

Chapter 5

Attaching People and Technology: Between E and Government

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ABSTRACT

The Swedish public sector is involved in an overwhelming change process aiming towards creating a good-service society based on information technology. Rationalisation, efficiency and effectiveness are the leading signs in the dominating discourse of Swedish society of today. This discourse is silent about public sector employees, their agencies, their participation, and how the public sector is the dominant labour market for women. Alternative stories of women's presence in the creation of a good-service society are presented with a focus on performances of gender, skills, learning and technology. The empirical material was collected in municipalities in the south east of Sweden. Methods sensitive to everyday practices in order to create space and time for women and their stories were developed and used. The methodological approach, feminist technoscience, provides opportunities to move beyond the dominating IT discourses in order to make visible other discourses where women are present.

BACKGROUND

Since the dawn of the new internet era, from the middle of the 1990s, information technology has become a strong political actor of change. One of the main visible areas of this change in Sweden, among many other countries, is the public sector. This overwhelming change process is aiming towards, with strong political hopes spiced with ingredients from

the New Public Management ideology (see e.g. Pollit and Bouchaert, 2004), to creating a good-service society based on information technology. The transformation process is united under the overall concept of e-government, with its two dominating aspects of e-administration and e-services. This is characterised as a modernisation process with the use of the concepts of rationalisation, efficiency and effectiveness as its leading signs.¹ This is the grand narrative or the dominating discourse of Swedish society of today.

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The very same discourse, however, is silent about public sector employees, their agencies, and their participation in the development of the service-society based on information technology. Consequently, this also means that the discourse does not speak about how the public sector is the dominant labour market for women, and that the modernisation and implementation of IT will probably radically change their working conditions and practices. Just how the experiences, knowledge and skills of these employees could provide valuable bits and pieces for the process of developing IT-based work practices and also a good service environment for citizens is not articulated in the dominating discourse.

We also know from the context of the gender equality and information technology debate in Sweden, that the official story emphasises the absence of women when talking about information technology. Women are the minority when investigating fields of the labour market labeled under the umbrella concept of the IT-sector, and the same is also true when looking at the numbers of women students within the so-called IT-field. Of course, if the emphasis is limited to the computational aspects of IT, such as systems development and programming, the story of absence is not far wrong. The connection to the silence about public sector employees and the IT-based public sector development, as identified in the dominating IT-discourse, is clear if one accepts that information technology is, above all, concerned with issues such as software engineering and information architecture. However, gender and technology researchers provide other stories where the meaning of IT is extended and thus opens up new spaces for action and agency. (see e.g. Mörtberg, 1997; Karasti, 2001; Elovaara, 2004; Tuuva-Hongisto, 2007).

We are tying together this silence in the dominating IT-discourse with alternative and contrasting stories of women's presence in the creation of information technology. Further, we pay particular attention to, and are conscious of,

the fact that working life experiences and skills are valuable components in the design of IT systems and solutions. We also want to include the observation that the introduction of new technologies is intertwined with people's working conditions and work practices. Using this weave as a starting point, we focus on asking questions about e-government, gender, skills, learning and technology. How gets e-government done in day-to-day activities in a Swedish municipality? How do the civil servants learn and enhance new skills? What does it actually mean to be skilful in everyday administrative work? Finally, what is the agency of technology in work and change?

In this chapter we discuss performances of gender, skills, learning and technology, starting with our questions above and the stories based on the research project From government to e-government (2005-2007)² We will invite contemporary feminist technoscience scholars Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, and Lucy Suchman along as our main weaving companions to support us in our story telling and analysis. Their methodological approaches provide opportunities to move beyond the dominating IT discourses, in which women are excluded, in order to make visible other discourses where women are present. In conclusion, we gather together the threads and discuss our findings and the (hoped for) consequences.

METHODS IN USE

We take our departure from the above mentioned research project From government to e-government (2005-2007) and describe what methods we applied while working with the project. By our rather detailed method story we want to emphasise that research methods, both in general and specifically in our context, do matter. If tuned to hear sensitive waves, even the very silent and silenced voices and sounds can first of all be heard and even more important, heard more clearly and distinctly and not only as a part of loud but non-

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