

Chapter 5

Using Virtual Communities to Involve Users in E–Service Development: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Thriving in the Internet era requires both Internet presence and careful development of the e-services provided using this technology. However, one major problem is how to involve the end users of the e-service(s), something which is necessary if the e-services are to be useful and sustainable. This chapter presents a case study on the e-service development process using a major player in the travel industry as the case. The main focus is on how new technological advancements and phenomena, primarily virtual communities, can be used as a main source of end user requirements. Virtual communities are both of strategic and practical relevance and even cause a need to redefine the term “user participation.” E-services constitute a major trend for private as well as public organizations and should address Internet technology advancements when being developed.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet enables companies to interact with customers as never before, learning ways

to improve service, develop new products and fine-tune marketing strategies (Hofacker, Goldsmith, Bridges, & Swilley, 2007). An e-service is an artifact for electronic delivery of services and is one major trend in recent technological

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developments. For example, it is used to boost e-government adoption, externally to citizens and businesses as well as internally for increased efficiency of work processes. In the private sector, the focus thus far has been on the more technical aspect usually termed “web services”, which are software applications, or one technical implementation of an e-service. However, the concept “e-service” is much more than simply technology. It encompasses the entire chain from developer to user. Until recently, development of e-services has been developer-driven and focused on automating manual processes within organisations (Asgarkhani, 2005). There has been little or no consideration to the users of the e-service (Andersen & Medaglia, 2008; Anthopoulos, Siozos, & Tsoukalas, 2007; Melin, Axelsson, & Lundsten, 2008). At best, user needs are guessed instead of thoroughly analyzed by the developing party (Jupp, 2003). The development of these services poses somewhat different challenges and perspectives compared to traditional information systems development, as will be demonstrated later in the chapter. It is therefore highly important to investigate and analyse the conditions under which e-services are being developed, as well as how users can actively contribute to this process. Internet technology has become a rising star for eliciting or gathering input into the e-service development process, where input primarily refers to user preferences, desires, complaints and requirements. The new developments and innovative uses the Internet has brought is an unexplored source of valuable information as far as e-service development is concerned. Our primary focus is the role of virtual communities in this scenario, and we will demonstrate the usefulness of said communities using a real-life industry case.

In order to set the stage, background information on e-services and user participation in e-services development will first be discussed. The latter includes four identified problem areas in the said development. The primary internet technology of interest, Virtual Communities, will

be explained next, before the case study itself is introduced with its associated research methodology. The case ends with a section on solutions and recommendations, before the chapter concludes with future work and conclusions.

BACKGROUND

E-services are used in many different settings and there is no commonly agreed definition (Rowley, 2006) but there are some general characteristics applicable for most e-services. Firstly, e-services are based on electronic interactions between a service provider and a service consumer (Javalgi, Martin, & Todd, 2004; Liao, Chen, & Yen, 2007; Rowley, 2006). Secondly, e-services are intangible, inseparable and heterogeneous (Edvardsson & Larsson, 2004; Javalgi et al., 2004; Johannesson, Andersson, Bergholtz, & Weigand, 2008; Järvinen & Lehtinen, 2004). The creation of some kind of value is also stressed by many authors (Edvardsson & Larsson, 2004; Hultgren, 2007; Preist, 2004) meaning that the e-service interaction must generate a positive outcome, either for the producer or for the consumer or most preferable, for both. In this paper we have chosen to view e-services as artefacts for the delivery of services electronically, i.e. e-services are viewed as applications making it possible to offer and use services via electronic communication channels, such as the Internet.

We distinguish between two basic types of e-services; commercial ones and public ones. The outmost important difference between these is that public e-services (often described as e-government services) are not based on the user's ability or desire to pay (Henriksen, 2004). Public administrations do not seek profit but instead they are striving for cost reductions by increased internal efficiency and more efficient communication with citizens (K Axelsson & Melin, 2007; Charalabidis, Askounis, Gionis, Lampathaki, & Metaxiotis, 2006). Furthermore, public e-services must be targeted towards a wide spectra of users

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