

Customizing eGovernment Support Services: A Value Co-Creation Perspective

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Abstract— Small businesses are an important part of the Australian economic landscape. Therefore, it is important that small businesses be supported to encourage sustainability and growth. One of the complexities in designing and delivering relevant e-Government support services in this context is the diversity of small businesses, in particular when considering their existing resource base (such as experience, knowledge and skills), the resources they are seeking and the way they integrate their own resources with those of others. Customization is proposed to address the diverse nature of resources and resource integration, as it presents resources that are specific and relevant to the business. Indeed, the lack of perceived relevance is understood to act as a barrier to small businesses accessing support services that may be overcome by customization. However, research is yet to consider the role of customization of support services as a way to maximizing resource integration and value co-creation for small businesses. This research aims to address this limitation by developing a framework for increasing value-in-use from support services in the context of e-Government digital support systems. The suggested framework can then build the foundation for future empirical research in this area.

Keywords- customization; e-Government; value co-creation; resource integration; information overload.

I. INTRODUCTION

Small businesses are complex and diverse in nature, and thus differ greatly in how they derive value from support services. Indeed, some research focuses on small business as a homogenous group [1], treating customers as a broad and rather undefined mass [2]. Even where the research has attempted to look at the clients more closely, there is a tendency to only use socio-demographic and digital divide factors. This is despite general recognition of the heterogeneous nature of small businesses, considering variations not only in the business' size, age, industry also in regards to the capabilities and motivations of their owners and managers [3].

Not only are small businesses more than 'scaled-down' versions of larger firms and need to be treated differently [1], they also differ more broadly in the resources that form part of each firm's make-up. Hence, understanding the complexity and diversity of small business and their resources will be a key focus of this research.

Notably, while limited, existing research suggests a positive impact of public agency support services on small business success and growth [3] as well as employment creation and labor productivity [4], thus indicating the importance of understanding the use of such services and the value small businesses generate as part of that usage process. This importance of small business support is recognized by governments around the world, who offer different types of support services, such as Business Link in the UK [5], many of which are offered online through websites or online portals. Many of such portals seek to cover as many possible facets and questions as possible, so as to account for the diversity of small businesses and their requirements for resources and support.

However, barriers to small businesses exist, limiting their ability fully realize value from such services. In particular, the impact of support services on the effectiveness of small business support programs depend both on the actual content and, importantly, the delivery method [6]. For example, a Canadian study found that more than half the respondents thought the support services offered to small business by public agencies was not suited to their needs, questioning the relevance of the service and related information provided [7]. Furthermore, the number of support services available to small business, together with an accompanying plethora of information, may limit their ability to generate value from these services. Whilst giving small businesses the opportunity to access the information they require; the sheer volume can also be a barrier to finding and utilizing these resources. This concept is commonly referred to as "information overload" and occurs as there are limits to how much information humans can process and use in a certain timeframe [8].

To overcome these issues, research has suggested tailoring content to the user, so that the information provided conforms to businesses better, especially for those experiencing information overload [9]. Indeed, it is the personalization techniques that "can reduce information overload and, hence, increase user satisfaction" [9]. For example, customizing the content to the user may make the service not only more relevant, it may also make it quicker and easier to find the right material [10]. Customization can be defined as "some level of adaptation or tailoring of the process to meet the individual consumer's needs" [11]. Research has shown that support services may experience

greater usage if “support becomes more customized and suitable to problems and needs of SME” (Small Business) [3]. Indeed, research in digital services has demonstrated that the impact of human factors in the value co-creation process is greater at the front-end phase of the production of digital products and services [12].

However, although previous research notes the potential importance of customization for small business utilization of support services, research is yet to consider how it enables small businesses to generate value from these services. This is important, however, given that the advancement of small business – may it be in sustainability, growth or other goal – depends on their ability to gain value from the services they draw upon. Furthermore, customization research to date has focused mostly on the offering organization’s perspective and not on the user/customer [13][14].

To advance our knowledge, this research draws on the theoretical grounding of value co-creation and resource integration to conceptualize the role of customization in the value co-creation process, providing a user centric approach that has been an identified gap in the existing customization literature. It will also contribute to small business, e-Government and support services research by advancing our conceptual understanding and related managerial recommendations aimed at maximizing the benefits small businesses derive from support services. Building on the conceptual development outlined here, future research can offer empirical support for the appetite of customized small business support and the relationship with factors central to the value co-creation process; a key focus and contribution of this research, which will be introduced in this working paper and expanded in future research.

Indeed, much of the research on customization and value co-creation has occurred in the commerce or retail perspective. However, there are significant differences between e-Government and e-commerce [15]. For example, a pivotal goal of commerce is gaining of profit, which is not a consideration for government. There is also not competition between government departments as each has their own specialty and often actively promote other government departments and services, thus warranting research specifically investigating this context.

Finally, this research will answer calls for research in the value co-creation literature. In particular, [16] call for the role of the customer and their resources that are integrated, with [17] pointing to the need to further investigate the contribution of the customer, which is still underrepresented in the literature. Furthermore, researchers have called for studies into the role of customer participation in the value co-creation process, particularly this from a “business customers has been largely unexplored” [18]. They highlight that more research is needed into business to business offerings, and in particular from the consumer business perspective as much of the previous research at that point was from the seller’s perspective. This has also been cited as a limitation in e-Government research with limited research examining e-Government success from a citizen-based perspective [19].

This paper is divided into four sections. Section I contains the introduction, Section II presents the literature

review and proposed framework, Section III discusses future research, and Section IV conclusions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

Significant research has examined value co-creation - “the process by which actors (firms and customers) integrate their resources to generate value” [20] - in recent years, emphasizing the role of actors (such as customers) as part of this process. Founded in Service Dominant logic (S-D), value co-creation reflects on the notion that customers are not just passive receivers of value, but that they instead they have a crucial active role in creating value for themselves [21]; both through direct and indirect inputs across multiple stages of utilizing or creating services [22]. Therefore, it is not the service itself that has value but it is a function of how the user utilizes it [23]. Within the S-D logic framework, value-in-use is seen as the outcome of resource integration [17] and the resource integration is a fundamental aspect of the value co-creation process [24]. Hibbert, Winklhofer and Temerak [25] posit that “resource integration is the process by which customers deploy resources as they undertake bundles of activities that create value directly or that will facilitate subsequent consumption/use from which they derive value”. Hence, the organizations’ role is to ensure that the service is designed, delivered and marketed in such a way as to facilitate the customer integrating resources and thus creating value from the service [26].

The way actors integrate resources and co-create value is by means of value co-creation behavior, and thus the “concrete representation of resource integration that assists in building knowledge about specific behaviors that customers engage in for co-creation of value” [27]. Value co-creation behavior can be defined as customers’ participation in the value co-creation process, and as consisting of two higher order dimensions, participation behavior and citizenship behavior [28]. This research will focus on the subdimensions of participation behavior as this is more likely to appear when the client interacts with online support systems. This approach has been taken in previous studies with relation to e-shops [29]. There are four key elements to customer participation behavior. The first is information seeking, the effort to obtain or improve resources. The second is information sharing, third responsible behavior and fourth personal interaction, and thus the relationship between the customer and service provider [28]. While building an important foundation for understanding value co-creation behavior, it is recognized that it may not fully reflect the case of business to business customers [27][28]. This research will therefore examine this concept from a business client perspective.

This research will draw on a recent framework proposed by [30], as it provides a view of the different stages of resource integration and it is proposed that customizations fits naturally into this framework. The first phase relates to an actor matching their resources and what they require with that of the offering organization [30]. This logically requires the actors to be aware of what the potential resources are that

may be of relevance. Matching primarily concerns interaction between the actor and the organization's resources. One of the key aspects of resource integration therefore is for the client to be able to find the right resources for them from the offering organization that they can match and then integrate with their existing resources and thus create value.

It is proposed here that customization mainly occurs during the matching phase and will assist in this process by making it easier for actors to match the available resources with their existing resources and specific requirements. This would then have a flow-on effect to the other two phases.

Resourcing is the second phase in the [30] framework and focuses specifically on the integration of resources process. This phase importantly includes the removal of the barriers to resource integration [30]. In the context of this research, customization is proposed to assist in this phase by removing the barrier that may be created by customers perceiving a lack of relevance of services or relevant support material. The assessment of value by the actor themselves forms the main component of the third and final phase.

The framework is highlighted in Figure 1 and conceptualizes the role of customization for value co-creation. In brief, the user brings their existing resources, along with an understanding of the resources they require, to the offering system or organization. The customized offering of the organization then allows the user to utilize their value co-creation behaviors (information seeking, sharing and responsible behavior) to match the resources of they require and have to that being offered, utilize this resource (resourcing), perform a value assessment and thereby derive value from the service and use this to achieve their initial goals (value-in-use). This may then lead to greater satisfaction with the offering organization and other consequences.

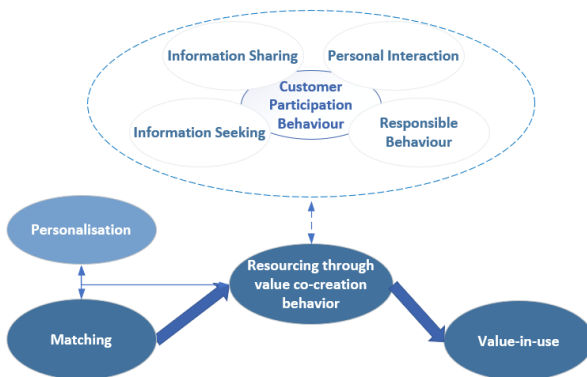


Figure 1. Framework

III. FUTURE RESEARCH

Value co-creation behavior, resource integration and customization literature and current approaches were reviewed to develop a possible framework that could be tested empirically in future research - to determine the validity of the framework generally, and specifically with relation to e-Government small business support.

Future research will look at the case study of an Australian government department and specifically at small business. The data that will be used are from two surveys that have previously been conducted by the organization. The first is on general small business engagement and the second with relation to their specific small business support digital offerings. The two surveys contain discrete populations and will be analyzed separately to address different components of the research questions. Both surveys, however, do contain a variable pertaining to the customers appetite for customization. Whilst the two surveys were conducted for a different purpose, several questions from both surveys have been identified as variables of interest that can be used to investigate the research framework.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research seeks to understand e-Government small business support from the user perspective and how customization can be used to increase the value small businesses drive from these services. A value co-creation framework is used, with a specific focus on resource integration, as a way to frame a customized support service. This research forms basis for proposed future quantitative research.

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