

Mapping out and constructing user needs in developing online public services

Annelie Ekelin

Department of Human Work Science
University of Karlskrona/Ronneby,
SE-372 25 Ronneby
Sweden
+46-457-38 55 69
annelie.ekelin@iar.hk-r.se

ABSTRACT

This poster gives a web-based presentation of work in progress¹ in a pilot study² concerning the setting up of public services in the local context of the county of Blekinge, southeastern Sweden. The way in which I will do this study is to examine a selection of methods, or types of needs analysis, used by different actors and producers of public services in order to get a picture of various needs among the users. One part of my study is to look at service producers/providers and their use of explicit techniques such as questionnaires, larger surveys and work carried out with the help of focus groups. A basic question to put forward is what role do these explicit surveys play for the various participating actors – including citizens – and in the long run for the design-choices?

Keywords

Analysis of methods, on-line public services, citizenship, needs analysis, needs assessments

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, a new form of co-ordination of public services has been spreading among Swedish municipalities in the form of so called one-stop shops or citizen's offices. Here citizens are offered different kinds of public services at one and the same reception desk.

(Eriksén 1998) This could be seen as a result of an ongoing effort to make public services more efficient, a development that has occurred simultaneously with rationalisations of the Swedish public sector and the reduction of the Swedish welfare system. But it could also be seen as a way to test new organisational and administrative forms or an attempt to achieve improved accessibility, quality and range of public service and

¹ A work-in-progress report on the subject will also be presented at PDC2000, New York.

² This assignment has come via IT Blekinge, funded through the RISI+ project (Regional Information Society Initiatives) within the EU social fund.

stimulate the development of local democracy. (Eriksén 1998) In Blekinge some of the municipalities have been involved in experiments such as the ones described above, which have been more or less successful. Yet there is still room for development concerning initiatives like this. Natural follow-up evaluation-questions on these experiences ought to be what is the significance of centralisation versus decentralisation of points of services? Is co-ordination a gain or a loss? There are also a lot of expectations on public services provided by the municipal authorities, which indicate that an instrumental approach on these matters is not enough. Implicitly business-oriented approaches such as "once we manage to create the 'right' kind of product or community it's also possible to attract the citizens - whether they have the needs or not" is another perspective that is occurring in the debate on the issue. Therefore I find it highly relevant to focus and explore the relationship between the identification of needs, content and shape.

What is 'a need' then? In a simple way it could be defined as the gap between *what is* and *what could be*. In a fundamental study on needs assessments in different organisational contexts the authors (Witkin & Autschuld, 1995)³ emphasise a way to clarify the idea of needs by thinking in terms of *three levels of needs*, each of them representing a target group for a needs analysis or needs assessment. The primary one is the *service receiver*, in these case citizens. The secondary level is the *service providers and policymakers*, such as the municipalities, governmental authorities and other producers of service. A tertiary level is the *resources or solutions* such as supplies and technologies. They point out that the primary group for the analysis is level one, but the salaried employees could also have unmet needs related to their functions towards the users and the organisation could also have needs as an organisation.

I would also say that there is a clear distinction between the precise needs that are easily recognised and answered and the "unknown" needs, in the sense of not yet formulated, recognised and understood needs. In order to facilitate a personal development of knowing which leads to a formulation of needs connected to a clear definition of what it means to be a citizen, a different

approach is required. This brings on the question: how to provide on-line public services that allows and support people in *growing* as citizens, not only in *being* a citizen with certain needs?

2. THE STUDY

I would like to emphasise that this study is a limited pilot study aiming to initiate a discussion on the questions that are risen in this presentation, rather than answering them once and for all. The planned course of action for the autumn is to conduct in-depth interviews with key producers/providers of public services in the county of Blekinge as well as with representatives of various groups of citizens and with individuals. I will also focus on commercial actors and governmental representatives. The mapping work described here is being carried out within the context of a larger on-going research and development project concerning the continuous design and development of IT in use in public service.⁴ My objective is to bring about a discussion on the *experience* and *construction of* needs and whether it is possible to discern which:

- techniques/methods
- definitions/interpretations
- target groups/perspectives
- qualities/effects

that is likely to stimulate and lead to more sustainable results. The analysis will be compared to and discussed in relation to other examples of local projects aiming to achieve increased citizen involvement. One example is supportive activities on forming communities on the web, initiated on a grassroots level, where citizens are provided time and space to explore and articulate their needs and options.⁵ The study is part of an assignment

³ For further development of mentioned concepts see *Planning and conducting needs assessments. A practical guide* by Witkin & Altschuld.

⁴ Sara Eriksén, Högskolan Karlskrona/Ronneby, is in charge of this project. Project description could be found in application to the Swedish Council of Work Life Research, 2000. *Design of IT in Use: technologies for supporting services to the citizens*. (Project number 2000-0476)

⁵ A description of such project is to be found in *Discourses and cracks. A case study of Information*

for the European Union concerning experiences, access to and requests for public services on-line. The study will be completed and reported in October this year.

2.1 How to do it?

Some basic questions being addressed are:

- What kind of **techniques/methods** is currently being used in order to identify and distinguish various needs?
- **Why** do the service producers/providers choose these kinds of selection methods? How do they define significant conceptions as "needs", "citizenship", "service", "technical products", "user-orientation", "interaction and dialogue"?
- **What** is regarded as primary and/or most frequently encountered needs in public services? What are the basic elements when developing the services?
- How to define **target groups**? Whose/which needs are legitimate or predominant? Are the categories seen as univocal or is there room for diversity and if so: how is this great variety dealt with? Allowance of different perspectives such as products that are adapted to a specific situation or an individual's need?
- **By whom**? How do the service producers/providers define and describe themselves and their relationship to the users?
- Thoughts/expectations on **future services**?
- Is it possible to balance demands of **quality and content as opposed to low-cost needs**: e. g. use of technical solutions and the extended need of a content that is dealt with thoroughly

2.2 A local inquiry

One example of the empirical material I am using is the results of an inquiry that is taking place in Ronneby. A group of local politicians and municipal officers from the Municipality of Ronneby are currently working with a survey concerning how to develop future public service. This survey covers public service in general, not only focusing the on-line functions. During the first half of 2000 I've had the opportunity to take part in this group as a participant observer, and participate in

workshops or discussion meetings with groups of generalists such as receptionists and librarians as well as formal meetings. The question of increased citizen involvement is central as well as how to improve the quality of the service. Mark Nichter talks about low cost techniques for "reading the community" such as focus groups that are replacing surveys. Nichter points out that none of these approaches seems to foster active community participation. (Nichter, 1998) A number of important questions are surfacing: Are there any alternatives? How do we take stock of intermediate competencies when bringing together people who need to communicate? This leads on to the basic question: what is the signification of accessibility, democratic solutions, participation and co-operation in the area concerning the production of on-line public services.

2.3 Sammanfattning på svenska

Mitt posterförslag är en webbaserad presentation av ett pågående arbete som utgör en del av en EU-finansierad pilotstudie rörande kvalitet, efterfrågan och utformning av on-line tjänster för medborgare i Europa. Studien tar sitt avstamp i den lokala utformningen och framväxten av medborgarservice on-line i Blekinge län. Huvudsyftet är att lyfta fram och diskutera behovet av reflexion och ökat medborgarinflytande vad gäller design och utveckling av framtida publika system. En central del i arbetet är en undersökning av olika aktörers behovsanalyser genom en granskning av ett urval tekniker eller metoder vid användarundersökningar. Några exempel på sådana tekniker är enkäter, mer omfattande undersökningar eller arbete som utförs i samarbete med så kallade fokusgrupper. Vidare omfattar studien också granskning av tjänster samt deltagande observationer i en politiskt tillsatt lokal utredningsgrupp. En grundläggande fråga är: vilken betydelse har dessa undersökningar för de olika aktörerna och i vilken mån påverkar de utformningen av tjänster? Andra centrala frågeställningar som diskuteras är: hur relationen mellan innehåll och utformning gestaltas och på vilket sätt kravet på låga kostnader kontra kvalitet och utformning hanteras. Användarnas behov av utökad dialog och interaktion leder fram till frågan: är det möjligt att tillhandahålla en medborgarservice som också möjliggör för medborgaren/användaren att "växa" som individ – inte enbart "vara" en medborgare med specifika behov? Vad får detta i så fall för konsekvenser för utformningen av tjänster?

Technology and Writing Women in a Regional Context by Ekelin & Elovaara.

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