

## Chapter VII

# Involving Service Professionals in eGovernment Innovation: The Case of Finnish Early Childhood Education

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### ABSTRACT

*This collaborative action research study reports the experiences in developing e-government innovations in early childhood education context in Finland. While e-government is too often understood as transforming paper documents used in public services into electronic mode, the ultimate objective should be to enhance communication and interaction between citizens and public organizations and thus increase the value of public services. This objective cannot be reached without involvement of service professionals in the eGovernment innovation processes. This research introduces a method for involving service professionals in the process of generating and evaluating alternative ways how new technology can be incorporated in service processes. Amit and Zott's (2001) e-business value creation method was applied to clarify the value of alternative e-government innovations for citizens and for the service organization. The practical result of the study was several business model innovations for the early childhood education. The methodological result was a collaborative method for analyzing and generating business model innovations.*

## INTRODUCTION

The diffusion of e-government has been slower than the diffusion of e-business and many applications are designed from an organization centric view not from customer- or citizen-centric view (Marche & McNiven, 2003). In some public sectors usage of information and communication technology is quite a recent development and they do not have therefore capabilities to fully utilize it. One of these public sectors in Finland is the state and municipality controlled early childhood education (ECE), the environment for this research.

E-government is often perceived as a channel for government to offer information intensive public services in electronic form. Janssen, Kuk and Wagenaar (2005) have studied and categorized e-government business models in Netherlands. According to their research, most of the e-services in the content and direct-to-customer (e-government) business models were intended to make existing information and services available. They recommended that value creation should become an essential part of e-government.

Identifying ways to improve the value of public services requires involvement of service professionals. The problem in many sectors of public services, including early childhood education, is that the professionals have a narrow or even negative view of information technology. Hence, a prerequisite for any eGovernment innovation is to invite these professionals in rethinking the role of IT in their field. Amit and Zott (2001) have presented value creation methods for e-business. We will extend the scope of their model to the area of e-government. The new model has been applied in this action research study in Finland. The context of this chapter is ECE service provided by a public organization and the purpose is to study how e-government creates value for customers or citizens.

In the research area of e-business, customer is in a central role. In the field of e-government the concept of "customer" is more complex. As

users of public services we are customers, but at the same time we are citizens, who have more power than an ordinary business customer. As tax payers, we are also owners of the public service provider and as citizens we are also subjects with obligations (Mintzberg, 1996). One of our obligations is to rear our children to be good citizens. Early childhood education shares this educational responsibility with us; therefore the relationship between parents and ECE-professionals should be viewed as a long-term partnership.

This chapter is organized as follows. In the next section, we outline the theoretical basis of the study. Section 3 describes the case, ECE in Finland, which is followed by presentation of the collaborative research method used in this study. Section 5 highlights the results against the theoretical framework. Finally, discussion and conclusions section conclude the chapter.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

One of the various definitions of a business model "is a method and a set of assumptions that explains how a business creates value and earns profits in a competitive environment" (Lumpkin & Dess, 2004). In Finland public organizations' the financing comes from the tax payers, the business model for government should therefore be a method and a set of assumptions that explains how a public organization creates value.

According to Lee, Tan & Trimi (2005) the purpose of e-government is to offer citizens valuable and quality public services and information on the Internet. Although it is possible just to digitize the services for example returning a tax form, the best value from public e-services is gained when different public organizations horizontally integrate their processes in order to provide a "one-stop" e-service point for citizen (Lee et al., 2005).

Referring to Lumpkin & Dess's (2004) definition, the idea of a e-business model is to gain

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