A Socio-Technical Account of an Internet-Based Self-Service Technology Implementation: Why Call-Centres Sometimes ‘Prevail’ in a Multi-Channel Context?

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rampant growth in technology-based service delivery options, the implementation of these contemporary forms of service channels continues to be risky and problematic for organisations. Current conceptualisations of IS implementation is rather narrow and highlights only particular aspects of this phenomenon. This paper adopts a socio-technical lens to enhance our understanding of the implementation of an Internet-based self-service technology (ISST) at a major South African healthcare insurance firm. Actor-Network theory’s (ANT) key conceptual elements of inscription and translation are used to describe how the design and use of this self-service technology emerged from the co-entanglement between the technological and social. Drawing from a field study, this paper demonstrates the complex interdependencies and interactions among contrasting social, political, economic and technological issues and therefore advances implementation theory for these contemporary service channels in yet another important way.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory, Consumer-Driven Healthcare, E-Commerce, IS Implementation, Self-Service Technology, Socio-Technical Approach

INTRODUCTION

The following statements were made by managers at a healthcare insurance firm, speaking about the challenges in implementing an Internet-based self-service technology (ISST):

Initially it was just to be part of the space. And no one really could draw a more rational reason than that. You have got to be part of this play. The whole world was going to go online ... (CIO Health Systems, interview 36, pp. 1-2)

There was a lot of political wars ... you want to achieve your initial goals so to expose everything is sometimes not the best thing because you are selling something, when you are selling at that moment you are making a claim, and it does not mean that everything that you are selling is the best thing. It’s a war in the
beginning, it’s a business war ... and like in any war the general cannot expose his strategy to
the army at any stage, at least at the beginning ... especially in an environment like this if you
want to achieve anything ... (Systems architect, interview 021, p. 9)

We tried to follow the industry standards and use what at that stage would have been best
of breed technology offerings which we did but not without huge and consistent resistance
from other key players ... (Community head, interview 49, p. 3)

You will always have more naysayers and prophets of doom than supporters. Identify
the key stakeholders early and engage them. This does not mean become their friends but
stay close to them understand their fears, their drivers and their influence and how they can
possibly use this to interfere with your plans... . . [Community Head, Interview 30, p. 9]

Underpinning the experiences expressed by these practitioners is the view of a power-seeking
strategist who, given this new “technology-based self-service” was “plotting” to change
the world of servicing healthcare insurance consumers, by enrolling both key human and
technology-based allies.

Despite the surge in “technology-based self-service” delivery options, ranging from
on-site options such as in-room hotel checkout, and off-site options such as automated airline
ticketing by telephone to Internet shopping, implementing these technologies is proving
rather difficult for managers (Bitner, Ostrom, Roundtree, & Meuter, 2000). Robertson and Shaw (2005) fur-
ther characterises the SST context as threefold:

- consumer participation in service production and delivery, independent of service personnel;
- a lack of interpersonal interaction between consumers and service personnel; and
- consumers being required to interface and interact with technology. In this study, I will focus specifically on off-site options and information based services delivered over the Internet. The Internet in particular has become one of the major forces behind these service innovations. These types of services are becoming popular among software, news, portal, financial services and healthcare firms. Despite the proliferation of Internet-based self-service technology (ISST) in organisations, the implementation of these information systems remains a significant issue (Pandya & Dholakia, 2005). The problems
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