Chapter IX

Adoption of Mobile Communication Technologies in the Municipal Open Care Service Sector

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Abstract

In this chapter, the writers present and discuss the findings from an empirical study conducted in Turku, Finland, to explore the social workers’ willingness to adopt mobile communication technologies in the workplace, and more specifically in the context of domiciliary care. As the respondents have many distinguishing features (the population consisted solely of females with a relatively high median age), the results contradict some assumptions generally made in literature about the impact of age and experience on technology adoption. Considering the rate at which information and communication technology is developing and its use spreading in
all walks of life, one hardly needs to stress the need for studying the technology acceptance and adoption of special, more marginal, user groups.

Introduction

In today’s business world, mobility is increasingly seen as a key ingredient for success. Companies and company employees need to move faster, operate more efficiently, and improve their service levels. But mobility will not play an important role in the private sector alone, it will do so in the public sector, too. Numerous tasks and routines relating to public services can, no doubt, be significantly enhanced by using new mobile technologies. The field of social services and especially domiciliary care deserve special attention in this respect, due to the true mobile nature of their tasks and services. Mobility is especially relevant in Finland, which is a large, sparsely populated country with very extensive public sector responsibilities for the arranging of welfare services.

The elderly people constitute the largest, and a steadily growing, customer group of open care services in Finland. The national social policy is to favour and develop municipal service forms, which allow elderly people to stay at home for as long as possible. This is primarily achieved by using home helpers—trained persons who visit their clients on a regular basis. The home helpers perform a wide variety of tasks. They, among other things, exercise the physical and mental health of the elderly, perform common housekeeping tasks, and shop for daily consumer goods based on lists provided by the clients.

Although the number of old people is constantly increasing in Finland, the money spent on municipal care is not. Social service organizations all over the country are facing the dilemma of performing their constantly growing service obligations with greater efficiency and higher productivity, yet with stagnant resources (Hellström & Hallberg, 2001). Since there seems to be little hope of hiring more workers to better meet the increased demand for social services (including domiciliary care) in the near future, the pressure to produce more without increasing costs is enormous. In Turku, a city of approximately 165,000 inhabitants in Southwestern Finland, the situation is no different.

As an attempt to cut costs and to increase the efficiency of its elderly care services, the municipal open care service bureau in Turku, Finland decided to use mobile communication technologies for some specific tasks relating to the daily service routines. The home helpers were given a number of Nokia Communicator mobile devices for the purpose of ordering groceries for the elderly and disabled who receive domiciliary care. The driving force behind the managerial decision was a motivation to: (a) save employee time, (b) reduce employee physical strain, and (c)
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