

Research on the Role of Complaints in Stimulating Innovation

A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction made to an organisation where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected.

Complaints originate from many sources and regardless of how they are delivered, can be prompts for innovation. Complaints are increasingly no longer seen as problems to be ignored, dismissed or under-valued, but as useful early warning signs that something has gone wrong which uncover problems and enable engagement with service users.

Project Aims: This collaborative project seeks to:

- Build understanding of the role of complaints as drivers of innovation, recognising the role of complaints as a catalyst for innovative approaches and the impact of new technology and techniques on organisations.
- Understand the growing role of communications technology as a tool for (i) orchestrating complaints and (ii) capturing innovative ideas that may not otherwise be heard.

There has been a growing interest in the consumer in public services, and an understanding that listening to complaints can be a useful driver for improvement and innovation in the public sector. Complaints in public services often come from a relationship where individuals trust an organisation to take their complaints on board. Complaints are also important in the context of righting wrongs, and there is an important role for ombudsmen and other complaint handling organisations in considering complaints that government or public bodies have not acted properly or fairly or have provided a poor service.

Consumer expectations are rising and this includes the need for swift problem solving. An example of an innovation that flowed from this new approach was the 'Tell Us Once' service. This illustrates a response to customer complaints which prompted the design of a new service so that citizens only have to inform government once about a birth or death, after which this information is shared, with their consent, across other government services.

New feedback technologies are making it easier to organise this input as it is easier to leave feedback and easier to aggregate complaints. It is also easier for service users to see the experience of others, which can have escalation effects as small complaints become big problems for organisations. The research will also include a focus on the role of communications technology as a tool for orchestrating complaints.

There may be particular groups such as recipients of poor service delivery who are less able to complain, or public service areas like eldercare that are growing in scale and where complaints could be catalysts for innovation which transforms services.

We are looking for cases where complaints have been used to stimulate improvement and innovation, mainly in the public sector or public services. We would appreciate a note of any examples and look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you.