Chapter 2
About the Nature of Services

Here the author elaborates on the intangible nature of services – and how it materializes to tangible commodities and results. The aim of this chapter is to increase the awareness of the reader regarding the complexities related to even simple forms of services that we regard as trivial. Five propositions are presented upon which the proposed service development framework and the underlying processes are built; all five of them are also related with corresponding problem areas in the real world and the markets. Two sections are devoted respectively to the nowadays more increasingly and intensively faced step changes in the conceptualisation of services and the e-services iceberg.

Though both the results and the outcomes of services are in many cases tangible and visible to us, and the same holds for their ‘ingredients’, services themselves are rather of an intangible and immaterial nature. There are many interesting definitions that try to organise knowledge in the area of services with aspects of the service delivery process.

At a great extent we are used in operational definitions that relate a service with
the time that has been necessary for its delivery. However, this is not necessarily academically correct: in many cases, the human provider of a service carries years of experience and previous education which is not counted by us – what we see only is how much time he or she spent for us or on our case.

However, we can all accept that if we want a celebrity lawyer to work for us we shall pay him or her more money than a young graduate who has not yet proven any professional excellence.

On the other hand, we tend to forget that the celebrity lawyer is too busy polishing his image and fostering his public relationships and administering his numerous clients and managing his own people, therefore we shall actually not get a service by him or herself and rather end up being serviced by one of his or her team members – not necessarily the brightest or more ambitious one. While in case we had chosen the young but still unknown one, we would get personal service. It is up to us to choose of course, but it is good to know what we pay for and match this with what we get in return. The most exciting thing with the service industry is that there exist huge margins for profit and charlatanism and that it is not always easy to distinguish between what shall end up in a good customer relationship or in a bad one. In a great extent, these borders are unknown even to the ones who provide the services.

Many services can be designed by someone for delivery or provision by others. However, many services are difficult or impossible and not sense-making to try to abstract or conceptualise: simply they are a mix of the individuality of their provider and this cannot be subject of any rational description.

The possible options are countless: we can consider the case of an extremely well designed service (to avoid using the term optimal) that has been implemented in an unlucky way. In a similar fashion, even a less well designed service can have a good or even optimal implementation that can grant it a commercial success. To choose which of the two is best is highly subjective – personally I prefer the second case: optimising something than decreasing the level of optimality the more we leave the downy field of theories to enter the coarse fields of practice.

In a 2003 Conference of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), two outstanding members of the profession expressed the following thought: ‘An appealing vision of the evolution of computing is that the computer disappears – with the task and experience dominating, and the tools receding into the background’ (Pingali and Sukaviriya 2003).

Further to this, Professor Thomas Davenport concludes in his book that “It is difficult to impose a new process on a large group of knowledge workers who don’t want to work that way”. He continues by recognising that “Too much of the work is invisible or is carried out in a way that can’t easily be assessed or measured” and concludes noting that “A process orientation implies design – we are not just
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