Multi-Channel Service Management in Public Sector - Three Interpretative Frames Illustrating E-government and Work Practice in a Swedish State Agency

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Abstract: In order to deliver services to citizens, public sector agencies of today offer various types of channels for interaction. In this article we aim to develop an understanding of the reciprocal relation between multi-channel services and work practice. By showing how actors at different organizational levels in an agency differ in their interpretation of multi-channel services we have generated knowledge that is essential in multi-channel strategy formulation. The study illustrates an example of an agency that works actively and in a mature way with e-government and e-services. This qualitative case study illustrates that the top level management, middle management and the case officers need to confront and discuss their understanding of e-government and their work practice in order to reach a situation where strategies actually are influencing daily work more explicitly. An important aspect is the decision to adopt an internal or external perspective on multi-channel service management. The result of this decision might be to view multi-channel service management as a way of reaching either internal agency efficiency or external citizen benefits.

Keywords: e-government, public sector, service, multi-channel service management, work practice

1 Introduction

In their quest to develop an optimal multi-channel strategy (i.e. an intended way to implement and manage a specific set of channels for interaction) suitable to the public sector, state agencies of today face significant challenges both organizationally and in relation to citizens (Gil-García & Martinez-Moyano, 2007). When formulating and implementing a multi-channel strategy in public sector several aspects have to be taken into account. First of all, the needs and preferences of citizens have to be known and acknowledged in any e-government project. Otherwise, the offered service channels might stay insufficiently used or not being fully accepted of identified as beneficiary by citizens (Pieterson & Teerling, 2008; Pieterson, 2009; Axelsson & Melin, 2009; Allen et al., 2001). Such strategy formulation also has to consider the agency's internal demands, resources and restrictions; for example, budgets, competence among employees, and other organizational resources necessary for each offered channel. It is not unusual that decisions regarding multi-channel strategies are guided by rational arguments like cost-efficiency of electronic channels (compare Ebbers et al., 2008). However, it would be unfortunate for agencies only to focus single handedly on cost-efficiency in their multi-channel strategy as the challenges are much more multi-faceted and, thus, cannot be treated as a solely an internal resource question.

Of course the notion of users in terms of citizens (or customers) is important when developing new channel strategies, but another at least as important, although much rarely studied user group is the agency employees – with their needs, demands, incentives, interpretations, and preferences. Working within these multi-channel environments, agency employees are the ones who will realize different channels in practice. How do they view changes, how do they perceive citizens' responses to these changes, how do they feel that their relation to citizens are affected by the implementation and use of multiple channels, and how do they view their online clients, are just some of the questions these changes raise – questions which we do not know very much about so far. There are a few studies focusing on the agency employees; e.g. Følstad et al. (2004) who refer to agency employees when discussing user participation in public sector development project. A similar view is present in a study by Folkerd and Spinelli (2009) who study the lack of user participation during requirements capture in public IT projects; focusing on agency employees. These studies focus agency employees' participation during

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information systems development projects. We have identified a lack of knowledge about the agency employee perspective during the use of multi-channel services. This lack of knowledge is an important point of departure in this article.

The overall aim of this article is to develop an understanding of the reciprocal relation between multi-channel services and work practice. The main contribution is a theorization on how to understand the organizational micro dynamic processes involved in the implementation of multi-channel services in public administration. This understanding gives input to multi-channel management and future multi-channel strategy formulation within the context of public e-service development and public administration.

In order to increase understanding about how different service channels may be positioned in multi-channel management, this article aims to explore how employees at different hierarchical levels perceive the influence of multi-channel services for citizen and agency interactions in their work practice. The empirical material used to explore this issue comes from a case study within a Swedish state agency; The Swedish Board for Study support (CSN is the Swedish abbreviation used in this article). In the case study we have interviewed employees at three different organizational levels; the development department at the headquarters (HQ), local office management, and case officers at the local office.

The article is structured in the following way; after this introduction related research on multi-channel strategies in public sector is reported and reviewed. In the same section our theoretical framework is also presented. The research method and the studied organization are then discussed in the third section, followed by empirical findings from the case study in the fourth section. These findings are discussed and related to previous research in the fifth section. The article is concluded in the last section where we also make some remarks on future research.

2 Related Research on Multi-Channel Strategies in Public Sector

The increased attention to multi-channel management and ways of distributing services in public sector is of course influenced by the fact that advances in IT have enabled the use of electronic channels, which are sometimes launched as the first alternative for agency interaction (see for example Klievink & Janssen, 2008, 2009). From this perspective, a channel could be defined as a means for users to contact public administrations (inbound) or for public administrations to contact their users (outbound) with the aim of acquiring or delivering public services (ibid.). Such channels include the use of web-based technologies, telephone, paper media, and face-to-face contacts. Related to this we have in the last years seen vast research demonstrating the need for a more strategic approach to IT use in the public sector and some studies have discussed the importance of relating it to some kind of management paradigm (see for example Virili & Sorrentino, 2009; Kamal & Alsudari, 2009; Amoretti, 2007; Grönlund, 2006; Hall, 2004). Whether the management paradigm is explicit or not, new technologies give rise to new ways of distributing services with consequences for organizational work practices. The impact of these changes in the public sector has been most evident in work practices directly concerned with new demands in productivity, efficiency, and improved service level.

Most of the research on e-government channel management has focused on the notion of citizens as important during the requirement engineering phase when developing electronic channels (cf. Galal-Edeen & Abdel-Fattah 2008). This is also emphasized on the European Union (EU) level in the “Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment”, which states “We will develop user-centric services that provide flexible and personalised ways of interacting with public administrations. We will develop multi-channel strategies in order to deliver eGovernment services in the most effective way.” (Ministerial Declaration on eGovernment, 2009, p. 2). This also connects to the thought of ‘supply and demand’ and needs analysis, which is a growing notion in e-government research (Reddick, 2005). The European Commission also stresses the importance of the demand side in the development strategies (European Commission, 2005); i.e. what is offered should match what is asked for and if it is not used it is because it is not needed (Thomas & Streib, 2003; Reddick, 2005). The supply and demand discussion focuses on the user (in this case the citizen; the external user) and the importance of creating methods to be able to listen to and find out citizen needs, but it is to some extent loaded with different values. In private sector, analyzing presumptive target groups is a common activity before launching a new product, but this is not as common in public sector. In a study performed in the Netherlands by van

Deursen, van Dijk and Ebbers (2006) the authors claim that Dutch government organizations instead pay a lot of attention to the supply perspective and, thus, offer as much electronic services as possible.

Rhetorically, citizens are at stake in e-government projects, but in practice an internal agency perspective on e-government development often exists (Axelsson & Melin, 2009). Nevertheless, an agency perspective (e.g. in terms of using scarce resources or achieving more efficient ways of working) does not assure that agency employees' situation and the structuring of work within an agency is focused. Sefyrin and Mörtberg (2009), for example, report from their studies of how agency employees participated in e-government projects, but at the same time were marginalized. Furthermore, research about how these changes are perceived from a labour perspective shows that employees have to develop new work routines, processes and skills in order to apply the innovations in the structuring of their work (see for example Giritli Nygren, 2010; Melin & Axelsson, 2009).

Despite discussions about how to organizationally implement new electronic channels, there is little empirical research that relates these to other channels, or addresses how different multi-channel strategies are perceived by the organizational members, or how it affects their work practice and citizen contacts. Pieterson and Ebbers (2008), who have studied citizens' use behaviour when interacting with agencies through different channels, state that there are few empirical studies on how to formulate and realize multi-channel strategies so far. If we instead turn to the private sector we find some studies on multi-channel strategies (Schoenbachler & Gordon, 2002; Kumar & Venkatesan, 2005), but even there the knowledge of multi-channel strategies is still imprecise and further studies are claimed to be needed (Balasubramanian et al., 2005). Most studies focus on customer behaviour and fewer take the perspective on how multi-channel strategies influence retailer employees' work situations. An exception is Axelsson (2008) who reports from a study of how customer service employees in distance selling companies apprehend different channels in relation to customer interaction regarding a certain business action (e.g., ordering a product, posing a question, or making a complaint). The findings show that in complex and demanding customer interaction (e.g., solving complicated problems or giving advanced technical advices) the employees find it most effective to interact over telephone (ibid.).

In order to close the existing research gap and increase understanding about how different service channels may be positioned in multi-channel management, this article aims to explore how employees at different hierarchical levels perceive that the structuring of work has been influenced by multi-channel services for citizen and agency interactions. By continuing on earlier research from an employee perspective this article intends to shed light on the important process through which different channels are transformed into different divisions of work practices (Giritli Nygren, 2010; Sefyrin & Mörtberg, 2009; Melin & Axelsson, 2009; Axelsson, 2008).

3 Theoretical framework

When it comes to e-government and multi-channel service management there seems to be an unsatisfying way to conceptualize what actually differs from other types of interactions between citizens and government. Furthermore, it seems to be rather difficult to draw a clear line between a service (product) and the means of service delivery (channel) and it is still unclear in which ways a channel can change different perceptions of a service (compare Axelsson 2008). Interesting theoretical contributions to the understanding of this change have been put forward by Bovens and Zouridis (2002) as well as Reddick (2005; 2009). They argue that e-government replaces the street-level bureaucracies with system-level bureaucracies. In street-level bureaucracies, public servants have direct contact with citizens, but in system-level bureaucracies the information systems (and e-services as an extension of that) replace street-level bureaucrates. Such an understanding implicitly says that street-level bureaucrats are being replaced or transformed into system-level bureaucrats, depending on which channels that are used.

According to this, and supported by a theoretical description of the by technology carried forms of social interaction, the modern technical progress generates impersonal relationships independent of human contact (see e.g. Giddens, 1991). To add a deeper understanding of what consequences such impersonal relationships can cause the ways in which employees understand their work situation, roles and commitments, it is possible to draw on Giddens (1994; 1991) explorations of the concept of abstract systems and "trustworthiness". Giddens argues that the foundation of trust stems from personal trust, but in the modern society personal trust is becoming increasingly replaced by the trustworthiness of abstract systems. When interaction and authority exercise should be done via the Internet, citizens as well as public administrators have to delegate their trust, not to an authority as the representative of an expert system, but to a technical system. Furthermore, administrators and employees have to transfer parts of their work assignments to an automated e-service even though their responsibilities for its outcome might remain. Drawing on Giddens' (1991) argument that basic trust is created in people's concrete life, makes it necessary to take into consideration how the transition from personal to electronically distributed interaction affects the public administrators' work commitments as well as their work content.

Giddens (1991) uses the term 'disembedding' to describe the process by which social relationships are lifted from its concrete context and become abstract and impersonal. Disembedding refers to the way in which contemporary social practices, for example the use of Internet, can no longer be primarily defined by their immediacies of context. To re-embed abstract systems is then crucial in order to create a new form of trust. Understood in this way, the transformation of street-level bureaucrats into system-level bureaucrats, implicates that the interaction between state agencies and civic society becomes more abstract and impersonal. In relation to our study, this assumption means that employees, due to different channels, can perceive their work content and work commitment more or less abstract and impersonal; i.e. disembedded. To make a restoration of this trust is, according to Giddens (ibid.), possible to describe as a re-embedding process, i.e. the process by which abstract systems are enacted to a specific, more personal and local context. In our study this has to do with the ways different channels are enacted to specific contexts, making it relevant to analyze how different channels are re-embedded into a local context both in terms of service distribution and situated work practices.

To understand how different service channels may be positioned in multi-channel management as a way of 'doing' them implies that they are actively produced and reproduced as a part of an ongoing and interlaced process in organizations (cf. Orlikowski, 2010). Seen in this perspective, the situated view of our respondents can tell us a great deal about how different service channels are produced and reproduced by the increased use of IT and organizational change, and whether there is a situated way to differentiate between channels.

In order to situate our respondents' different interpretations of different channels we draw on Orlikowski (1992; 1994). She uses the term 'interpretative flexibility' to grasp the complexity of how different persons interpret and create the meaning of different technologies (here treated synonymously with channels). This implies that people will understand certain access points differently due to their interpretative frames (inspired by Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). Thus, their understanding of multi-channel settings is enacted in their daily and strategic structuring of work. In order to understand this we need to explore how these persons apprehend their work situations, roles, and commitments in a multi-channel setting.

In a non-digitized authority "street bureaucrats" had, in their role as representatives of an abstract system, a central role in creating trust in abstract systems (see also Lipsky, 1980). Since they have direct contact with the public, they can affect citizens' legitimacy and public confidence in political institutions by giving the state a face. Commitments to face (face work commitments) occur when the personal contact occurs or maintains the trust relationship. Confidence in the abstract system does not always include meetings with the persons responsible for them, but such individuals or groups can meet at the access points or meeting places of the abstract systems. In a street-level bureaucracy, the street-level bureaucrat played a crucial role as being the access point. How public administrators perceive their role in an enhanced system-level bureaucracy is still a quite unexplored issue. How do they, for example, perceive their relationships with citizens when the main access point in e-government to a higher degree is the interface of an e-service or an IT system for internal (back-office) interactions?

Following this reasoning, it is possible to focus not only on how informants position different channels in relation to each other, but also how they position themselves in a multi-channel service management setting, thus, revealing the various intersections of service channels, IT, skills, and formal position.

4 Research Method

The findings reported in this article stem from a qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) conducted at the Swedish Board for Study Support (CSN abbreviated in Swedish). The agency is active in striving to increase e-government by offering e-services to their "customers"; a label for their clients used at the agency as an expression of an underlying perspective. A strategic goal is that the amount of customers using e-services when applying for study grants will increase in the coming years. Other goals related to this ambition are that the organization will improve efficiency, recruit staff with feasible competence and work more with pro-active study social support.

According to the above mentioned, our chosen case illustrates an example of an agency that works actively with e-government and e-services and has come rather far in this effort. The case is therefore interesting to investigate and to explore due to its unique qualities and character rather than its statistically significant and representative nature (Klein & Myers, 1999; Myers, 2009). The main part of our empirical data was generated at one of CSN's local case handling offices. The agency is divided in several regional offices with different areas of responsibility, but the organization as such is quite strictly hierarchical controlled and run since all local offices have daily goals to fulfil. This results in a certain organizational culture which influences how both employees and customers are approached and looked upon from different organizational levels. The headquarters are responsible for e-service development as well as process changes and strategy formulation. In addition, CSN separates between front-office and back-office tasks which are located at different offices. The most repetitive and easy to solve issues are handled at a front-office. The studied office handles more complex (back-office) questions and problems. At the studied office the case handling activities concern three areas; repayment, study, and recovery study. The task distribution and specialization at the office follow these three areas; i.e. each employee is dedicated to one expertise area. The reason for this is that each area requires certain legal knowledge and experience which makes it difficult to alter between expert areas. All together 46 persons work at the office, of which 43 persons are employed as case officers (student investigators), two as group leaders and one as office manager. The case officers are divided into three areas of expertise: Repayment (9 persons), Study (14 people) and Recovery Study (20 people).

Our ambition when conducting the qualitative case study has, thus, not been to arrive at generalizations in a positivistic sense, or to ensure repeatability, as stated above. Rather than presenting answers to a set of questions, it has been apprehended as more fruitful to generate a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon in its context, which in turn can be used to inform other settings (Eisenhart, 1989; Denzin, 1970). The value of the result should instead be judged by the extent to which it permits others to understand the studied phenomenon (Walsham, 1995). In order to facilitate such understanding a proposed theoretical framework has been used as a set of sensitizing concepts to guide the analysis (compare van den Hoonard, 1997).

Since we aimed to understand the respondents' experiences, feelings and thoughts about the reciprocal relation between multi-channel services and work practice, an appropriate way was to let them tell their own stories and their sensemaking. The qualitative interview method was therefore a suitable choice (Silverman, 1993) in our study. In order to highlight issues from several perspectives, focus group interviews (Morgan, 1998) were used when interviewing the case officers. One advantage of focus groups is that the interaction between the participants gives a great depth in the answers to questions which are illuminated from a variety of perspectives. The conversation broadens perspectives on the subject at hand as participants can express their views, listen to others and fill in with their own experiences (Strauss, 1987).

Overall our empirical data material consists of five on site, face-to-face, interviews with all together 17 respondents (Table 1) below. All interviews were facilitated by a semi-structured interview guide (Patton, 1980) and were recorded on tape and transcribed. The interviews lasted around 60 minutes. The respondents talked as freely as they wanted. Although it sometimes resulted in issues being discussed that were not expected, the intention was to capture their descriptions, their words and their associations, not to encapsulate their experiences into a theoretical language.

The purpose of the focus group interviews was to get pictures of the case officers' own experiences and opinions concerning their contact with customers through different communication channels. In order to analyze the enactment of multi-channel services at different organizational levels, interviews with the local managers and one informant representing the headquarters development department were also conducted.

Table 1. Data generation, respondents and analytic categories

Data generation	*Number of respondents*	*Analytic category*

method	*and their profession*	
Focus group interview	Six case officers (student investigators)	Frame 1: Multi-channel case work in everyday practice
Focus group interview	Seven case officers (student investigators)	Frame 1: Multi-channel case work in everyday practice
Interview	Two group leaders	Frame 2: Local Managers managing multi-channel work
Interview	One office manager	Frame 2: Local Managers managing multi-channel work
Interview	One person representing the organizational development department (located at the HQ)	Frame 3: The Central Management's view of electronic and 'other' channels

Table 1, above, summarizes the data generation and the analytic categories that have been focused in each data set. In the analysis we have induced three different interpretative frames (inspired by Orlikowski & Gash, 1994) representing the three organizational levels in the case. The empirical material was analyzed by a content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) where each of the organizational levels was analyzed separately in order to make potential differences visible. As mentioned in the theory section, we draw on Orlikowski (1992; 1994) who uses the term 'interpretative flexibility' to grasp the complexity of how different persons interpret and create the meaning of different technologies, here treated synonymously with ways to distinguish between different channels in relation to organizational positions. The empirical material was analyzed in three stages. The first stage was to read the material to identify the expressions that denoted experiences of computerized work and organizational changes to working routines. The second stage called for the coding of expressions and experiences of how different channels are perceived. The third stage focused if and how the respondents distinguish between channels differently at different organizational levels. Closely related to the above mentioned, this understanding is believed to be deepened by the proposed theoretical framework and we do therefore use the theoretical framework as a set of sensitizing concepts to guide the analysis. This helps us, for example, to find if certain channels are perceived as more or less abstract and impersonal (*dis-embedded)* and how the respondents make sense of different channels in their daily work (*re-embedded).* This is in line with the article's aim as well as our theoretical framework. The findings might not lend themselves to generalizations, however, the approach is adequate for an exploratory study designed to identify in which way employees at different hierarchical levels perceive that the structuring of work have been influenced by multi-channel services for citizen and agency interactions.

5 Empirical Findings

Below we discuss three interpretative frames in the context of IT implementation and multi-channel strategies within the studied agency. The first frame tells the story of the headquarters showing a visionary voice and a general view of change. The second frame represents the perspective of the local managers. In the third frame the story of the employees working to realize the agency's goals on an everyday basis is told. The interpretative frames are based on three different organizational levels and are used in order to structure the empirical findings below.

5.1 Frame 1: The Central Management's View of Electronic and 'other' Channels

The person representing the organizational development department at the headquarters talks about how the organization for the last fifteen years has had a strong emphasis on cost efficiency, which has led to a focus on developing the electronic channels in order to increase automation of case work. In turn, this has resulted in a reduction of other channels, for example, the closing of nearly all front desk receptions in Sweden. The main consequence of this development is, according to the respondent, that when most of the interactions are automated, taking care of problems and reclamations are the only tasks not being performed through electronic channels. The respondent wonders about how this will affect the employees' view of their clients in the future. The quotation below illustrates how he is reasoning about this:

> *- It is almost like the employees today are serving machines, they become machine technicians to some extent. It comes out something from the computer, a document, it is not a customer but it is a bug in the system, they make the document correct and put it back for automatic case*

administration by the system. Previously, when case work was made manually, they also took care of the correct files. They could see all clients who received money in time and that was simple. Nowadays, it's a question of pure complaint cases, so that gives a different picture of the customer. A high proportion of clients are of course very pleased; of course they go straight through the system, so now it's just the problematic customers or cases left. They never really meet the cases or customers that just pass through the system. So what employees really do is that they are dealing with errors, yes, they are dealing with errors.

This redirection of work content might of course influence how case officers regard their work tasks and their professional role. Changes, occurring due to increased automation, might not be apprehended as such, since the employees see another type of cases now. Instead, the employees might have the opinion that the average customer has changed and that their work, thus, has become more complex and demanding.

In the interview it becomes obvious that the way the respondent distinguishes between different channels is a very simple distinction between electronic (or e-government) channels and other channels, which seems to mean on one hand web or IT based interaction (e-mail, e-services and automated case work) and on the other hand traditional forms of interaction (telephone, physical meetings and manual case work). Below is an example of this way of reasoning:

- Well, I think that we, as an organization, must decide for ourselves that we are good enough at e-government, now we must do the second thing also, and e-government may have to include the other contact channels such as telephone with support systems built for employees. Now, we have IT based support systems for those working with telephone services. In the beginning of our implementation of e-government, we built a lot of systems to create a process in which employees should not be present; the aim was to have everything automated. This means that the usability design of these systems is pretty bad.

The interpretative frame of our informant from the headquarter reveals a division between channels based on technology content; some channels are 'e'-channels and others are not. Since "easy" (uncomplicated) cases are nowadays handled automatically and, thus, never become visible for the case officers, CSN has become much more specialized in recent years, which raises the demands for highly skilled employees within a certain area of expertise.

5.2 Frame 2: Local Managers Managing Multi-Channel Work

The management team at the local office believes that the characteristics of a good case officer is all about finding a balance between quality, service and 'quantity thinking' so that it becomes a reasonable priority between these qualifications. In the interview with the person at the development department at the headquarters, the local office is also described as being rather 'controlled' and the respondent at the headquarters talks about how that may affect the way case officers feel that they have a mandate to prioritize between the above mentioned issues:

- Well, the thing is, of course, I do not think that they feel that they have the space, although we have told our employees to "take time and finish a case on the telephone if possible, you can always pause" and it's not better if the customer calls again another day. They have to feel that they can do that, but far from all do and it is not that easy when the numbers of calls you manage are counted.

At the local office, organizational development does not seem to be about channel management in terms of customer satisfaction in the same way as at the headquarters (further discussed below). Instead, it seems to be a way to divide and measure daily work in order to make sure that the office achieves its mission. The management team divides the employee's working day in three work objects; e-mail, telephone and case work. This division of employees' work with different channels seems to be the core part of the managing of multi-channel work in this organization. When the local managers are asked about their view on client meetings and how they prioritize their importance, they answer:

- Yes, they are really important; they are top priority, especially on the telephone, because we do not have so many other kinds of meetings any more.

The statement above indicates how the traditional way of thinking about meetings as a situation when you talk to each other in real time still is what is considered as 'a meeting'. The other more technically carried and non-real time contact arenas seem to be considered as something else. When talking about how the introduction of web based channels has affected other channels the following reflections came up:

> *- Well, our telephone service has become so much better. We answer a lot more calls now than we did before, so even if it does not call more than before it is perceived as such because we respond to so many more calls today.*
>
> *- But the hits on the web also increase. They have also increased significantly, but I don't think it will make fewer telephone calls in many years still, since you can get direct feedback on the telephone.*

Obviously, the telephone is seen as the only channel by which clients can have direct contact with the agency today; the only channel where a personal meeting takes place. Electronic channels as e-mail and e-services are given another meaning. The fact that interaction is separated in time, which makes communication in real time impossible, seems to influence the view of these channels. These characteristics are given high significance by the local managers, who emphasize direct feedback as an important customer service, but do not mention possibilities to reach the agency at any time by using the e-services as an example of customer service.

To conclude, the local management team is not talking much about different channels in terms of client contacts. Instead, they are primarily using the different channels as a way to divide and organize the employees' daily work. The focus is on how many hours each employee will work with each channel, rather than what issues and customers that would be gaining most from using a certain channel. The channels are, thus, discussed from an internal, organizational perspective which implies that multi-channel management is mostly seen as a task of work division, not a way to reach service quality and high customer satisfaction.

5.3 Frame 3: Multi-Channel Case Work in Everyday Practice

During a work day the case officers divide their time between answering the telephone, answering e-mails and handling cases (here regarded as three channels). The latter task contains administrative work that has to be done as a result of the customer contacts through telephone and e-mail. The case work consists of both manual and automated tasks; including handling web based cases (i.e., applications submitted through e-services). In both the focus group interviews these three channels are talked about as three different types of tasks. All employees, regardless of competence, divide their time between these tasks. How time is distributed between the tasks is not something that the employees feel they can decide for themselves. They tell that it is determined by the group leaders.

When the case officers (the employees) themselves were asked to describe their work and their professional role, most of them emphasized the importance of providing good service to the agency's customers. This means that they must provide payments to those who want to study and that they should do that in the best possible manner in order to achieve high quality services. One important part of their work is therefore to be experts on student aid and give the customers the best advices and support possible. To receive positive feedback from customers is expressed as the best work satisfaction:

> *- The thing that gives me personally the most satisfaction is when someone has a problem that seems insoluble for them, usually on the telephone, and I can solve it fairly easily, that feels good.*

The citation above illustrates a theme often mentioned in each of the interviews; that a large part of their work satisfaction seems to be about those occasions when employees in a simple way can solve a client's problem and they express their appreciation. This of course applies to all their channels, but it is seldom that the positive response is described as immediate as on the telephone. All employees interviewed agree that the relationship with the customer is important and they all seem to be keen to have good customer relations. They are also proud that they repeatedly receive feedback from customers. They emphasize that they have very good customer relations and stress in particular that it is due to the specific spirit at the office:

> *- We're people, not just bureaucratic administrators, we are committed and we like our work. There's a special spirit here, a special team spirit that has existed since at least sixteen years. I have worked here for sixteen years and I felt it at once when I walked through the door.*

In the quotation above, one of the employees tells that those who work in the office are dedicated to and love their work; thus their professional role goes beyond the role of bureaucratic administrators. An attitude which has been around for a long time, maybe even longer than the new technological innovations? At least it is possible to believe so and when the discussion goes back to the questions about the effects of an increased degree of e-government and how this development affects their relationship with the customer, they give the following response:

- Less and less, I think, if you mean physical contact, in principle all CSN offices have closed their reception areas. And if anyone wants to meet us they must make an appointment. It is not possible to just go in and check up something at CSN. Actually, I think the personal contacts have decreased and I think it is sad, in fact, I think that more personal touch would make many things easier, especially for people who have difficulties understanding rules or keeping up with what's happening. I think they are doing many guesses or hunches and hope that it will be the best, but if one could go in and talk to someone quickly then of course it might be easier to understand why it may be in one way or another.

- Yes, that's right and furthermore, we are not any more out at the schools when the semesters start. That I think we should reintroduce.

Here it is obvious how the employees emphasize the importance of personal contact in order to establish good customer relations and they think it is sad that they no longer have any face-to-face contact with their customers. They even suggest that they should be more visible outside the office. Today, the personal contact is almost entirely over the telephone and they also believe that it is the main reason why their agency prioritizes telephone higher than e-mail and case work:

- Yes, I guess that's why we have this order of priority, even if we case officers often think that we should give case work higher priority since we believe that if we do, they will not call us, but they do anyway. That contact is contact number one, and will always be.

- People will never stop calling us, no matter how many web services there are.

Above the contact with customers are described as more personal over the telephone than in e-mail and it is clear that most of them find themselves doing a lot of telephone work. However, this is a rather demanding job. On the issue of whether or not telephone work is more difficult to handle than e-mail or case work, the following dialogue takes place in one of the focus groups:

- Well, not more difficult questions, but you can do either two, or if you have two shifts, four hours on the telephone each day, then there is always work left to do when you finish because there are lots of things you can't sit and deal with when you're still on your shift.

- Yes, there are lots of after work issues.

- The questions don't have to be difficult but when I have a client on the telephone that has fallen in between chairs I of course want to try to help and take the right decisions so that this customer will get money or assign its amendment. But then I have to save them to afterwards, that's what you perceive as a hassle, the telephone itself is not hard but the work afterwards steals time from the case work.

It thus appears, as shown above, that it is not the telephone channel in itself that is difficult, but rather the work left to do when the telephone shift is over. Many of the employees feel that the telephone tasks tend to "steal" time from other tasks. In light of how they talk about telephone work and how it is felt to steal time from other tasks, it became relevant to ask about the other channels; the content of e-mail work in relation to telephone work. The answer is presented in the following quotations:

- You can actually say that we have front-office e-mail and back-office e-mail in a similar way as we have front-office telephone and back-office telephone.

- The letters are sorted by content and areas of expertise and then distributed to different local offices and our office has a certain percentage that we should do.

- Yes, each area of expertise has a certain amount which then is divided between us workers by the local managers.

- Yes, we know how many emails we have to do every day.

- Yes, this e-mail work, it turned up from nowhere and got such a high priority but I guess that it is how it looks like in the society today.

The employees consider e-mail and telephone to be comparable and the task itself is similar in several respects, except being in direct contact with the customer. They receive mainly the same types of questions through both channels and they are organized in the same way, as the telephone flow is divided into front-office and back-office. However, it is reasonable to interpret from one of the above quotes that e-mails have arisen out of (or at least increased with) the new technologies. During one focus group interview, the participants came to talk about channel choices. They discussed whether it is the same customers who send e-mails and make telephone calls, or if different forms of contact are used by different customers. An interview sequence is quoted below:

> *- I rather think that the question they have decides which channel they chose.*
>
> *- Yes, that's a bit different questions in between the channels.*
>
> *- Well, it is not necessarily different issues. Sometimes it can be that someone has talked to an employee but still wants to do it in writing.*
>
> *- Yes, you are right, some do both.*
>
> *- Although, people rarely write when they want to sort out a payment, then they call.*
>
> *- Yes, that's my view too, they write e-mails about the simple stuff, but about the more complex they are calling.*

In general, the case officers describe their relationships to customers as very important. They also feel that a more personal contact is desirable. Today, the personal touch only takes place on the telephone which means that it is only through that channel they have a slightly more "visible" contact with the customer. When handling e-mails and web based case work the relationship is invisible. It is also on the telephone that the issues may be more complex and the case officer role can become more specific and consultative.

In comparison with the interpretative frame containing the headquarter perspective, above, the case officers do not explicitly talk about the IT systems or the e-services. Instead, they regard these electronic channels as 'machines' which automate parts of the work tasks. Each channel is enacted to their work situation as a separate work assignment. They distinguish between different channels regarding: 1) how much extra work each channel generate, 2) what customer contact that is possible to establish through each channel, and 3) what kind of feedback they get through a certain channel. The interpretative frame of the employees is understandable since the local managers at the office use different channels as a way to divide and measure their daily work. Without regarding which type of service that is delivered, the channel by which it is distributed is taken into account. At the case working office they divide between three different channels while the top management, on the other hand, divides channels based on technology content; some channels are 'e'-channels and others are not.

6 Discussion

In order to increase understanding about how different service channels may be positioned in multi-channel service management, we have now explored how employees at three different hierarchical levels perceive that the structuring of work has been influenced by multi-channel services for citizen and agency interaction. The three frames illustrated above explore several differences in how multi-channel service management is interpreted and understood at different organizational levels in the studied agency. It is, in our empirical material, apparent that informants with different interpretative frames position different channels in diverse ways in relation to each other. Furthermore, they also position themselves in a multi-channel service management setting, thus, revealing the various intersections of service channels and formal positions, as well as commitment to their work.

As presented in the section above, case officers describe their work as divided between telephone, e-mail and case work. Implicitly they are expressing three different types of channels as different types of working tasks, which shows how different types of work and different types of channels are simultaneously constructed (i.e. 'done'). Drawing on Giddens (1991) it is possible to understand and explain these actions as a way to re-embed abstract systems from the organizational point of view. The three different channels which are talked about among our respondents are organizationally enacted to their situated work practices as concrete tasks. Each channel is at the studied office somehow re-embedded in the division of labour which intertwines service distribution and situated work practices. However, when looking into how our respondents talk about email, telephone and case work in relation to each other it seems like email and telephone are far more re-embedded compared with case work. Case work assignments are almost not mentioned. This could, according to Giddens (1994), be a consequence of its abstractness.

The case handling process at CSN has become much more specialized in recent years, which raises demands for highly skilled employees within a certain area of expertise. According to the perspective of our informant at the headquarters, easy cases are nowadays handled automatically and, thus, never become visible for the case officers in their work. In that manner, the content of case work assignments is still organizationally dis-embedded to some extent. Further on, when analyzing different service channels as a way of 'doing' them we can see that there exists a situated way to differentiate between channels (cf. Orlikowski, 2010). In this perspective, the situated view of our respondents tells us a great deal about how different service channels are differentiated, produced and reproduced by the increased use of IT and organizational change. The result shows that what is talked about as either electronic or 'other' channels by the organizational development department is by the local managers seen as an aspect of division of work. The case workers on the other hand talk about the difficulties of dividing their day between case work, heavy telephone work with lots of work afterwards and a vast amount of highly prioritized e-mails. This indicates that the multi-channel strategies are unclear in relation to the prioritization of different kinds of interaction. It also shows that the distinction between electronic and other channels made at the organizational development department level has no real bearing in the routinized everyday work and the sensemaking of that.

Moreover, the case workers do not explicitly talk about these channels as different ways of interacting with citizens (customers), although they emphasize the importance of telephone work as a way of having personal contact with the customers. However, at the same time they describe telephone work as 'heavy work'. According to Giddens (1994), the concept of abstract systems and 'trust' could shed light on this way of reasoning. In a non-digitized authority the case officers had, in their role as representatives of the agency (being an abstract system), a central role in creating trust (compare Bouvens & Zouradis, 2002; Reddick, 2005). Since their abilities to have direct contact with the citizens decrease, their work commitment might change. What they actually loose, according to Giddens (1994), are the 'access points' where they in relation to citizens can make their work less abstract and impersonal. Today, described with Bovens and Zouradis (2002) terminology, they feel that their role as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) is reduced and they think it is sad not to have 'face-to-face' contact with their customers. They even suggest that they should be more visible outside the office. Today, the personal contact is almost entirely over the telephone and they also believe that it is the main reason why their agency prioritizes telephone in front of e-mail. This confirms to the result of Axelsson (2008) who found that employees in complex and demanding customer interaction, in private sector, find it most effective to interact with customers over telephone.

The statement above indicates how the traditional, institutionalized, way of thinking about meetings as a situation when you talk to each other in real time still is what is considered as 'a meeting' at CSN. The other more technically carried and non-real time contact arenas seem to be considered as something else; i.e. a 'non-meeting'. At the headquarters, visions with customer focused e-government and multi-channel management are formulated, but these are mainly interpreted as tools for work division and control by the local office management. The visionary notions seem to disappear when the strategies are forwarded to the local offices, as these are not accompanied with enough freedom of action regarding how to implement and realize the strategies.

However, confidence in the abstract system does not always include meetings with the persons responsible for them, but such individuals or groups can meet at the access points or meeting places of the abstract systems. Therefore, we argue, that in a multi-channel setting it is important to understand how the access points are changing. This way of theorizing multi-channel work shows the importance to consider the role of employees in a system-level bureaucracy (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Reddick, 2005; 2009) and how different channels, due to different interpretative frames, become organizationally enacted and re-embedded.

As we can see above, there are institutionally situated views on the relation between multi-channel services and work practices. Drawing on Orlikowski's (1992) concept of interpretative flexibility these different views could be understood as reflexive processes in different institutional settings. How our informants are organizationally positioned in relation to both technology and formal hierarchy causes different interpretative frames. This is in line with results presented by Giritli Nygren (2010) which showed that employee's notions and use of IT can be explained by investigating the degree of routinized work and working autonomy.

Further on, it becomes visible that there exists a large knowledge gap between different interpretative frames. The development organizational department at the headquarters holds an overall 'helicopter' perspective on

the new ways of distributing services and its consequences for organizational work practices, while the case officers seem to have a view based on their very concrete working experiences. A quite interesting finding is that the local managers, instead of being a bridge between the visionary helicopter view of multi-channel service management and the concrete experiences of working with multi-channel services, seem to be completely decoupled from both these perspectives. In such a matter our result shows that although the local management team and the local case officers are participating in implementing multi-channel strategies, they are at the same time holding a marginalized position in this process (compare Sefyrin & Mörtberg, 2009).
To summarize the discussion, we have identified the following issues in our study:

- Individuals at different organizational levels interpret services made thorough various channels differently, both regarding the implication for work content and work satisfaction.
- Different channels are often related to a certain work task by the case officers. The channels are, thus, not seen as different ways to interact with citizens.
- The division of electronic and manual channels at the management level has little meaning at the local level making sense of the routinized work.
- Access points between individuals and the agency change when an electronic channel is the medium through which access is offered.

7 Conclusions and Future Research

In this article we have aimed to develop further analytical understanding of the reciprocal relation between multi-channel services and work practice. By showing how persons at different organizational levels in an agency differ in their interpretation of multi-channel services, we have generated knowledge that is essential in multi-channel strategy formulation. If the aim is to reach a situation where strategies actually are influencing daily work in the intended way, this study shows that top level management, middle management and case officers need to *jointly confront and discuss* their understanding of e-government and work practice. An important condition for how this will impact daily work practice seems to be the decision to adopt an *internal or external perspective* on multi-channel management. From an internal organizational perspective, channels might be regarded as a rational organizational tool to divide work practices and to control processes. From an external perspective, on the other hand, different channels can be directed towards certain customers or issues in order to provide as high service quality and customer satisfaction as possible.

Our findings also indicate that it is important to understand how the *access points between citizens and civil servants are changing* in a multi-channel setting in order to understand employees' work content and work commitments. Additionally, the way of theorizing multi-channel work, presented in this study, shows the importance of analysing how different channels, due to different interpretative frames, become organizationally enacted and re-embedded.

In this article we have acknowledged e-government literature as well as previous multi-channel management studies. In order to illustrate different perceptions of multi-channel management in the studied case, we used the metaphor of frames, inspired by Orlikowski & Gash (1994). The focused research theme could be analyzed by using other kinds of frameworks and theories as well. It would, for example, in future studies be interesting to address marketing management literature as well as communication theories in order to confront and relate to the channel discussions present in these theoretical views. We also identify a possibility to study the use of metaphors in sensemaking that is present in the case (in frame 1 "[…] employees today are serving machines […]") and how metaphors are linked to work practice, e-service development and use (cf. Hekkala et al., 2014; Melin and Axelsson, 2014). Another possibility is also to anchor and deepen the discussion on automation based on e.g. the seminal work of Zuboff (1988).

This article is based on findings from a single in-depth case study. Next step in this line of research will be to explore other interesting cases covering multi-channel service management in order to get variation in organizational settings, history, use of technology, etc. Based on several cases it will be possible to perform a comparative study of multi-channel service management, which could generate a richer picture of the studied phenomenon. It would also be fruitful to take part in an agency's strategic process regarding multi-channel service management in order to get an inside perspective.

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