ICT Enabled Distribution of Services: Service Positioning Strategies, Front Office Information and Multi-channeling

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Prelude to the Case Studies

In the next five chapters I present the four case studies (each chapter one) and a chapter on the cross case analyses, conclusions and further research (chapter nine). To do so I made several choices on presentation order and text structure, which I discuss in this prelude.

The Case Studies and Cross Case Analysis

The case studies are done at Unique Nederland, Gak Nederland, Interpolis and Sioo. Unique Nederland provides flexible workforce services. Gak Nederland was a Uitvoeringsinstelling (UVI - Social security administration agency) for social insurances during the period of study and has merged into the Uitvoeringsorgaan Werknemers Verzekeringen (UWV - Body Implementing Employee Insurance Schemes) by the first of January 2002. Interpolis is a general insurance company providing all kinds of insurance services. I studied Interpolis’ employment benefits strategy and implementation. Sioo provides educational services for professionalization in the field of organizational science and organizational change, meant for academically educated professionals. Unique Nederland, Gak Nederland and Interpolis’ business unit Employment Benefits were all business units of larger companies. Sioo is a company with, so to say, just one business unit.

As mentioned in the research design, these cases has been primarily selected on the criterion of maximum variation to enable confrontation of all strategic service positioning patterns and front office types with practice. Pragmatic reasons played a role because not all companies like to participate in academic research. The Interpolis case is selected because of having potential for being a critical case.

Eight front offices are studied in the four case studies. This means that proposition one and two will be confronted with eight front offices and that the service positioning strategy of four business units will be confronted with proposition three. At Unique I studied two front offices: the branch offices and the relation management. At Gak I studied specification of services in three front offices: Relatiebeheer & Verkoop (R&V, relation management and sales), Polisbeheer (policy management) and the Centra voor Werk and Inkomen (CWI, centers for labor and income). At Interpolis I studied the specification of employment benefits services, which partly was done by Rabo Banks and partly was done by Interpolis’ business unit Employment Benefits. At Sioo I studied two specification processes, the application of individual professionals for open course programs and the specification of in-company programs.
ICT Enabled Distribution of Services

As my own insight in this field of research progressed over the years, I decided to present the case studies in synchronic sequence to take the reader with me on the same journey. This sequence has the additional advantage of starting with the most accessible case, Unique Nederland.

In chapter five to eight the case studies will be described and analyzed. Each chapter will end with a section on what I learned from that particular case study in regard to the theory presented in chapter four and some conclusions are drawn. I like to stress that in these chapters no comparisons over the cases are made. This is postponed to chapter nine, the cross case analysis. In this chapter I confront all cases with theory and I draw conclusions on the theory. The cross case analysis is where all lines of reasoning come together. In the case study chapters reasoning is restricted to the particular case under study.

The case studies on Gak, Interpolis and Sioo tend to be quite complex because the businesses these companies are in are complex. Part of this complexity (especially for the Gak and Interpolis case) stems from the fact that developments in their business are tightly related to specific Dutch legislation on social security. Readers not familiar with this legislation are advised to first read appendix B, in which I provide an overview of Dutch social security legislation and organization. Understanding the Gak and Interpolis case (and parts of the Sioo case) will be hard without some insight into this legislation. Even the Unique case, although more indirectly, is in the same working field.

Partly coincidentally, partly intentionally all cases are in the field of human resource management related services: flexible workforce services, education, social security and employment benefits (packages of services like pensions, income insurances, health cost insurances, business savings arrangements, occupational disability insurances, WAO-shortfall insurances, etc). This provides the opportunity to compare developments within the cases and learn something about the industry the cases are in. Furthermore, putting the developments in the cases in the context of changing social security legislation and administration (as described in appendix B) provides some insight into effects of changing legislation on government related institutions and the market of social security related services (like for instance insurance and reintegration services). Both are done in the cross case analysis (chapter nine).

The Structure of the Case Studies

In this section I discuss the choices I made to describe and analyze the cases.

Analysis of the material is mixed with the material itself. In the analysis I refer as much as possible to the research material (mainly by document references or interview quotes). If larger parts of an interview tell its own story, I put these interview episodes deliberately in the text to let the interviewee tell his own story. My underlying idea was to let every case tell its own story without losing structure (which comes from the theory under study). This asks from the reader the skills to navigate from analysis (in quite structured and theoretical language) to the basic research material, vise versa. The quotes from the interviews are in spoken language
(with its natural limitations in structure) and are in the language of the business the interviewee was in. Inclusion of interview quotes and several data displays (like the one in appendix one) results in quite extensive case study descriptions.

The underlying idea to let every case tell its own story without losing structure, let to different text structures in the case study chapters, although these structures have many similarities (to not to lose structure). The main difference between the case study presentations is whether a discussion on the service positioning strategy of the business unit precedes or follows a discussion on the front office type and its effectiveness. In the cases of Gak and Interpolis, I chose to discuss strategy before the front office because the developments in the front office were driven by the developments in strategy. In these cases, understanding of developments in the front office need understanding of the business unit's strategic developments. In the cases of Unique and Sioo the opposite sequence is used. I would not say that strategy followed developments in the front office, but the strategy could be better explained by knowing what happens in the front office.

The case study chapters have many similarities in text structure. Every case study starts with an introduction of the chapter and of the company in question, followed by a short introduction of the front offices studied and the data collection material. The data analysis always starts with a discussion on the services, the market and the basic organizational structure of the business unit to get an idea of the business unit. From that moment on the differentiation is made in the sequence of discussing strategy and the front offices.

The discussion of the strategy is always done in terms of the three generic service strategies and the service innovation types of Gallouj and Weinstein, both presented in chapter two. In the cases Gak and Interpolis additional information on the strategy is given in company specific terms to give the reader a complete overview.

The sections on the front office always follow the same structure: a discussion on the specifics of the specification process, the type of front office, the degree of customization, relation information, product information, process information and the effectiveness of the front office. In the case of Gak, it was necessary to discuss the degrees of customization in general before discussion of the front offices. This is done in between the section on the strategy and the sections on the three front offices. Every case study chapter ends with conclusions on what I learned from the case and a summary of company specific reference material (in all cases company specific documentation; in the case of Sioo complemented with academic literature used in the context of Sioo).

Interview quotes are included in the text in italics en between quotation marks. Sometimes it is necessary to include a comment in interview quotes to explain something to the reader. This is done between straight brackets and the comment is preceded by the abbreviation EdV which stands for Erik de Vries, thus: [EdV: - comment -]. References to company specific documentation or systems are included in the text with document acronyms between brackets. In the Unique case for example (YR1997) refers to their year report 1997. In every section on a front office the relation information table of appendix A will be presented. Information specific to the business unit and not included in the table of Appendix A is written in italics.