Chapter XIII
The Case of Roskilde University E-Services

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ABSTRACT

Examining electronic services both as products and as organization, this chapter discusses the development and management of e-services at Roskilde University, Denmark. The services in question can be distinguished according to purpose into products meant for administration, communication, education, and integration. The chapter discusses several examples of e-services from the point of view of adoption of technological innovation. Further, it is argued that participatory design and voluntary adoption are factors favourable to, but also challenging to the adoption of e-services. The technical and organizational integration of e-services are also touched upon, as is the importance of maintaining a creative environment for developing the services. The chapter concludes by outlining some challenges to the continued diffusion of e-services in the organization.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews the development of e-services at an institution of higher learning, one that is characterized by a fairly high degree of departmental and individual autonomy. It is argued that participatory design and voluntary adoption are factors that further, but also challenge the adoption of e-services. The technical and organizational integration of e-services are both touched upon; and the importance of having a creative environment for developing the services is emphasized. Before turning to the case, however, some observations on the use of the term e-service will be in order.
BACKGROUND

E-Service, Innovation, and Scope

In this chapter the word “service” is understood in three different meanings as (1) facility supplying some public demand, (2) the process of producing an intangible commodity, and (3) an administrative division in an organization. The case thus discusses the planning, implementation, organizational integration, and wider perspectives of a number of information and communication technologies (ICT) designed for facilitating work processes. These work processes may be distinguished according to purpose into: administration, communication, education, and integration.

The prefixed “e” specifies that a service is mediated in a particular way (electronically). The fact that “new media” are involved implicitly suggests that the service represents something new in terms of quality and maybe even in nature. “e”-ing a service means introducing technological innovations. An innovation may either remediate existing practice or enable an entirely new activity. Either way, the innovation—e-service, in the present context—is not guaranteed to “supply a demand” both from the point of view of management and from that of the employees.

A notable aspect of the Roskilde University case, however, is that by and large adoption of e-services has been voluntary. Thus, in this instance, one may expect a close correlation between the adoption of an e-service and its perceived usefulness. Therefore, the case would seem suitable for considering not just how, but also why innovations are adopted. To help bring out this aspect, the discussion of the various examples on the following pages will draw on the so-called perceived attributes of innovations. These five qualities have been identified as the key characteristics when it comes to explaining the rate of adoption of innovations (Rogers, 2003). Rephrasing Rogers slightly, to be adopted an innovation has to represent a relative advantage (be perceived to be an improvement), has to be compatible with the experience, values, and needs of the users, has to decrease rather than increase complexity, has to be clearly visible (offer “observability,” in Roger’s terminology) and to be available for trying out (afford trialability).

Faculty, students, administrators, government, suppliers, and the general public all are target groups for university e-services. Some of these groups use the same e-services, maybe in different roles. Other services are specific to just one group. In the present context we will focus on intramural e-services, excluding, for example, electronic invoicing and general information Web sites. We will also exclude from our discussion general management tools such as finance and human resource systems that are operated only by specialists in the central university administration, and where the service consists only in automation of routines (e.g., payment of salaries) or easier access to information (e.g. statistics on sick-days, or number of holidays spent).

The Organization

Roskilde University, Denmark, was founded in 1972. It has about 1200 employees (faculty and administrative staff) and a student population of some 10,000 undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students distributed over six departments offering a total of 28 programs. In 2006, the total budget for the university amounted to about 78 million euros.

“Try something different” is the slogan used in marketing Roskilde University’s academic programmes. What makes it “different” is a special pedagogical approach based on problem oriented project work performed by students working collaboratively in groups. When first introduced, this approach to learning was quite radical, but over the years it has been adopted by other institutions so that at least in Northern Europe it is no longer exceptional. Still, nonconformity looms large in the self-understanding of the Roskilde
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