# IMPLICATIONS OF REMOTE SERVICE DELIVERY ON CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN A B2B-SETTING

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## ABSTRACT

Recent advances of information technologies alter not only the nature of services and their delivery process but also the interaction at the interface between service provider and customer. Increasingly more companies offer remote services in B2B-settings, which imply a reduced personal contact between provider and customer. The transformation from close personal contact to technology-mediated interaction is challenging both the service provider and the customer. Against this background, this research focuses on the exploration of a new type of technology mediated services so-called remote service in an international B2B-context. My dissertation intends to contribute to literature by (1) exploring how customers perceive and evaluate remote services; (2) identifying their expectations; (3) revealing how the transformation from close personal contact to technology- mediated interaction affects the relationship between service provider and customer (4) comparing the results from USA, Germany and Sweden. Results of this research generate valuable managerial implications for remote service providers that help to enhance the service perception, the usage behavior and the strengthening of customer relations.

Remote services represent a relatively new field of service technology research therefore literature and concepts on remote services are limited (Wünderlich 2009). Moreover the key research questions of this dissertation have not been investigated before and seem to be important in the context of B2B remote services usage and implementation from a theoretical and practical perspective. A qualitative approach that helps to get a holistic perspective and to obtain in-depth knowledge about that topic is suitable in this context (Sinkovics et. al 2005). Large-scale surveys cannot capture the subconscious perceptions of individuals (De Beuckelear and Wagner 2007) but without these it is hard to built theoretical foundations that help to characterize and explain inter-personal interactions (Woodside and Wilson 2003). Qualitative research consequently play an important role in industrial marketing (Easton 1995) and has been recommended in B2B marketing research (Gummesson 2003). We utilize in-depth interviews as a method to capture the underlying dimensions (Miles and Hubermann 1994, Carson et al. 2001) of how customers perceive the remote service technology, to explore basic prospects and evaluations of remote service encounters and to identify the impact of the remote service technology on the quality of customer relations. In-depth interviews were selected as they are a "useful method for exploring new and under-researched topics" and enable researchers to gather "rich and meaningful data" (Carson et al. 2001).

We have chosen the healthcare industry as unit of analysis since in the medical- and healthcare sector remote services are established to a certain extent and interview partners can refer to their experience, incidents and know-how collected over the time. Interview partners were selected according to a criterion sampling method meaning that selected interview partners must meet some predetermined criterions that method is important concerning the quality assurance of the data (Patton 2004). In accordance with our research aims we selected medical engineers and technicians being directly affected by remote service technologies. This study comprises a total of 25 extensive qualitative interviews with remote service customers and 10 interviews with remote service representatives across 10 different hospitals in the USA, Germany and Sweden. Data material is analyzed with the help of a computer-aided software tool called Gabek[®]/WinRelan- *holistic processing of linguistic complexity*-. The convincing strengths of Gabek are the strict rule-based coding process, the closeness to the original data and respondent's language and transparency during the complete analysis process therefore ensure reliability and validity (Buber and Kraler 2000; Zelger and Oberprantacher 2002).

Initial results from in depths interviews with remote service customers highlight main topics that need further examination. Frequently mentioned topics are higher risk and security concerns, separation of the customer during the service provision, lower benefit perception, absent evidence of services, loss of process control and missing personalization that influence the remote service perception and adoption and are challenging for the remote service provider with regard to relationship marketing. Additionally the lack of personal contact and social exchange complicate the trust building as a crucial factor for stable remote service relationships. The completion of the data analysis is the next step on my future research agenda. Supported by GABEK/WinRelan I will outline causal relations between the above mentioned topics to get a deeper understanding of the remote service customer's perspective. After that I will compare the statements and opinions of the interview partners country by country to investigate possible intercultural differences in remote service perception. My doctoral research should contribute to the holistic understanding of remote service perception and its impact on relationship marketing.

References Available on Request.