Framework Towards a Virtual Tool for the Front-End of Employee-Driven Innovation in Healthcare

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ABSTRACT

This paper combines entrepreneurial behaviour and service innovation in order to investigate the use of the Idea Window; a virtual tool planned for employee-driven service development in a healthcare organisation. The empirical study investigates the tool used as a method for supporting employees’ collaborative knowledge sharing in front-end of innovation in two study cases. Particularly, the research findings focus on how the virtual tool can be used for tackling the unknown - tacit knowledge, hidden possibilities, and initiatives in the context. The results are based on Idea Window entries and survey data collected in a Finnish hospital ward.

KEYWORDS

Corporate Entrepreneurship, Employee-Driven Innovation, Front-End of Innovation, Healthcare, Service Development, Virtual Tools

INTRODUCTION

The need for innovation in the public sector is widely recognised. Innovation is considered to be an important mean for promoting welfare and resolving efficiency demands (Saari et al.,2015; Sørensen & Torfing, 2012). In healthcare sector the need for innovation has become critical to enhance quality of care and there continues to be a quest to balance cost containment and healthcare quality (Omachonu & Einspruch 2010; Varkey et al., 2008). Despite the importance, the generation of innovations and their adoption in healthcare organisation is often complicated (Länsisalmi et al, 2006). Hospital, which is the environment of this study, is considered to be a very complex and hierarchical social organisation. There have been claims that hierarchies and authoritative management styles have caused rigidity in work practices especially in hospitals. The boundaries between different professions are precisely defined and based on the education and certificates. These strong boundaries between work roles affect the renewal and innovation practices in hospital wards (Iedema, 2007). Restricted domains of responsibilities and authority can cause limitations in the abilities to imagine renewals that touch several professional groups and several cross-functional operations.

In the heart of innovations in healthcare, there are the needs of the patients and the skills of the healthcare practitioners. According to Omachonu and Einspruch (2010, p.5) “healthcare innovation can be defined as the introduction of a new concept, idea, service, process, or product aimed at improving
treatment, diagnosis, education, outreach, prevention and research, and with the long term goals of improving quality, safety, outcomes, efficiency and costs.” Successful healthcare innovation focuses mostly on three areas 1) how the patient is seen 2) how the patient is heard and 3) how the patients’ needs are met. This rises up the importance of healthcare workers in innovation processes. They see and meet the needs of patients in their daily work practices.

In order to develop work practices and service processes, the tacit knowledge and skills of workers should be incorporated into the innovation process. Incorporating the employees - the experts of their own work - into innovation activities can be seen as co-creation aimed towards employee-driven innovation (EDI) (Høyrup, 2010; Kesting & Ulhøi, 2010). The EDI is expected to accelerate the productivity and quality of services. Innovation requires the activation of ‘corporate entrepreneurs’ who will articulate problems, opportunities and possible solutions and will exploit the windows of opportunities (Sørensen & Torfing, 2012). The role of employees as innovators has been a subject of studies in service innovation and management research but also in the service design research. Despite increasing studies about the EDI, there is still a lack of understanding on how to engage employees to participate more actively in collaborative development and how solutions of the recent information technology (IT) could have a meaningful role in supporting employee driven innovation especially in the front-end of innovation process (FEI).

The previous findings of this research (Lahtinen et al., 2014) have indicated that concrete ‘doing’ from real needs motivates employees to participate in and get excited about the collaborative development process within their organisation. The virtual tool used in the empirical study of this research has been developed in the previous study project where it was designed for supporting employees in their collaborative service design project which based on the real needs the employees collected in their everyday work. The results of the study revealed that employees are committed to the collaborative development if they feel process open and transparent. Hence, employees are willing to use the technology and digital tools in the process if they experience them supporting and strengthening the transparency of the collaboration. In addition, the previous study results revealed that the technical solutions are approved well by the personnel if they enable simple and practical opportunities for whole organisation to renew practices, processes, and conditions to provide better services (Lahtinen et al., 2014).

Due to the promising previous study results (Lahtinen et al., 2014) this research investigates more carefully the role of IT when it is used in capturing employees’ starting points and motivational factors in EDI. The purpose of the study is to shed some light on a virtual tool which is used for supporting employees’ collaborative knowledge sharing in FEI. The research investigates how the virtual tool can be used for tackling the unknown - customer needs, tacit knowledge, hidden possibilities and initiatives in the working life context – and for bringing up issues and topics the employees find meaningful and important within the collaborative innovation process.

The structure of the research paper is as follows. The first, the paper describes the key concepts used in the research – the concepts of employee driven innovation (EDI), front-end of innovation (FEI), corporate entrepreneurship (CE) and boundary object. Then the research proceeds into describing the empirical study cases. From there on, the paper continues to the research findings and the discussion of them in the light of theory.

LITERATURE

By definition, employee-driven innovation (EDI) is a new idea created by employees that results in a new, shared, and sustainable practice (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Hoeve & Niewenhuis, 2006;
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