A research framework for service evaluation

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Abstract

The authors propose a reflection on service evaluation research and practice starting with the assumption that the evaluation process in the service field is still a fragmented and controversial issue. The paper describes a first attempt to build a research framework targeted to better understand which can be the role of evaluation in the service lifecycle (from a design to a release phase). The final purpose is thus to propose a service evaluation overview by mapping existing theories and tools coming from different service-related disciplines and to outline an in-progress interpretive theoretical model.

KEYWORDS: service evaluation, service innovation, evaluation approach, service model

Introduction

What does it mean to evaluate a service? How it can be evaluated and which are the tools available? Who are possible beneficiaries and what are the possible benefits? Reflecting on these questions, this paper briefly illustrates the complex topic of service evaluation through work-in-progress of a doctoral research project. The purpose of the research is to reflect on the relevance of service evaluation and its potential impact on service innovation processes, mainly focussing on the evaluation system, the beneficiaries of evaluation, the service lifecycle phases and the service elements that could be evaluated. Some considerations for the role of service design in this emerging field will be outlined ,starting from the idea that designers are no longer expected to confine their skills to the creative process but can apply their knowledge across a wider range of strategic and management activities (Kimbell, 2009).

Brief overview on service evaluation

Evaluating basically means making a judgement. It is a fundamental cognitive function of individuals and organizations that allows understanding what works (or not) about activities, performances, programs and projects in order to replicate or refine them (Bezzi, 2007). In a

social environment, evaluation deals with *planned* social mechanisms and their operating principles (Bezzi), thus considering the role of the *evaluator* and the interrelationship between an action and its context of performance (*situated action*) (Suchman, 1987). Moreover, it ideally allows measuring the merit, worth, or *value* of what is being evaluated, supporting decision-making processes (Scriven, 1991). In social life, this value can have several interrelated dimensions, such as moral, aesthetic and economic (Aspers & Beckert, 2011). Each dimension uses a different scale and there is no *exchange rate*, possible translation process between them (Weber, 1978).

What about evaluating services? Today, services are completely different from those of the 1950's, when the so-called *service society* and *service economy* began to arise. In the last two decades service marketing studies have undercut the validity of the IHIP paradigm stating that services differ from products because of their intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, and perishability (Lovelock & Gummeson, 2004). Going beyond this paradigm, Grönroos (2000, p. 46) defines a service as:

> *"a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities that normally, but not necessarily always, take place in interactions between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems."*

This means that in the contemporary service society the difference between products and services is blurring. Consequently, also service evaluation dimensions have changed according to the service sector evolution and to the transformation of social dynamics. Referring to service evaluation, scholars assert that in the service sector measures tend to be qualitative and service quality mostly depends on how actors involved (i.e. provider, final user) perceive it (Hollins, Blackman & Shinkins, 2003). Polaine et al. (2013) propose instead to focus on the service performance (the service delivery phase) as a measure of value. The issue is that both service quality and service performance are wide and questionable concepts. Evaluation studies assert that what is being evaluated (in a social context) can be clustered in three main categories (Bezzi, 2007):

» physical standards (i.e. the environmental impact or the resistance of a structure);
» individual performances (i.e educational learning or workers' productivity);
» processes and organizations (i.e. policies, programs, projects, organizational activities).

Moreover, to be effective, evaluation has to reach a specific purpose: basically it allows making a judgement on the *efficacy* (capability of reaching a purpose) and *efficiency* (relation between resources employed and results achieved) of what is being evaluated (Bezzi, 2007). According to Grönroos (2000) definition, the value of a service should lie on all these elements, addressing a purpose both from the customer and the provider perspectives and taking into consideration several dimensions (i.e. moral, aesthetic, economic), depending on the context in which the service takes place. Considering the complex service nature (Shostack, 1982; Manzini, 1993; Kimbell, 2009) and reflecting on applying evaluation approaches to services, some key features can be defined to structure a research framework on service evaluation.

A research approach for service evaluation

Evaluation is evidently a wide and complex scientific topic characterized by several approaches (Stame, 2007) even though, according to a *pragmatic approach* (Patton, 1990), there is not a best way to conduct an evaluation, since every situation is unique and requires specific and *situated* solutions. Focussing on service evaluation, the idea is to structure a research framework aimed at understanding - in a first stance - which part of service evaluation is already covered by existing approaches, methods and tools, with the purpose to define – in a second stance - a theoretical model to be used by actors operating in the service sector. To achieve this purpose different disciplinary contexts dealing with service evaluation are going to be investigated in order to map the state of the art in the research field. Along with the consolidation of the service society, specialized disciplines dealing with services have emerged and started to work on service evaluation. Three main areas of interest can be distinguished, each one including some specific disciplines:

» economics (service marketing, management and organization);
» social sciences (sociology, anthropology and psychology);
» engineering (service logistics and operations engineering).

The design discipline goes through all these areas (mainly referring to service, strategic and interaction design) and its role in the field of service evaluation need to be explored. Defining the disciplinary context to investigate is a crucial point for the research, to frame its boundaries and, as a consequence to identify the opportunities of developing original knowledge. The research framework can thus be described as follows, through some key features.

Key feature #1: defining the process of evaluation

Defining the process of evaluation implies setting a strategy that changes every time, according to the rationality of people involved in the evaluation and to the situated action to be evaluated (Palumbo, 2002). A possible strategy is to compare the evaluation process to a decision-making process because every decision undertakes an evaluation. This process usually implies (i) identifying options and constraints, (ii) establishing criteria to evaluate them, (iii) understanding what we want to obtain for taking the final decision (Saaty, 2008). The issue is that in real life problems are not so linear and when a "rational" decision is made the problem is not necessarily solved. According to the *bounded rationality model* (Simon, 1982) the decision-maker perspective is highly context-dependent and his personal background and purposes strongly affect his evaluations and decisions. This is particularly true referring to services, where the *human component* has a strong and active role. Thus, going beyond the bounded rationality perspective, it is important to explore other possible strategies aimed at solving the issue of defining the process of evaluation.

Key feature #2: identifying the phases of the service lifecycle process

Undertaking a service evaluation requires reflection on which part of the service process to which it could be applied, and from which perspective the observation is done (i.e. individuals or organizations). To reach this purpose, two well-known service design development models have been selected. The first one, called "Four Segments Model", consists in the phases of *discover, define, develop* and *deliver* and is commonly used in design and innovation processes (Moritz, 2005). Moritz has then developed this segmentation in a more detailed one consisting of six phases. In the authors' opinion, by merging these two models,

a comprehensive service lifecycle process may emerge (see Figure 1). In order to complete it, a further phase (*adoption phase*) that is usually not considered in the design process has then been added, considering the consolidation of the service in the medium-long term (Foglieni,
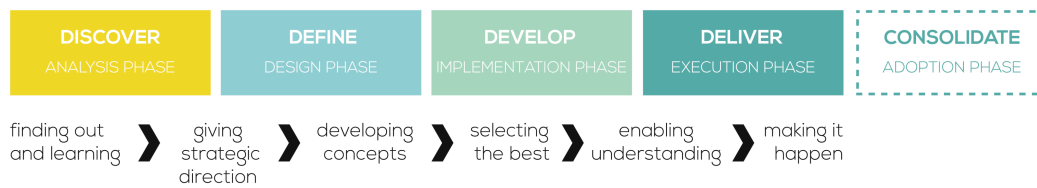
DISCOVER	DEFINE	DEVELOP	DELIVER	CONSOLIDATE
ANALYSIS PHASE	DESIGN PHASE	IMPLEMENTATION PHASE	EXECUTION PHASE	ADOPTION PHASE

finding out and learning ❯ giving strategic direction ❯ developing concepts ❯ selecting the best ❯ enabling understanding ❯ making it happen

Figure 1 - Service Lifecycle Process

Maffei, & Villari, 2013). The idea is to reflect on the potential impact that services can have on individuals, communities and organizations at different levels (social, economic, organizational, educational). Since the phases identified mainly derives from a service design process, it is necessary to understand if they are representative according to the disciplinary context previously described and which phase can significantly affect innovation, thanks to its evaluation.

Key feature #3: determining the beneficiaries of evaluation

All along the service lifecycle many actors are required to evaluate situations and solutions in order to make decisions. It is important to identify them because, depending on the perspective applied, evaluation produces different results and impacts. Three main categories of actors are proposed, addressing the service evaluation perspective:

» *service providers*, including decision-makers or other stakeholders, like managers, entrepreneurs and policymakers dealing with service management, operations and marketing;

» *service designers*, like service design professionals, service design agencies, academics and other actors dealing with the design process;

» *service users*, namely the beneficiaries of the service offer.
In this case, the open issue is to understand how they can be connected thus affecting the overall innovation process and if there might be indirect beneficiaries to take into consideration.

Key feature #4: identifying the possible focus of evaluation

As stated in the previous paragraph, there are several elements of a service that might be evaluated according to the perspective selected. To make few examples service evaluation can concentrate on the overall service quality, the service performance, the organization efficiency, the user satisfaction, the quality of service interfaces and interactions.
Since identifying the focus of service evaluation is probably the more complex issue relating to service evaluation, four main categories are being explored, also according to evaluation studies:

» *service processes evaluation*, including the activities happening before the service delivery (i.e. market analysis, design process, management operations, marketing campaigns);

» *service delivery evaluation*, including the activities and tools related to the interaction between the service and the users (i.e. touchpoints accessibility, customer satisfaction);

» *service impact evaluation*, assessing the outcomes of the service provided, related to a specific context and target, in the medium-long term (mainly social, educational, economic and environmental impacts).

The role of design in service evaluation

Which is the relationship between service design and service evaluation? Evaluating is a complex process that implies responsibilities and a research aptitude. What the doctoral research wants to explore as a new challenge for service design, exploiting its multidisciplinary nature and its strategic value, is to contribute in designing a service evaluation approach relevant within the considered disciplinary context and the whole service lifecycle. Applying existing evaluation techniques to services is not enough: what is needed is an *evaluation strategy* considering the context in which the service takes place, the actors' perspective and the purpose of evaluation. Only designing a strategy aimed at defining what is being evaluated, for which reasons and through which process, it will be possible to select appropriate evaluation techniques and obtaining coherent results. Contemporary challenges are pulling design disciplines to overtake their boundaries. From a design point of view, spreading a culture of service evaluation and supporting the adoption of a systemic service evaluation process could increase providers and users awareness on the importance of service design to foster service innovation. In the authors' opinion, service design has the potential to engage a systematic research in service evaluation field, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods that go beyond costumer satisfaction studies.

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