

## Service Innovation Implementation In International Hotel Chains

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### ABSTRACT

In recognition of research shortcomings in this area, this paper focuses on the implementation part of the service innovation process in the context of international hotel chains. It argues for the requirement to adopt multiple lenses of organizational learning, sense making and political theories, in order to fully grasp the dynamics of the process. The integration of these approaches advances knowledge in innovation implementation by moving away from prescriptive linear process models and allowing for an iterative and interactive actualisation of innovation in complex services such as the hospitality sector.

**Key Words:** service innovation, implementation, hospitality, organizational learning, sense making, politics

### INTRODUCTION

Innovation, meaning the initiation and implementation of products, services, processes or business models which are new to the service provider, plays a significant role in the survival and growth of corporations in the contemporary dynamic and hyper competitive world (D'Aveni, 1995; OECD, 2008). Innovation has been explored extensively in the context of product development and has been strongly associated with technological advancements. However, the issue is understudied in the context of services (Jimenez-Zarco, Martinez-Ruiz and Gonzalez-Benito, 2006; Page and Schirr, 2008). Services account for almost three quarters of all economic activity and 85% of employment in the developed countries and as with products, innovation is considered as a major route to winning new business and driving competitiveness in the field (Froehle *et al.*, 2000; Johne and Storey, 1998; Stevens and Dimitriadis, 2005; Tidd and Hull, 2003). An in-depth review of the literature reveals that disproportionate attention is placed on the idea generation part of the innovation process, with less emphasis on the crucial implementation stage (McAdam, 2005; West, 2002). However, a large number of innovation projects fail due to implementation problems with intended benefits such as profitability and productivity not realised as a result (Klein and Sorra, 1996).

Van de Ven *et al.* (2008) summarise the core elements of the innovation journey in cycles of learning, leadership, relationships and infrastructure development. One important contribution of this study is the demonstration that, although innovation process is discussed holistically, the dynamics are different during the early and later parts of the process, during initiation and implementation. Different types of learning, different types of leadership, different emotions, and different forms of relationships are formed during the distinctive parts of innovation cycle (Van de Ven, 2008). This is not to suggest that the two parts take place in isolation, but treating innovation as a unified process neither illuminates differences nor invites leaders to tailor their management styles accordingly.

This conceptual study aims to contribute to this stream of research by exploring service innovation implementation in the context of hospitality organisations. In international hotel chains, it is important to recognise that often the decisions around implementation are taken at different levels in the organisational hierarchy, with the decision to adopt made at corporate level and the innovation put in practice at the local organisational unit. This separation of actions structurally at different levels and physically at different locations accentuates the role of 'secondary adoption' in the implementation process. Secondary adoption, locally made decision taking place after the primary adoption decision at higher level (Leonard-Barton, 1986), is a powerful process as it can determine the future of the service innovation and whether the innovation will ever be truly implemented.

The limitations of this paper lie in its conceptual approach on the nature of service innovation implementation. Further empirical studies could demonstrate the combination of learning and political activities in real organisational settings.

### INNOVATION IN HOSPITALITY

Hotels and restaurants are characterised 'supplier-based' service sector according to the typology by Soete and Miozzo (1989). As a result they are expected to follow a 'supplier-dominated' pattern of innovation based on the taxonomies by de Jong and Marsili (2006) and den Hertog (2000). Indeed, many innovations in the hotel industry are supplier-driven, such as the introduction of interactive TV equipment. Hipp and Grupp (2005) found however, that 'innovation patterns in services are less sector-dependent, and every type of innovator can be found in each service industry. For the hospitality industry, that would mean that alongside supplier-dominated innovations, other types of innovation are also possible. Ottenbacher suggests that what differentiates hospitality businesses from other services is their high customer contact, and this impacts on the way the implementation process takes place.

### LINEAR PROCESS MODELS

The service innovation process is often seen as 'a set of stages and activities, actions, or tasks that move the project from idea generation to final launch' (Cooper *et al.*, 1994). The process encompasses the development and implementation of both the tangible and intangible elements of the service (Smith and Fischbacher, 2005) and includes planning, engaging, executing, and reflecting and evaluating (Damschroder *et al.*, 2009).

Implementation deals with the realisation of plans developed in advance addressing operations, communications and strategy. It incorporates the market introduction (launch) of the new service and follow ups and is regarded as the most critical stage in service innovation (Schneider and Bowen, 1984). A number of models, mainly based on product development, have been developed in the literature to describe implementation in services. They have been widely used by researchers to explain the nature of innovations and the way innovations unfold over time (Damanpour and Gopalakrishnan, 2001; Eisenhardt and Tabrizi, 1995), but services applications remain fragmented and less developed than for products (Hjalager, 2010).

Linear models can be used as a starting point to our understanding of the implementation process, but their applicability to heterogeneous service industries is questioned (Johnson *et al.*, 2000). They have been criticised for their tendency to over-simplify a complex reality, their little attention to the external environment, and their representation of the process in a rigid, non-concurrent step-by-step format (Alam and Perry, 2002; Read, 2000). The intangible character of services renders the true application of these models almost impossible. For example, testing and market launch cannot be considered fully separable stages since there is no possibility to develop a service prototype (de Jong *et al.*, 2003; Debackere, van Loy and Papastathopoulou, 1998).

### NON-LINEAR PROCESS MODELS

One of the landmark works on innovation research by Van de Ven, Angle and Poole (2000) strongly advocates the non-linearity of innovation processes and demonstrates a cyclical representation of innovation corroborated by findings in the wide range of the so-called Minnesota studies. Non-linear models like this portray the innovation process as an iterative (Anderson, de Drew and Nijstad, 2004), 'complex process with multiple, cumulative and conjunctive progressions of convergent, parallel and divergent activities' (Gopalakrishnan and Damanpour, 1997: 16). They aim at including the events but also the conditions which determine the process, embedded in the organisational context (Wolfe, 1994). Because of the complex and muddled picture they are painting, non-linear models are more difficult to represent diagrammatically; authors often rely of 'rich descriptions' instead. The dynamics of the process, the influence of the environment, organisational culture and structure, leadership issues and power balances are touched upon in models. However, no integration is achieved at the level of implementation and in the context of services.

In order to build a comprehensive framework of innovation implementation in services, a good starting point is the role of people in the process. Although much emphasis is placed on people as creators and facilitators of innovation, their function as inhibitors of innovation is not explored on balance (Van de Ven, 2008). This may be attributed to the fact that the positive effect of innovation is taken for granted and that the process is one of learning and development. In fact, a few models advance a learning approach to innovation (Bondarouk and Sikkell, 2003; Edmondson, Bohmer and Pisano, 2001; Stevens and Dimitriadis, 2004).

## ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING (OL) APPROACH

Innovation is often linked to learning, knowledge construction and distribution (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The majority of the literature acknowledges learning processes during ideation, but the relevance in implementation is not so well documented (Bondarouk and Sikkel, 2003). OL is defined as ‘an experiential process of acquiring knowledge about action-outcome relationships and the effects of environmental events on these relationships’ (Duncan and Weiss, 1979 in Van de Ven, 2008: 79). Simon (1991) considers innovation as ‘a classic OL process’. Droegge et al. (2009) agree that this approach has much potential but is neglected in service innovation research.

Klein and Sorra’ (1996: 1058) explain that ‘the challenge of implementation is to change individuals’ behaviour’. For behaviourism learning theorists (e.g. Cyert, 1963), such change is an indicator of learning and implies that service innovation implementation is achieved through a learning process (Maier, Prange and Rosenstiel, 2001). Learning in this occasion is achieved by rationally adapting to environmental stimulus. For cognitive learning theorists (e.g. Piaget, 1959; Huber, 1991), learning does not necessarily results in observable behavioural changes (Leroy and Ramanantsoa, 1997). Learning precedes change, in a way that a process precedes an outcome.

Stevens and Dimitriadis (2004), Edmondson et al. (2001), and Bondarouk and Sikkel (2003) offer some insights on how learning relates to innovation, but their studies are limited by certain methodological limitations, such as their case study approach. Findings by Stevens and Dimitriadis (2004) in retail and banking services show that implementation takes place at the operational level where the proposed rules need adapting to the local context in order to be efficient. Their model is not a normative one; instead, it represents implementation in a systemic manner acknowledging the complex nature of the process, and the main contributors, their tasks and their behaviour. They posit that dissonance, interpretation, testing, adaptation, and routinisation are learning actions, through which knowledge is built, in line with the learning model by Crossan, Lane and White (1999).

Stevens and Dimitriadis posit that the only constant in the innovation process is learning. They demonstrate that service innovation projects unfold informally and include a strong organisational learning component, whereby the innovation process consists of issues to be addressed and problem solving. It is suggested that learning actions occur continuously and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the process. Although Stevens and Dimitriadis perceive cognitive conflict (dissonance) to be the starting point for learning in innovation, Bondarouk and Sikkel posit that experience triggers the process. Indeed, as per Kolb’s experiential learning cycle ‘only experimentation, and the experience brought by it, show how things really are’ and permit advancement in learning (Järvinen and Poikela, 2001: 285). However, Kolb has been criticised for taking experience as the only point of departure for learning (Järvinen and Poikela, 2001).

The other point of content is the role of feedback and reflection. Järvinen and Poikela (2001) explain that Crossan et al. replace reflection with systematic feedback and perceive feedback loops to function in a mechanistic rather than interactive fashion. Feedback is seen merely as a matter of exploiting what has already been learnt and use it for work activities. However, Kolb argues that learning also includes the creation of new knowledge for which reflection is necessary. Such emphasis on reflection is largely missing in Crossan et al.

Despite their differences, Leroy and Ramanantsoa (1997) explain that Crossan et al.’s and Kolb’s models combine behavioural and cognitive learning perspectives, which is necessary to understand implementation. Cognitive change alone renders learning incomplete, if not accompanied by organisational change. Similarly, behavioural change may be superficial and short-lived, an automatic change, if not accompanied by change in the cognitive frame (Leroy and Ramanantsoa, 1997).

## SENSEMAKING APPROACH

Even without the financial and time constraints, a learning perspective to implementation cannot alone give a complete picture of the phenomenon. Innovation requires not only knowledge manipulations activities but also stakeholders’ understanding (Greenhalgh, 2005). Sensemaking places attention on interoperation at every level and shifts away from a manager-centred analysis on innovation (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2002). Bondarouk et al. (2009) explain that, when people face new actions, the processes of sensemaking and sense giving guide interpretations of reality that challenge the processing of information. Sensemaking is considered a primary generator of individual action and is achieved through meaning that individuals hold – called frames (Goffman,

1974), enactments (Weick, 1979), schemata, or cognitive maps (Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian, 1999). Actors' perceptions, filtered through their mental frames, form the basis for their interpretation of organisational issues and subsequently their own behaviour (Hodgkinson, 1997). Sensemaking may be part of learning, but is not defined by it. Weick (2001) provides a detailed examination of the influence of cognition in innovation.

It has been shown in the previous section that individual, organisational, process, and context-related factors are found to be determinants of innovation. A sensemaking approach can be valuable in understanding how these factors are interpreted by organisational members. Christiansen and Varnes (2009) use the theory of sensemaking and its application in their study on product innovation; more specifically, they look at the way organisational members interpret formal structures, which are shown to impact on success. The authors posit that sensemaking has the potential of producing different interpretations in different individuals. Sensemaking provides employees with a scheme, based on retrospective interpretations of actions and events, that can be used to guide their future behaviour. The interpretation process includes noticing, 'bracketing' (framing) and assigning importance (Weick, 2001). The authors conclude that the effects of rules do not depend on the rules themselves, but on their application and interpretations made by employees. For example, mandatory rules are perceived as such by managers, but not by project managers. This has enormous implications for innovation implementation, as approaches used in everyday life may not be the same as companies officially declare and describe (Christiansen and Varnes, 2009).

Sensemaking involves conversational and social practices and occurs through both verbal and non-verbal means (Balogun and Johnson, 2005). Balogun and Johnson's (2005) findings confirm that sensemaking processes are powerful: sensemaking made lower-down in the organisation affects the outcomes of decisions made higher-up. Social interactions occur laterally between senior managers and middle managers, and vertically between middle managers (Balogun and Johnson, 2005). Sensemaking is made through formal communications, but also through informal processes when employees share rumours, stories and gossip in their everyday life around behaviours and interventions. These informal processes have so far received far less attention in the literature than formal processes, and have not typically been involved in models of change, a promising area for future studies according to Balogun and Johnson (2005).

Fleck (1979, cited in Dougherty, 1992) was the first to apply interpretative schemes to innovation. The process of sensemaking has been applied to the general innovation process (Dougherty, 1992), but not to implementation specifically. Analysing the interpretive mechanisms in innovation implementation helps researchers understand why the prescriptions given by success factors studies are not achieved in practice. For Dougherty (1992), the answer lies on thought worlds and organisational routines that can become barriers to innovation. Therefore, understanding the interpretative dynamics of innovation and change is crucial.

### **POWER, POLITICS, AND RESISTANCE TO CHANGE APPROACH**

It is argued above that different interpretations are likely to develop during the innovation implementation process. Due to these differences, conflict is likely to occur. The innovation literature, and the associated change implementation research, point out that team resistance and politics could be surfacing during innovation implementation. Frost and Egri (1991: 231) explain that 'innovation at its core is replete with disputes caused by differences in perspectives among those touched by an innovation and the change it engenders'. The authors believe that innovation often becomes a very political process.

The dynamic of organisational politics can be seen as complementary, rather than antithetical, to organisational learning and sensemaking approaches (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Lawrence *et al.*, 2005). Lawrence *et al.* state that the role of power and politics is neglected in the literature. Organisational learning scholars themselves admit to that shortcoming (e.g. Stevens and Dimitriadis, 2005). Service innovation often involves change, the politicised nature of which is widely recognised (Dawson, 2003; Elg and Johansson, 1997; Frost and Egri, 1991; Pettigrew, 1985). Machiavelli *et al.* (1988: 1513) state that 'the innovator makes enemies of all those who prospered under the old order'. In contrast, Elg and Johansson (1997) explain that new ideas or techniques are not in themselves necessarily supportive or disruptive of the existing order and their efficiency cannot be evaluated 'objectively'. Instead, the dynamics of the decision making process dictate the acceptance of a new idea: the individuals who evaluate the technique, the abilities of people to pursue their interests, the moves made to manipulate the outcomes (Elg and Johansson, 1997). Nevertheless, researchers agree that innovation implementation encounters several stumbling blocks on its path (Klein and Knight, 2005). Among these are the requirement for teams to acquire new knowledge and skills and change roles, routines and norms, the scepticism on the merits of the innovation, and constraints of time and financial resources (Klein and Knight, 2005).

Traditionally, 'research has focused on how power inhibits change and innovation' (Dougherty and Hardy, 1996: 1147). Emphasis is placed on personal power of individual managers, and more specifically power associated with control of resources, such as budgets, information, expertise, sanctions, political access, and credibility (Dougherty and Hardy, 1996; Pettigrew, 1973). However, this approach has been criticised for only scratching the surface of power dynamics. Power also lies in processes; it can be exercised in 'non-decision making', by suppressing opposition and by being mobilised to encourage and stimulate change (Dougherty and Hardy, 1996). The not-so-negative stance towards politics is advocated by others. Lawrence *et al.* (2005: 188) declare that power should not be seen as a 'dysfunctional aspect in need of remedy but as an intrinsic part of the process that should be appreciated'. In a similar vein, Stevens and Dimitriadis (2005: 194) propose that conflict and resistance should be regarded as 'opportunities to progress' in implementation.

The discussion above shows how politics and power mechanisms can offer insights on the way identified influencing factors (such as regulations, norms, values) impact on implementation. Lawrence *et al.* (2005) explain in their model how power is exercised. The process starts with intuition of individuals and interpretation as a socialisation process. In this process of sharing ideas with others, only some interpretations will be accepted by others as legitimate and valuable; this will test the ability of individuals to influence those around them (Lawrence *et al.*, 2005). Tactics that can be used in this endeavour include moral suasion, negotiation, persuasion, ingratiation, and exchange. The ability of individuals to champion their ideas at opportune moments and convince the decision makers of the strength of their interpretation is likely to move an idea forward. Fox (2000) agrees that such processes are inherently political.

Each approach of the three discussed is limited when considered in isolation; it is their complimentary character that has the potential to build a complete picture of implementation. For example, learning is not evident in all aspects of actions or decisions, nor is it always positive. Steven and Dimitriadis (2005) assert that not all decisions observed in their study were based on learning but rather on some 'guiding principles' or random choices. In a time-pressuring environment, it is indeed very difficult to explore all possible options and their consequences (Stevens, 2002), that would be ideal in organisational learning models. Simon (1991) is among the scholars who argued for, and demonstrated the 'bounded-rationality' concept, according to which backing the choices based on the study of all alternatives is impossible to attain in organisations. Besides, the concepts should be tested and corroborated in empirical studies of service innovation implementation.

## CONCLUSION

This study has drawn from theories of organisational learning, sensemaking and power dynamics to show that the implementation process of service innovation is complex and multi-dimensional. Dealing with the specificities of the implementation process is a valuable exercise in the management of innovation. Instead of aiming at producing blueprints, this study is geared towards understanding implementation, as opposed to the idea part of the process. A comprehensive understanding of implementation is expected to be plausible by appreciating the environmental impacts on the process, the way employees and managers interpret the process and the way they feel during this period of change. In addition, the dynamics of power are expected to surface at different times during the process, underpinned by the key activities of training, adapting and adopting, reviewing and routinising.

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