

Chapter XIV

Competence in Transforming the Norwegian Welfare Sector: A Case Study and Implications for Future E-Government Initiatives

Knut H. Rolland

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

Torgeir Dingsoyr

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

ABSTRACT

E-government initiatives need to take the competence involved in producing high-quality services for citizens into account. We draw on insights from a pilot project in a Norwegian municipal aiming at radically restructuring the Norwegian welfare sector and show how the competence to provide high-quality services rely on the collective achievement of individuals' knowing-in-practice when dealing with particular cases and situations. Furthermore, we show how competence in terms of 'processes of knowing' is intrinsically related to organization structure and existing information systems. Transforming the Norwegian Welfare Sector then, involves transforming a sociotechnical network of heterogeneous elements, where existing processes of knowing plays an important role. Based on this, we discuss implications for implementing e-government in local municipals, and in particular e-government initiatives that aim at introducing all-embracing integrated IT solutions across organizational and geographical borders. The chapter concludes by sketching implications for future research on e-government.

INTRODUCTION

In recent information systems and management literatures much has been written on the socio-technical challenges involved in introducing e-government solutions in different countries and contexts (e.g. Homburg, 2004; Irani et al., 2005; Jones and Hughes, 2001; Moon, 2002; Robey and Holmström, 2001; Wastell et al., 2004). A recurring finding from many of these studies indicate that many e-government initiatives do not have the expected outcomes. These multifaceted outcomes can hardly be traced back to a few easily isolated factors, but needs to be understood in a broader context of interaction between different institutions, actors, and technologies (Myers, 1994; Robey and Holmström, 2001). For example, Gil-Garcia and Pardo (2005) lists challenges for e-government initiatives, which include challenges related to information and data, information technology, organization and managerial, legal and regulatory as well as institutional and environmental.

An important part of this context—and rarely emphasized in the current discourses on e-government, is the issue of the competence involved in providing high-quality services for citizens. As e-government aims at transforming the way front-end services for citizens are delivered, this typically has important implications for individuals' existing competencies. For example, this can imply both practical and more in-depth knowledge about the consequences for reporting particular cases when using an IT-system compared to a more manual routine. Furthermore, introduction of e-government also typically implies new ways of distributing work and new ways of coordination among different units and disciplines, knowing what others know and directing particularly complex cases to relevant individuals becomes key competence. In contrast to industry that can emphasize on a specific niche of customers, the welfare sector cannot choose not to handle a huge variety of atypical cases. In this regard, the

public welfare sector is a particularly interesting example of so-called 'knowledge-intensive work'; since it has to take into account the full complexity of a huge variety in cases and local situations (Alvesson, 2004).

A relevant analytical perspective in this regard is to conceptualize learning and organizational knowledge as inherently related to practice and context. In contrast to a perspective that views **knowledge** as objective resource that can easily be codified, represented, and transferred by information technologies, this lens views knowledge in organizations as continuously in the making (Blackler, 1995), distributed across individuals and organizational units (Hutchins 1995; Tsoukas, 1996; Tsoukas 2005), deeply entrenched in practices and communities (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Orlikowski, 2002), and thus inseparable from its broader context (Thompson and Walsham, 2004). On the conceptual level of the individual, a clear-cut distinction between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge becomes highly artificial. As Tsoukas (1996, p. 14) reminds us, "[**Tacit**] **knowledge** is the necessary component of all knowledge; it is not made up of discrete beans which may be ground, lost, or reconstituted ... []. The two are inseparably related". This way of conceptualizing knowledge in organization is especially helpful for recognizing the reflexive nature of knowledge—or more appropriate processes of knowing, in terms of how knowing is produced and re-produced through individuals' actions. Rather than simply new facts, knowledge is—as Lave argues, a process: "knowledge is not primarily a factual commodity or compendium of facts, nor is an expert knower an encyclopedia. Instead knowledge takes on the character of a process of knowing" (cited in Orlikowski 2002, p. 252). Accordingly, competence or gaining competence can be perceived as "a process of developing people's capacity to enact what we may term 'useful practices'—with usefulness seen to be a necessary contextual and provisional aspect of situated organizational activity" (Orlikowski 2002, p. 253).

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