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How Platforms Foster Service Innovations

Introduction

In service-driven economies, innovation becomes an imperative for survival, and firms need service innovations if they are to remain competitive. Service innovations are multifaceted and are developed in different ways; they may also form the basis for new firms, as in the case of Skype, Uber, and Amazon. However, most often service innovations are linked in some way to a firm's current offerings and business model—for example, by introducing technology-enabled or online solutions for purchases and payments, devising novel ways of serving existing customers or attracting new ones, as in hotel and resort “all-inclusive service experiences” or innovative amusement park attractions such as the Wizarding World of Harry Potter at Universal Orlando and Pandora—the World of Avatar at the Walt Disney World Resort. Digitalization enables service innovations such as social robots in elderly care, new medical services, and new exercise methods for weight loss. The development of digitalization has also facilitated innovation and business renewal by coordinating and managing collaboration with other firms, customers, and experts.

Even though, technology is the most important driver for service innovation the firm must arrange diverse conditions to succeed with multiple service innovation efforts. Among these efforts are to gather the disposal expertise of the firm, align resources, the organizational infrastructure and culture. An vital part is to empower an innovation platform that are designed to support the creation, testing, and launch of innovative services and to ensure they are configured to align with other products and services in the firm's strategy and business model. For example, the furniture company IKEA describes its web-based Space 10 platform as “a research and design lab on a mission to create better and more sustainable ways of living. We prioritize a collaborative approach and strive to surround ourselves with people who are smarter than us. We work with an ever-growing network of forward-thinking specialists and creatives from around the world and share all our research and ideas publicly.” To reach customers in global markets and expand the IKEA

business, the innovative solutions created at Space 10 are then introduced on the IKEA service platform, where customers can see and manipulate IKEA products.

We contend here that the innovation platform is an increasingly important driver of collaboration with external partners, revolutionizing how firms organize, govern, and manage innovation projects to create competitive advantage. Our own and other empirical observations indicate that business changes facilitated by innovation platforms are often led by a key actor, innovative champion, or entrepreneur. Well known examples include Elon Musk at Tesla, Steve Jobs at Apple and Jeff Bezos at Amazon, as well as Oscar Farinetti (Eataly), Ingvar Kamprad (IKEA), Xavier López Ancona (KidZania), and Ole Kirk Christiansen (LEGO).

An innovation platforms enhance efficiency and effectiveness by enabling innovators to access resources for service creation, more secure and customized payment options, better transportation services, and more convenient self-customization solutions. This article describes how firms configure and deploy innovation platforms as a means of systematically attracting, facilitating, and orchestrating innovation activities and projects with network partners, customers, and others. We developed the framework applied here to capture how innovation platforms are used to orchestrate the collaborative service innovation efforts of multiple actors.

A framework for service innovation

Service innovations are most often initiated by firms and communicated to a market through value propositions. For present purposes, a value proposition can be understood as a firm's invitation to customers to join forces in creating novel and attractive value for themselves and others through interaction with the firm. If there is to be a sustainable interaction, that invitation must be of interest and value to all of the involved parties; for the proposing firm(s), the offer must be worth their while, and for other firms and customers, it must be sufficiently attractive to warrant a transaction.

In general, then, firms seek to fulfill their business goals and objectives by presenting value propositions that are attractive to others. However, because they are also guided by existing business practices, norms, and rules, firms necessarily enact various economic and social roles that at once enable and constrain innovation efforts. To describe the creation of innovation systems, we draw on *the structuration of service innovation* framework, that describes the creation of innovation systems, based on the analysis of three interdependent concepts: *agency*, *structure* and

states of the innovation process. *Agency* refers here to the innovative champion that identifies and formulates a value proposition to attract and energize the partners and resources needed for the innovation process. This champion drives the innovation process and guides the interaction between the firm's offering, the value proposition, and customers and others who find their interests served by its pursuit. *Structure* refers here to the business setting, including the surrounding context of norms, rules, and business models. Finally, *states of the innovation process* are the actions that must be taken by the innovation champion and other key employees to initiate and realize the innovation. These three concepts capture how the innovation process is driven by the interaction between firms and customers and how the resources accessed through the innovation platform are orchestrated. The present article focuses on the first two of these concepts—agency and structure.

Agency

Agency denotes the innovation champion's entrepreneurial capacity to make effective decisions that will develop the business through service innovation, combining resources in novel and useful ways to form an innovative value proposition. Other firms and customers must be able to see how they can more effectively realize their goals by engaging in co-creation with the value-proposing firm(s).

Structure

Structure denotes the institutions that specify the rules of the business game the firm must play if it is to innovate successfully, both generally and in specific markets. This includes the business model and the norms and rules that guide the collaborating partners and customers when doing business. Innovative firms and their champions seek to challenge and change some of those existing norms and rules; for example, by using Facebook or Instagram to communicate with their customers, firms can massively extend access to their offerings. Similarly, the norms and rules change when Tesla drivers fuel their cars at home using the electricity grid.

Innovation platforms and collaborating partners

Although recent research has tended to focus on the technology rather than the business implications, an innovation platform can be defined as a structured and agreed means of collaboration on service innovation efforts among firms, partners, and customers. By facilitating and orchestrating relevant activities, projects and interactions, a stream of innovative services and solutions can be developed. Although not always systematically organized, all firms having multiple innovation activities use some kind of innovation platforms. First, companies like IKEA and Lego use innovation platforms to organize their partners assembly activities, and further on show customers how their products would look following assembly. In a second category, firms like Kraft, Nestlé, and Procter & Gamble use platforms to create an umbrella brand for multiple individual brands. Finally, a number of firms such as Spotify or Amazon have recently introduced technology-enabled platforms, which can be adjusted to meet the specific needs of a wide range of other firms—for example, to accommodate various legal requirements, market conditions, and business models.

Building on the structuration of service innovation framework and the above descriptions, we can define an innovation platform as *support structures and firm activities designed to foster service innovations*. On this view, these activities serve to develop innovations that fit the firm's business model, usually in a project context, with the support of an innovation champion. The value proposition is realized by a constellation of internal and external experts, equipped with the necessary resources to propose, visualize, and test ideas.

The innovation platform typically combines a physical and a virtual space designed to organize and support innovation efforts without the restrictions of existing business norms and rules. As one example, the global hotel chain Accor has worked closely with the Fraunhofer Institute in Stuttgart to develop a service innovation laboratory (ServLab) to “test drive” new hotel solutions, hotel room designs, and novel customer experiences in much the same way that customers can test drive a new car prior to purchase. These virtual solutions test elements of the customer journey such as check-in, conference rooms, restaurant tables and decor, and waiting staff, enabling fine-tuning before the hotel is designed and built. Similarly, construction firms can test virtual apartments, exposing customers to functional and aesthetic aspects of interior elements such as wallpaper, lighting, and furniture. As a third example, IKEA's Space 10 includes a test kitchen, an exhibition space, a mixed reality lab, a vertical farm, and a fabrication laboratory where

ideas are discussed, analyzed, and tested with experts and customers. Space 10 innovation projects include future uses of artificial intelligence (AI) in the home, the web as conversation, a visual exploration of future foods, and the new world of shared living.

As these examples show, innovation platforms can take many forms, differing in scope and focus according to changes in the business context and the firm's business model, strategy, and culture. In providing access to different sets of resources, technologies, and experts and users with relevant knowledge and skills, the platform's structure, norms, and rules should guide service innovation while resonating with the firm's business model and strategy. The innovation champion, who orchestrates the contributions of multiple collaborating partners to create something novel and useful, also acts as a gatekeeper in deciding whether an innovation is to be added to current offerings.

Innovation platforms in practice

To demonstrate their application in practice, we investigated six firms and their platforms that have successfully created multiple service innovations. The selected firms—IKEA, Lego, KidZania, Eataly, Amazon, and Spotify—represent a wide range of B2C activities and are known as innovators within their industry. All of these firms are growing rapidly and operate in multiple international markets. Crucially, they rely on a high degree of collaboration with other actors and leading within their field of business. Each is associated with an innovation champion with a passion for innovation, breaking and remaking normal practices in their market. In all six cases, the innovation champion has created the platform to renew the business by exploiting business opportunities in the given market. The platform's key role is to manage ongoing processes involving multiple actors whose interactive collaborations contribute complementary ideas and insights to the processes of innovation.

Among the many forms of innovation platform, the present paper focuses on three main types: those emphasizing new ways of assembling resources, those emphasizing new constellations of brands, and those emphasizing new applications of technologies. We go on to describe how these three types support business renewal by orchestrating resources and the interdependencies among collaborating partners, as well as business norms and rules.

IKEA and Lego are examples of the first type of innovation platform. IKEA designs and produces ready-to-assemble furniture, accessories, and appliances for new home and office spaces,

which are displayed and sold on their website and in their stores. These solutions can be “test-driven” and further developed by customers, using online simulation tools or chatting with experts for customized support, either online or face-to-face at IKEA stores. IKEA’s Space 10 platform is a major recent innovation that enables customers and potential customers to assemble and disassemble furniture without the need for tools. Working with disruptive entrepreneurs, the Space 10 platform is used to create new value propositions and services, as in the case of the innovation project In Motion Office.

Together, we explore different perspectives and incorporate outside insights when creating the products and services of tomorrow.

IKEA (Inter IKEA Systems B.V.) has created an innovation platform called Space10 [which] invites people from the worlds of art, design, and technology to participate in different research projects that produce a range of prototypes, exhibitions, events, and workshops. When designers and interaction artists collaborated on ways to increase body awareness and to address the mental and physical challenges of our modern digital world, the In Motion Office was born. With a pivoting desk, the workstation enables workers to change position throughout the day, allowing them to enjoy sunlight, avoid screen glare, change their perspective, and interact with different colleagues. The physical act of moving into different work positions promotes intellectual productivity and reduces health issues associated with long periods of inactivity.

Since its launch in 2015, the Space 10 platform has generated an astonishing volume of ideas, some of which have been developed as innovative additions to IKEA’s product offering. According to Göran Nilsson, IKEA Concept Innovation Manager at Inter IKEA Systems B.V.,

IKEA co-workers have always enjoyed the freedom to address big issues creatively in our own business practices. With a global network of contributors, Space10 reflects the same spirit, enabling them to explore food security, the pace of urbanization, health and wellness, and other macro-trends in a fearless way.

He went on to say:

We already do a lot to improve the lives of many people, and with Space10, we hope to take this vision even further. It's about exploring new ways of enabling a better and more sustainable life for many people.

LEGO is a second instance of this assembly type of innovation platform. LEGO (meaning “I assemble” in Latin) makes construction toys that feature interlocking plastic bricks and an accompanying array of gears, figurines or mini-figures, and other elements. LEGO’s building bricks create “*builders of tomorrow through creative play and learning*” and can be assembled and connected in multiple ways to construct objects that include vehicles, buildings, and working robots. The LEGO innovation platform increased the volume of resources available to customers when solving a particular problem by establishing itself as a new institution within the LEGO business system. Ville Kilkku, who is responsible for Toys and games innovation, had this to say.

This is essentially what the LEGO System of Play is designed to do! Rather than dispensing ready-made solutions, it gives children (and adults) the means to create their own play. With complete interoperability between all bricks, past and present, the LEGO System of Play is the platform on which a whole ecosystem is based. Children of my generation used LEGO not only with LEGO but also to build vehicles, buildings, and furniture for action figures and dolls. This platform aspect gives LEGO much of its longevity across the generations. Driven by LEGO User Groups (LUGs) all over the world, the platform unleashes their creativity when using LEGO. Its LEGO Ideas portal (formerly Cuusoo) makes LEGO a leader in crowdsourcing, collecting customer suggestions for new sets and working to create the most popular ones, with a share of the profits going to the idea’s originator. For example, LEGO’s Minecraft sets were a response to customer demand on this portal. LEGO also uses the power of creativity in its marketing—for example, around LEGO Architecture, bringing out LEGO customers’ creative side through various competitions.

Being a platform also means that other companies can take LEGO pieces and do something new with them. An example is Play, the “Netflix for LEGO.” Play rents out LEGOs and runs its own crowdsourcing portal, which is actually creating more new crowdsourced LEGO sets than LEGO’s own Ideas portal. (Posted June 25 2015)

LEGO's innovation platform supports efforts to expand its product offerings by enabling the company to benefit from existing institutional arrangements. In response to a crisis in 2004 that led to financial restructuring when the company was unable to compete with rivals such as Nintendo, LEGO decided to introduce open source methods and engaged outside developers. Now, collaboration with multiple individuals across a worldwide network and creative orchestration of information, physical products, and ICT tools generates opportunities for ongoing reconfiguration of existing products and resources.

In a second category of innovation platforms, firms orchestrate brand collaborations. As one of the fastest-growing and innovative global businesses, KidZania is a good example of this type of platform. As a kid-friendly theme park where children get to role-play adult jobs such as fireman, painter, or dentist, the KidZania experience is designed as a child-sized replica of a real city, including buildings, shops, and theaters, as well as vehicles and pedestrians moving along its streets. In this city, children from 4 to 14 work in branded activities in settings that include bottling Coca-Cola, working at a Crest-sponsored dentist's office or in a McDonald's restaurant, painting with Corporação Industrial do Norte, washing hands with P&G's Safeguard soap, and using airline tickets from American Airlines, Fly Dubai, and Saudia. While performing these tasks, the children earn KidZos (KidZania's currency), and their money is kept in the KidZania bank to be spent at the gift shop and on KidZania activities.

The commercial and critical success of this innovative theme park confirms the value of collaborating with well-known brands to manage the risk of service innovation and to facilitate and finance upscaling. These innovation platforms are flexible and can be adjusted to specific project requirements or local conditions while avoiding conflicts with institutionalized norms, rules, and business models. In *KidZania Journal 2011*, the company's former Chief Marketing Officer described the KidZania model as follows.

It is critical that the experience be fun! So whether it is a TV station in Dubai using the most innovative new Sony cameras, the new Fiesta hotel experience in Mexico City, or the Nestle Chocapic cereal-making factory in Lisbon, each experience is uniquely crafted to be enjoyable for kids and beneficial for partners.

The decision to grow and upscale is linked to how resources and practices are accessed and configured through collaboration with well-known brands as resourceful partners. These business

alliances supply KidZania's parks with scale replicas of their equipment, enabling KidZania to integrate the brands into their service experience. The challenge of upscaling is to strike a balance between positioning a leading brand in the local market while communicating values and prosocial habits to children through KidZania as the umbrella global brand by means of a unique service product platform.

Eataly is another example of an umbrella brand, using its restaurant and product offerings to bring small local food and wine brands together with global brands like Barilla, Slow Food (a quality assurance and employee training provider), and Coop (a provider of logistics solutions in the food sector). The name "Eataly" combines "Eat" and "Italy" to describe both the firm's heritage and its business purpose; its motto is "We cook what we sell, and we sell what we cook." Each Eataly describes itself as "a bustling Italian marketplace ... overflowing with restaurants, take-away counters, and an educational counter dedicated to the same high-quality food and drink offered just steps away in the full market" where customers are invited to "Eat, shop, and learn!" Eataly is an example of how an innovation platform can be used to orchestrate a configuration of local and global brands into a scalable service array of related products within an ecosystem. As the company's operations manager described it,

In Italy, with the support of Slow Food, the company selects only high quality brands with traditional and sustainable production practices. Abroad, Eataly also introduces brands that local partners suggest as more representative of Italy. For instance, in New York, Eataly included the first Nutella bar in the world, and for the same reason selected Barilla as the main brand of pasta. In Brazil, the local partner suggested not including Barilla among the pasta brands because it is not well positioned in the Brazilian market.

KidZania and Eataly collaborate in similar ways with international and local brand owners, illustrating how an innovation champion can use this kind of platform to develop novel service processes and experiences. In the words of one Eataly manager:

Worldwide, Eataly stores develop close relationships with the territory, selecting the best local suppliers. In general, for stores abroad, the selection process differs for dry and fresh foods; dry products are exported from Italian suppliers while in the case of fresh products, local providers have to abide by specific methods of production and values as in Italy.

By integrating their resources, these actors join forces to realize the value proposition articulated by the service ecosystem's key actor. Collaboration and resource integration is coordinated and managed through web service platforms. As noted on the Eataly website:

Eataly uses Amazon Web Services (WBS) for a wide range of business functions: running its website and e-commerce platform, providing data storage and communicating with a mobile app, as well as for business analytics. By using AWS, Eataly has been able to expand globally while scaling to support hundreds of thousands of users and millions of page views every month. (Accessed August, 2018)

Finally, a third category of innovation platforms orchestrate technology for a business purpose. Spotify's technology platform for streaming music, video and podcasts is an excellent example of this type. The business model involves the coordination of licensing agreements and contracts with a wide range of organizations and individuals, including record labels, media companies, and artists. Through social media, users collaborate in creating, editing, and sharing tracks and playlists. Spotify's innovative pricing and revenue distribution to rights holders exemplifies how an innovation platform can play multiple roles beyond its core activities. The following is a recent Wikipedia description:

Unlike physical or download sales, which pay artists a fixed price per song or album sold, Spotify pays royalties based on the number of artists' streams as a proportion of total songs streamed. It distributes approximately 70% of total revenue to rights holders, who then pay artists based on their individual agreements. (August 2018)

Finally, Amazon is an excellent example of a technology platform that orchestrates a wide variety of other companies' products and services as web-based offerings. As well as e-commerce services, Amazon handles contracts, financial support services, distribution mechanisms, and logistics solutions. These services have global reach and are also offered to partners and suppliers. According to its mission, Amazon "*builds a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online.*" As well as transforming how the retail sector operates, this disruptively innovative company has put several iconic brands out of business, shifting service offering platforms from bricks and mortar to predominantly virtual. In the 2017 Global Innovation

Index, Amazon was named the most innovative company in the world. According to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos,

Our job is to invent new options that nobody's ever thought of before and see if customers like them. Our customers are loyal to us right up until the second somebody offers them a better service. And I love that. It's super-motivating for us.

The latest version of Amazon's streaming music service, Amazon Music Unlimited, sits on top of its original music store (Amazon MP3), which opened nine years ago. As Bezos explains,

Amazon Studios' Emmy Award-winning original TV shows are built on an innovation platform for aspiring scriptwriters. And the company's fashion business—Amazon is now the second-largest seller of apparel in the U.S., according to Morgan Stanley—evolved from brand experiments in outdoor furniture (2004), home goods (2008), electronic accessories (2009), diapers (2014), and now (2018) perishables such as organic, fair-trade-certified coffee.

Unlike Apple, Google, and Microsoft, Amazon is not fixated on a tightly interconnected product ecosystem of interlocking apps and interrelated services. Instead, Bezos favors platforms that are separately and uniquely designed to serve its own customers in the best and fastest way possible.

*That impulse has spawned an awesome stream of creative firsts. Just this past year, Prime Video became available in more than 200 countries and territories, following the November debut of *The Grand Tour*, Amazon's most-watched premiere ever. Twitch, the streaming video-game network that Amazon acquired in 2014, unveiled its first three original titles from its recently formed studios.*

Amazon has invested millions in startups to build voice control apps for the intelligent assistant Alexa, equipping "her" with thousands of new skills. In 2018, the firm opened 24 new fulfillment centers, became the largest online store in India and made its first delivery by autonomous drone in the United Kingdom.

All six of these firms are known as innovators within their industry. They all share a clear focus on value co-creation and have pursued this logic over time. The six cases illustrate how

innovation platforms can differ in form and focus—here, assembly, brand constellation, and technology. IKEA’s and LEGO’s platforms are characterized by a focus on assembly, with activities ranging from solving customer problems to viewing assembly from an environmental and health perspective. In so doing, these platforms extend beyond physical assembly to innovate new solutions and value propositions.

Through their innovation platforms, KidZania and Eataly assemble constellations of brands. In both cases, established brands play a key role in the service ecosystem, providing physical and financial resources for upscaling and for making local adjustments. Finally, Spotify’s and Amazon’s innovation platforms emphasize the use of technology to connect multiple business actors and customers in complex service ecosystems. Regardless of focus, all of these case examples illustrate how innovation platform activities are both enabled and constrained by the firm’s overall business development focus. Table 1 summarizes the six firms in terms of innovation platform characteristics, collaborating partners and innovation activities as well as type of innovation platform.

Table 1. Overview of the six firms’ innovation platforms

Firm/ Innovation champion	Innovation platform characteristics	Collaborating partners and innovation activities	Type of platform
IKEA Ingvar Kamprad	IKEA’s innovation platform draws on extensive customer feedback to facilitate expert collaboration for easier and better lifestyle solutions by upscaling fabrication across multiple actors.	Expert collaboration focusing on innovative lifestyle creation	Assembly focus
LEGO Ole Kirk Christiansen	The platform supports collaboration among multiple actors, inviting supercustomers and user communities to make creative use of information and physical products by using ICT tools to reconfigure existing resources. The platform encourages risk-taking innovative activities to identify new value propositions.	Supercustomers participation in risk-taking building activities	
Kidzania	The platform enhances learning through experience of responsible roles linked to well-	Expert collaboration in mixing brands to	Brand constellation focus

Xavier Lopez Ancona	known brands. This distinctive business model involves experts from fields such as marketing, psychology, pedagogy and ludology, as well as members of its board of directors. The company is actively developing an innovative learning platform to prepare kids for the adult world.	achieve innovative learning outcomes	
Eataly Oscar Farinetti	Eataly focuses on the benefits of healthy, nutritious foods and culinary experiences from various Italian brands. The platform widens access to quality food and drink, based on a deep knowledge of what brands sell and serve. Eataly invites brand owners and customers to come to their platform to disseminate ideas about the Italian lifestyle.	Experts collaborate to select brands to create an Italian lifestyle	
Spotify Daniel Ek	The platform is based on technical and legal expertise, using big data to analyze and advocate new offerings. It invites record labels, media companies and artists to collaborate by creating, editing, and sharing playlists and tracks on social media.	Expert collaboration combines technical, legal, and music knowledge to enhance the listening experience	Technology focus
Amazon Jeff Bezos	Amazon's innovation platform uses technology to encourage experts from different fields to search for advanced solutions that connect people to trade. The platform proposes that every actor can connect with others to trade merchandise and services.	Expert collaboration using technology and logistics to create a place to trade	

Summary and lessons learned

In showing how innovation platforms are used to foster service innovations, we have seen how an innovation champion orchestrates the development, communication, and realization of innovations on the service platform. Illustrating three different uses of innovation platforms, all six case firms employ structured forms of collaboration among multiple individuals and organizations. These innovation platforms serve many functions, including orchestration of multi-actor collaboration and information storage, management of innovation projects, facilitation of

extensive analysis as a basis for continuous learning, and development and prioritization of future innovation projects.

In all six firms, the innovation champion creates a value proposition that aligns with the business model and orchestrates service innovation activities. This champion is responsible for defining and communicating a value proposition, inviting collaborating partners and customers to participate in providing the offerings promised by the value proposition. The champion communicates the role of the innovation platform both internally and externally, orchestrating the collaboration of all participants. In each case, the innovation platform reflects the inherent focus of the service platform, supported by structuration of the innovation framework. The case examples also illustrate the importance of combining existing resources in novel ways, and of collaborations that afford access to new resources and capabilities for co-creation of service innovations.

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