

Chapter 4.5

Successful Web-Based IT Support Services: Service Provider Perceptions of Stakeholder-Oriented Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Web-based self-service systems (WSSs) are increasingly leveraged for the delivery of after-sales information technology (IT) support services. Such services are offered by IT service providers to customer firms and increasingly involve business partners. However little is known of the challenges faced by IT service providers as a result of the involvement of the other firms and their employees (end-users). This paper reports related findings from an interpretive study of IT service provider perceptions in six multinational IT service provider firms (Cooper, 2007). The findings highlight that, for IT service providers, (1) it is important to consider and resolve the needs and concerns of other key stakeholders, and (2)

significant challenges exist in doing so. The main contribution of the paper is the identification of the key challenges involved. Important implications for theory and practice are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The continued maturation of the Internet has been accompanied by a corporate shift from the provision of goods to the provision of services, with parallel development of relevant new business models and marketing paradigms (Rust, 2001). Many businesses have developed *E-services*, defined as the provision of services by electronic networks such as the internet (Rust, 2001). Despite the increasing importance of E-services to business success, electronic commerce researchers

have been slow to investigate associated issues. As the E-services value chain requires different types of processes and offers greater flexibility in comparison with offline services, there are new research challenges to be explored (Hofacker et al., 2007).

An important new source of value presented by E-services is *supplementary E-services* such as electronic provision of pre- and post-sales customer support for purchased services and products (Hofacker et al., 2007). Experts further suggest that the successful provision of supplementary E-services may be more important strategically to service providers and vendors than the quality of originally-purchased services and products (Otim & Grover, 2006; Piccoli et al., 2004). Marketing of supplementary services (offline and online) can provide differentiation, improve customer service, increase customer retention and lower service costs (Levenburg & Klein, 2006; Reichheld & Schefter, 2000).

This article focuses on the provision by service providers of supplementary E-services to customer firms (“enterprise customers”) using the World Wide Web (“Web”). To leverage this market successfully, vendors and service providers aim to improve the implementation and delivery of E-services by employing a systematic approach. One such approach is a Net-Based Customer Service System (NCSS) which has been described as “a network-based computerised information system that delivers service to a customer either directly (e.g. via a browser, PDA, or cell phone) or indirectly (via a service representative or agent accessing the system)” (Piccoli et al., 2004 p.424).

This article focuses on the use of a key type of NCSS based on a Web interface – a *Web-based Self-Service System (WSS)*. Self-service is gaining importance in contemporary organisations primarily for cost reduction reasons (Doyle, 2007). This article explores the context of *managed information technology (IT) support services*. In this setting IT service providers employ WSSs

to provide after-sales IT support to enterprise customers.

Key stakeholders comprise the service provider firm and its employees, business partners and their employees, and enterprise customers and their employees. As this article will show, the involvement of the key stakeholders results in significant challenges for IT service providers aiming to provide successful after-sales support by means of a WSS. These challenges will be explored in the article by examining the IT service provider perspective.

A knowledge transfer lens is used to explore this topic as the transfer of after-sales IT support knowledge (such as IT solutions) from an IT service provider firm to a customer firm is central to the concept of successful after-sales Web-based support services (CSI 2002; Koh et al., 2004).

This article draws on a large study investigating the successful provision of managed after-sales IT support when facilitated by WSSs (Cooper, 2007). The perspectives of six large multinational IT service providers were obtained and analysed. The views of IT service providers are important to understand for improved service provision (Pitt, 1998). Our study focuses on the use of operational IT support services, relating to (1) assembling and operating the core IT environment, and (2) providing key value-adding services such as the Service (Help) Desk (Peppard, 2001).

Five further sections complete this article. Section 2 provides a theoretical background by reviewing representative literature. Section 3 outlines the research design. Section 4 describes the key challenges relating to stakeholders, identified when an IT service provider transfers after-sales IT support-oriented knowledge to enterprise customers when WSSs are used to facilitate service provision. Section 5 discusses the key challenges. Section 6 summarises the main points, draws conclusions, reflects on the limitations of the findings and offers suggestions for future research.

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