Cross-organisational collaboration management of digital innovation in the public sector – the case of the Estonian Employment Register

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Abstract

Cross-organisational collaboration management has been an important topic in academic literature, but it has been studied inconsistently and initiatives within public sector have received limited attention. Organisational boundaries are becoming increasingly blurry with the continuous digitalisation through new interaction patterns, resulting in a growing amount of cross-organisational collaborations, both across sectors and within the public sector. The aim of this study is to systematise the factors that surround cross-organisational collaboration management within the public sector and test it in the case of the Estonian national Employment Register. For the analysis, the author coded the data gathered through semi-structured interviews with the use of a coding scheme based on the integrative analytical framework developed during a literature review and followed up with an examination for occurrences and co-occurrences with the used codes. The case highlights the role of system conditions (pre-established connections; power relations; digital infrastructure), process challenges (differences in perspectives; organisation-centric approach; reputation loss) and management interventions (initial expansive engagement of actors followed by a focus in incremental development; role adjustments and stakeholder empowerment). The findings demonstrate the role of pre-existing informal connections in shaping a cross-organisational collaboration. The system context conditions enabled a digitally capable agency (Estonian Tax and Customs Board) to capitalise on the opportunity with its technological capability and reputation to steer the Employment Register initiative. The key challenges remain with the ability to expand the cognitive framework beyond the initial interaction arenas to adapt to varying institutional logics. The ability to design a compatible human and machine-to-machine interactions remain key for future developments.

Points for practitioners:

- Initial engagement of all relevant actors, no matter how marginal their expected role, is key for expanding a solution beyond its initial intentions.
- A leading organisation or individual needs to possess the agility and authority to adjust management measures within a collaboration to meet the initial intended goals and to avoid overexpansion at most vulnerable stages.
- Digital innovation requires not only the designing machine-to-machine interactions, but also the surrounding human interactions to ensure compatibility in the interpretations that stakeholders may give to the output of the digital solution.
- Pre-existing informal networks can provide good agility for catalysts to conduct brainstorming and other forms of *ad hoc* interactions to develop a mutually agreed upon idea and jumpstart a collaboration. The *ad hoc* improvisations offer opportunities for expanding upon initial ideas.
- Strongly motivated actors should be steered with limited formal measures to avoid exhaustion from participation.

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