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E-services as social interaction: Editorial

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1 Theme background

There is a rapid growth in the development and launching of new e-services. E-services are widely used both in the commercial and the public sectors. What is special with an e-service compared with other IT resources? An e-service is often defined to be an electronically mediated service to customers outside the organisation that is providing the service. The customers (as external users) can be consumers in commercial settings or citizens in public settings.

An e-service implies important differences compared to human services. In e-services there is usually not any face-to-face meeting between the customer and the service provider. Instead of a direct human-to-human interaction there will be a human-artefact interaction. The customer will interact with an IT-based service artefact instead of interacting with humans. This important feature has sometimes concealed the genuinely social character of e-services. Even if human service providers are not present in the e-service meeting, they are participating in a distant way. The e-service artefact is a service agent representing the e-service provider. It is important that the use of e-services is not reduced to a limited human-computer interaction. The social character of the e-service use should be acknowledged. There is always a customer – service provider interaction that is mediated through the e-service. Many times the e-service will also be a mediator between different customers. Many e-services have features for interaction within customer communities.

2 A special issue in honour of Göran Hultgren

This special issue is prepared in honour of Göran Hultgren who conducted research on e-services. He was very eager in arguing for a social interaction perspective when studying e-services. In 2007 he presented his PhD dissertation in Swedish on this subject (Hultgren, 2007). He did not, however, write so many papers in English on this subject. There are two important publications in English that he wrote on this subject together with his colleague and supervisor Owen Eriksson. In 2005, he presented, at the 3rd International Conference on Action in Language, Organisations and Information Systems (ALOIS), the paper “The concept of e-service from a social interaction perspective” (Hultgren & Eriksson, 2005). In the same year he presented, at the 14th International Conference on Information Systems Development (ISD), the

paper “The user interface as a supplier of intertwined e-services” (Hultgren & Eriksson, 2006).

Göran Hultgren died suddenly in April 2009, only 49 years old. There are many research friends who miss him and his warm, friendly and humble personality.



Göran Hultgren (1960 – 2009)

One main impetus for this special issue is to make the legacy of Göran Hultgren on e-services available to a wider audience. The works of Göran Hultgren on the social interaction perspective on e-services have been developed and are in this special issue presented in four papers. Two papers (Hultgren & Eriksson, 2013b; Hultgren & Eriksson, 2013c) are based on earlier presented papers (Hultgren & Eriksson, 2005; Hultgren & Eriksson, 2006), mentioned above. These have been further developed based on the dissertation work (Hultgren, 2007) and also through a regular peer-review process of this special issue.

Two more papers (Hultgren & Goldkuhl, 2013; Hultgren & Eriksson, 2013a) have been written based on contents from Hultgren (2007) and are included in this special issue after a regular peer-review process. The co-authors (Göran Goldkuhl and Owen Eriksson) both acted as supervisors for Göran Hultgren during his PhD work.

3 Papers in this special issue

The papers in this special issue are dealing with different aspects of e-services from a social interaction perspective. There are four papers authored by Göran Hultgren; three with Owen Eriksson and one with Göran Goldkuhl. Besides these four papers, there are two more papers in this special issue.

The first paper is *How to research e-services as social interaction: Multi-grounding practice research aiming for practical theory* authored by Göran Hultgren and Göran Goldkuhl. This paper describes how research on services based on a social interaction can be conducted. A research approach for this kind of research is elaborated. This is a combined research approach characterized as multi-grounding practice research. Practice research means that it has purposes of creating abstract knowledge aiming for both the practice field (general practice) and for researcher communities (as an addition to scientific body of knowledge). Multi-grounding means a combina-

tion of empirical, theoretical and internal grounding. How these research principles are applied in the e-services research is described in the paper. Experiences from the use of this research approach are accounted for.

The second paper is *The e-service concept as social interaction through the use of IT systems* authored by Göran Hultgren and Owen Eriksson. This paper addresses the diversity of e-service definitions that are used within the information systems discipline. The authors argue that the e-service concept needs to be better understood and contribute by defining the e-service concept as “social interaction through the use of IT systems”. IT systems use is in this paper discussed from a social interaction perspective where not only the organizational context but also the societal context is focused.

The third paper is *The concept of e-service from a social interaction perspective* authored by Göran Hultgren and Owen Eriksson. Also in this paper, the notion of e-service is defined and characterized from a social interaction perspective. The social interaction perspective of e-services presented in this paper is based on communicative action theory, service marketing theory and information systems actability theory. A key aspect of the service marketing theory is the service encounter, i.e. the situated and social interaction that takes place when the service provider and the customer meet and produce a service in interaction. A key aspect of the actability theory within the discipline of information systems is to view IT systems as systems used for technically mediated business communication. This emphasizes that actors perform communication actions, i.e. social interaction, through the IT system. Bringing service marketing theory and information systems actability theory together outlines a social interaction perspective on the concept of e-service useful in analyzing and designing e-services. The discussion is supported by an example from an Internet-based marketplace and the conclusion states that it is fundamental for e-services that the IT system acts as a service performer in the social interaction between a service provider and customers.

The fourth paper is *The user interface as a platform for interlinked e-services supporting two-sided market e-customers* authored by Göran Hultgren and Owen Eriksson. This paper discusses what makes the design of the e-service interface complicated and different compared to systems used in an intra-organizational context. One reason is the various possibilities to interlink several e-services. The authors present a framework for how interlinked e-services can be analysed which could be used to design user interfaces that are transparent for customers. A conclusion from this paper is that it is important to combine the design principle for IT systems interfaces that advise the consistent use of functionalities, colours, frames, messages, etc., with a social interaction and network perspective of e-services, in order to design user interfaces that are transparent for customers.

The fifth paper is *Improving citizens' ability to find, understand and use e-services: Communicating the social interaction dimension* authored by Marie-Therese Christiansson. This paper focuses on the ability to communicate public e-services, as a part of e-service development. The author elaborates on the concept “communicability”, and defines elements and criteria useful in the evaluation and improvement of public e-services. In this paper a business process approach and a social interaction approach to e-services are combined. The discussion is grounded in a Swedish municipality case study. The research contributions include a first version of a defined con-

cept of communicability in the e-service context together with a conceptual basis for evaluation.

The sixth paper is *Using pragmatic concepts for exploring interactivity in service encounters* authored by Mikael Lind and Nicklas Salomonson. A service encounter is conceived as an interactive process between a service provider and a service receiver. It has however largely been analyzed as a non-interactive phenomenon which leads to a superficial and incomplete understanding of the dynamics of service encounters as an interactive process. The purpose of this paper is to explore whether a pragmatic approach could form a foundation for the conception of service encounters as an interactive phenomenon. The results show that in order to capture the essence of interaction in service encounters from a pragmatic view, researchers should turn to the concept of action. In order to avoid a one-side view (the customer or the company/company representative) of the service encounter, the inter-related actions need to be taken into consideration.

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