Abstract

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Organizing services — from symmetrical interactions to standardized routines?

Does the organizing of services differ from the organizing of manufacturing companies? Services have traditionally been conceptualized as different from products, and I started my fieldwork with the intention to study this suggested discord between service and production practices. During almost four years I regularly visited two manufacturers, studying their service activities and participated in their meetings with clients. I observed that the processes of organizing and co-ordinating industrial services were characterized by symmetrical interactions in the service encounter and a reciprocal service design. Customers organized the back office through their participation in the front office co-ordination.

This finding encouraged me to further analyze the co-ordination processes in the service encounter. An industrial service encounter is co-ordinated locally, as the participants' joint achievement. The main co-ordinator is "the machine"; therefore the service encounter preferably is organized so that the machine is allowed to participate. An industrial service encounter is co-ordinated by habitualization, and that is one of three tendencies in the service discourse that is suggested in this study.

Translocal and local discourse in the field of services reveal three tendencies: habitualization, individualization and standardization. When compared they disclose standardization as "the strongest one" since standardization is supported by individualization in its fostering of "customers". It takes effort and time to act as a proper, individualized customer, and standardization makes this much easier. This has been the trend in today's standardized service businesses, whether this will also happen in the locally co-ordinated industrial service encounters is yet to be seen. However the introduction of new services such as "value added" and "efficiency" support such a development. These services could be co-ordinated anywhere and they overrule the customary local definition of "best practice". In conclusion, the introduction of these services might encourage both customers and service providers to make use of the standard version offered by the service organization instead of going through the effort of making up their own versions.

Key words: industrial services, service encounters, symmetrical interactions, organizing, co-ordinating, service standards, standardization

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