

Electronic services, new public sector structures, and knowledge (mis)management

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Efficient Internet use for providing electronic public sector services require for customers to do some part of the business operations themselves to relieve the service provider of the costs. This implies a change to what we call the “e-service model”, as opposed to the traditional service model that pivoted around a professional of some kind. This service model is implemented to different degrees in different organizations, but most organizations of some size are exploring ways of benefiting from customer self-service. This has in many cases proven very efficient for the organizations providing the service (Liljenäs et al, 2001). The history of the e-service model is not only IT development but also conscious design based on New Public Management principles. Since the early 1990’s, the government sector in Sweden has gone through dramatic change. Agencies converted to government-owned companies, privatization, and deregulations have meant that size, tasks, and the terms of operations have changed fundamentally. In short, the current goals replace detailed government control by customer service and efficiency (Stjernberg, 1989: 25-26).

From a knowledge management point of view, things sometimes look different. One problem is that the definition of “a service” is not the same from the point of view of the user as seen by the organizations delivering the service. Complex services more often than not require users to consult many organizations/service providers. As the incentives most often have been downsizing organizations, most info systems developed are from producer point of view, “putting out what we have” for people to use best possible. Also, user studies are mostly designed in response to that, asking people “how do you like our new feature?”.

Knowledge management is a term typically used to consider how a (one) organization makes use of its information to make operations smoother, “delivering the right knowledge to the right person at the right time”. However, the public sector has a responsibility to provide also citizens with knowledge, and hence the mission is greater than the boundaries of any single public sector organization. This mission is not only altruistic “to serve the citizen”. It is also an important precondition for the much discussed issue of how to provide incentives for restructuring – not just downsizing within current organization – the public sector to provide user value and don’t by unreflected routines spend resources on things that do not do that. Hence there is great need to study knowledge management in public sector from the point of view of user inquiry. There have been attempts to organize public sector information on the basis of “life events” rather than organizational borders (Austria, Sweden, Denmark...), but this approach is rather blunt. It covers only a few obvious events (birth, marriage, buying a house, etc.) and can not cover the often complex processes of inquiry that can occur given the huge amount of government information and the number of differently featured situations a person can find herself involved in. Any complex problem requires a user to go through a number of stages (cf Simon intelligence – analysis – decision) which require very different kinds of information. Also, users of public sector information systems are widely different

ranging from novices to experts (Winograd & Flores, 1986) both in terms of their expertise in information skills, public sector organization and general cognitive and information processing ability.

For the purpose of illustrating the complexity of the situations that occur, and to point to some problems in current design of both information systems and of public sector organization and incentive systems, this paper provides a case study involving typical problems, several government organizations that are established to help solving those problems, and several web sites that are designed to... well, here's a problem. They are purportedly designed, of course, to help people solve the problems involved in their situation, but as our analysis shows, they appear to be more designed to solve problems that are important for the provider organizations (reduce costs, deliver proper statistics, reduce the amount of contact points, etc.).

Our case focuses on a study of the problem of "career management". This is a problem for an individual and involves, basically finding a proper job. But this task involves many things, including finding education necessary to eventually get the job wanted or hoped for. There are several government organizations around to help. Information about jobs and requirements for jobs is produced by universities, labour market organizations (e.g. the Job Office), and specially designed organizations. In our case, the latter include for example the Högskoleverket (National agency for higher education), the Net University (designed to provide information and services on distance tuition), and student service organizations. All these provide bits and pieces of information a user might need, but as our study shows, from a user-centred knowledge management perspective there are several problems.

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