However, this article will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the methods with regard to the outcomes in terms of number of ideas and how elaborated these ideas were and the roles of those involved.

Our research question is: What are the strengths and weaknesses of using different methods, more specifically future workshops and blogs, to involve users in service innovation? Thus, the paper contributes to existing knowledge about user driven innovation by comparing and assessing the innovation value of fundamentally different, but (perhaps) complementary methods for involving users in innovation in the same organizational context. Furthermore, by carrying out field experiments the findings can be of direct practical value for other organizations and for libraries in particular (Sørensen et al., 2010).

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