CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT PRACTICES IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS COMPANIES OPERATING IN FINLAND

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Abstract

While the extant literature suggests that customer involvement in development can have both positive and negative effects, a focus have shifted to find out how customers are involved. Still the literature on customer involvement has mostly focused on the effects of the collaboration and the practices on how companies involve their customers have been neglected. Thus, the purpose of this study is to reveal the customer involvement practices in business-to-business companies operating in Finland. Expert interviews reveal that all the studied 16 companies collect customer data that can be used in development but only some companies use interactive ways to involve their customers in the development. The findings also reveal four different modes for involving customers: passive involvement, sales-based involvement, customer insight expert based involvement, and customer orientation as organizational mindset. For managers, the study offers implications on increasing customer orientation in development.

Keywords

Customer involvement, Co-development, Customer orientation, Practices, Business-to-Business markets

INTRODUCTION

Several companies are involving their customers in the development of new products, services and solutions to better answer the customer needs. The value of interacting closely with customers in the development of new products and services has been identified years ago (Von Hippel, 1986). Co-creation with customers is seen as the future way of doing business (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and customer engagement is seen as key to create sustained profits (Kumar, 2015).

While co-creation can encompass multiple forms of collaboration such as value co-creation (Payne et al., 2008; Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012), co-development is a more specific form of co-creation between suppliers and customers that focuses on the development of new products and services. Co-development is of particular importance in the business-to-business markets in which goods and services are developed and customized to fit to purpose (Johnston & Chandler, 2012). Thus, customer involvement in development is receiving an increasing amount off academic research and it is one of the key research themes both for the innovation and marketing researchers (Griffin et al., 2013; Biemans & Langerak, 2015).

While collaboration with customer has become a typical way of developing offerings in the business-to-business markets, a consensus of the effects of customer involvement is lacking. The extant literature suggests both positive and negative effects of customer involvement (Fang, 2008). Thus, the current view of customer involvement suggests that customer involvement is a "double-edged sword" which entails possibilities to gain benefits but bears also some risks (Peled & Dvir, 2012). At the moment, there seems to be a joint understanding that customer involvement is beneficial as long as it is done in a correct manner. This leaves companies in a challenging situation in which they should be able to evaluate the right collaboration partners and situations for collaboration.

There is evidence that customers can take multiple roles in the co-development process and their input can vary from passive involvement to active development (Blazevic & Lievens, 2008; Öberg, 2010; Coviello & Joseph, 2012). The customer's role is dependent on the supplier's aims in the involvement and the amount of interaction that the supplier is aiming at. However, there is a lack of understanding on how business-to-business companies involve their customers in practice, and what kinds of involvement modes they use. It is particularly important to understand the involvement practices as the negative effects of customer involvement may be avoided by the suitable involvement practices. Thus, the purpose of this study is to shed light on the customer involvement practices in large business-to-business companies operating in Finland.

The study aims to answer the following research questions: 1) What kinds of practices for customer involvement can be identified within industrial companies? 2) What kinds of customer involvement modes the companies use? Expert interviews with 24 persons representing 16 companies among the 100 largest companies in Finland were conducted to reveal the practices for customer involvement. The study reveals that the companies developing their products in a customer-oriented manner involve their customers with interactive practices which help to demonstrate the benefits of the new products and services before the actual development has begun. Furthermore, the study identifies different modes for customer involvement.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: First, the theoretical background for the study is introduced. Second, the used methodology is explained. Third, the practices of customer

involvement in the studied companies are presented. Finally, the paper ends with discussion and conclusions.

CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT IN DEVELOPMENT

Customer involvement in development refers to the activities that the customer performs in the supplier's new product or service development process (Fang et al., 2015). Customers have been identified as valuable sources for innovations years ago. For example Von Hippel (1986) has suggested that companies should co-develop new products and services with customers who are experiencing market needs before others. In business-to-business markets customer involvement is typical for the development of new solution offerings that are aimed to solve customer specific problems (Tuli et al., 2007). Nowadays, it seems that the question is not whether to involve customers in development but instead how to involve customers.

The extant literature on customer involvement in development has focused on the effects of customer involvement and the roles that customers take in the development process. According to the literature, customer involvement in co-development can have positive and negative effects. Customer involvement can harm the product's innovativeness and delay speed to market (Fang, 2008), but it can also improve the development process effectiveness, time to market (Fang et al., 2008; Carbonell et al., 2009), and the technical quality of the developed service (Carbonell et al., 2009). Another often raised problem in customer involvement in development is the notion that collaboration with customers may impede the development of radical products and services and lead to only incremental innovations (Menguc et al., 2014). Although there is evidence that even radical innovations can be co-develop with customers (Coviello & Joseph, 2012; Chatterji & Fabrizio, 2014), it might be that the practices for involving customers differ in the development of radical and incremental innovations.

The extant literature on customer roles on co-development argues that customers can act as passive informers or actual co-developers who participate in ideation, development, testing and even marketing of the new product or service (Bitner et al., 1997; Blazevic & Lievens, 2008; Coviello & Joseph, 2012). However, these studies seldom take into account the fact that customer's role is also dependent on the supplier and the amount of customer involvement in which supplier is aiming at. Only some studies acknowledge that customer involvement can also be passive when the supplier is using customers to collect customer insights but the customer is not actually participating the development process (Blazevic & Lievens, 2008).

The extant literature suggests that companies can involve their customers by multiple ways, such as lead user method or living labs, and the involvement methods include involvement in actual user situations and outside these situations (Edvardsson et al., 2012). While there are empirical examples for example on the lead user method (e.g. Olson; Bakke, 2001; Ornetzeder & Rohracher, 2006), most of these studies have been conducted on a more general level which does not increase understanding on the actual involvement practices. Thus, more empirical studies on the actual practices for customer involvement are needed.

The importance of understanding customers has been growing as the business logic has changed so that products are not pushed to customers but customer needs are the basis for developing

products in collaboration with customers. In this logic, knowledge about customer needs is critical for the success. Thus, customer knowledge management, defined as the management of the knowledge that customers have (in contrast to management of the knowledge about customers), is seen as important way to create value (Gibbert et al., 2002). It is also critical for the development, as studies have shown that firm's competence to understand customer needs improves its innovativeness (Stanko & Bonner, 2013). While the technological development enables the collection of huge amount of knowledge, the focus have shifted to improving the use of the knowledge.

In sum, even though we have understanding on the customer roles in development and some effects of the co-development, we still need better understanding on the different ways to involve customers especially now when customer knowledge is seen as important for development. This study addresses the gap and aims both to create new theory of customer involvement in development as well as managerial recommendations on the management of customer involvement.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were selected for the study as they are used to increase understanding on contemporary phenomena. Expert interviews are used to incorporate views from several managers who have involved customers in development and are aiming to implement new co-development practices in their organizations.

DATA COLLECTION

The study was conducted among the 100 largest companies by revenues in Finland. The largest companies were regarded to provide the best understanding of customer involvement practices and Finland was selected for the context of the study as it is a country known for its companies operating in the B2B markets. Furthermore, analysis of the largest companies' strategies revealed that several of these companies have strategic aims in the field of involving customers in the development of new products and services with customers, which supported that they are eager to collaborate with their customers.

Twelve companies among the 100 largest companies on the list were excluded as they were investment companies or retail cooperatives without own development activities. Thus the data collection began by contacting innovation directors or holders of similar positions in the 88 companies. Of these companies 20 agreed to participate in the study and the participating companies represent different industries, such as manufacturers, or providers of IT services, healthcare equipment or industrial services. The contacted persons were asked to forward the invitation to the research to people who have experience of involving customers in development and thus 28 persons with positions varying from directors to project managers were interviewed. The interviews revealed that four of these companies mostly involved consumers in their development activities, so they were excluded from the analysis and the final sample was 24 interviewed persons in 16 different business-to-business companies (See Table 1).

The primary data was collected with open-ended interviews and interviewees were asked questions related to the practices of customer involvement as well as the potential benefits and challenges of

customer involvement. The primary data was supported with companies' annual reports which provided information for example on the companies' strategies and the strategic importance of customer involvement in R&D in the studied companies.

Table 1. Interview data.

Industry (according to SIG codes)	No. of companies (Companies)	No. of interviewed persons	Titles of interviewed persons
Mining	1 (Mi)	3	Business Unit Director, R&D networks manager; R&D Project Management Manager
Construction	2 (C1, C2)	2	Account Director, Director
Manufacturing	7	12	
- Primary Metal Industries	2 (Ma1, Ma2)	3	Product Development Manager, Senior product and application manager, Research Manager
- Industrial and Commercial Machinery and Computer Equipment	2 (Ma3, Ma4)	4	R&D Usability Designer, Customer Insight Professional, Product Manager, R&D Director
- Chemicals and Allied Products	1 (Ma5)	1	Head of Development
- Rubber and Miscellaneous Plastics Products	1 (Ma6)	2	Development Manager, R&D Project Manager
- Measuring, Analyzing, and Controlling Instruments; Photographic, Medical and Optical Goods; Watches and Clocks	1 (Ma7)	2	Director, Project Manager
Wholesale Trade	1 (W)	1	Associate
Transportation & Public Utilities	2 (T1, T2)	2	Senior Development Manager, Head of Commercial Development and Business Transformation
Services	1 (S1)	2	Customer Account Director (2pc)
Not specified	2 (X, Y)	2	Head of Business Unit, Development Manager
Altogether	20	24	

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis followed qualitative content analysis. The open coding was used for the initial analysis in which codes were allowed to emerge from the data. First, each interview was coded separately and if there were multiple interviews from the same company, these interviews were used to build the overall picture of customer involvement within the company. After the first round

of coding, codes were organized under higher level codes and patterns emerging from the data were identified. For example, customer involvement practices were grouped according to the purpose of each practice (i.e. identifying customer needs, testing new products/services, and collecting feedback of current services). The analysis also revealed that there are differences between the companies in the amount that that they involve customers and in the ways that they involve customers. Thus, the patterns of different type of customer involvement were identified and used to identify the different modes for customer involvement. Finally, the emerging findings were organized as frameworks that are presented in the next section.

PRACTICES OF CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT

The analysis of the studied 16 companies reveals that all the studied companies collect customer data which can be used in customer-oriented development. This basic data is collected through traditional practices such as market research, sales and maintenance visits and reclamations. The collection of this data is often automated. However, the companies which are aiming to customer-oriented development or are trying to involve their customers actively in the development, also use more advanced ways of collecting customer data, such as observations, field test and workshops in which also the customers participate actively. These practices typically require investments as the collection is not automated but it requires dedicated people to take responsibility of the data collection. The different practices for customer involvement and the purpose of these practices are presented in Table 2 and explained in the following.

Table 2. Practices for customer involvement

	Identifying customer needs	Developing of new products and services	Collecting feedback on current offerings
Traditional practices	• Market research • Sales and maintenance visits, regular meetings		• Feedback from sales and maintenance • Reclamations
Advanced practices	• Interviews • Workshops • Observation • Social media	• Field tests, clinical tests • Interviews • Observation • Testing products with 3D, styrox or carton models • Testing user interface with iPads • Testing services with narratives and comics	• Feedback questionnaires • Interviews • Observation • Videos and photos of actual user environment

Practices for identifying customer needs in the studied companies include market research, visits, interviews, workshops, observation and following customers' posts in social media. All the studied companies involve or at least try to involve customers passively in identifying customer needs through market research or sales visits. However, the customer-oriented companies use interactive practices in which customers are not just passive informers but they also participate in ideation for example in workshops. These companies also observe customers, so that they are not waiting the customers to tell what they need but instead they are trying to increase their own understanding on the customer's business and that way improve their own capabilities to develop solutions that are useful for customers.

Practices for developing new products and services include tests, interviews and observation. All the studied companies that are aiming to active customer involvement try to conduct some sort of tests. These companies typically use interactive practices for demonstrating the products and solutions already during the initial phases of the development process. The product concepts are tested with different kinds of models varying from basic cartoon models to more advanced 3D prints. Companies also try to demonstrate the benefits of new user interfaces and services which are often regarded as difficult to depict by using prints of different views in user interface or simulating the user interface with iPads. The services are depicted for example with narratives or comics about the service situations.

The traditional **practices for collecting feedback on the developed offerings** after they have been released to markets are feedback from sales and reclamations. However, as some of the interviewees pointed out, even if this information is collected, it is not typically used as the information does not reach the R&D department responsible of the development. Other more advanced practices to track the customers' opinions on the developed products and services are

feedback questionnaires, interviews, observation and videos and photos from the user environment.

MODES FOR CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT

The interviews revealed that there are differences between the companies not only in the practices for involving customers but also in the ways companies organize the collection of customer insights. In some studied companies, there were hardly any resources allocated for customer involvement and it was either the product managers' or sales people's task to gather data. For example, product managers were supposed to go through the reclamations and market research to find out if they provide any information about customer insight but as this was not systematically organized or monitored, the knowledge was seldom forwarded to the development people. In three companies (M, C2, Ma2), it was the sales people's responsibility to collect customer knowledge while they were on their sales visits. The interviews revealed that as customer involvement and collection of customer knowledge is not the main task for product managers or sales people, the information may be lost in the databases. On the other hand, in two companies there were dedicated managers for collecting customer experiences (Ma3, T1) and in one company (Ma6), people from different organizational functions were educated to collect customer data.

There are also differences on the continuity of the knowledge flow. In companies in which the collection of customer information relies on automated systems, such as internet surveys on customer satisfaction, the knowledge is not collected and continuously but instead maybe once a year surveys are send and someone analysis the results. Customer insight experts typically work in development projects, so even though valuable qualitative data is collected, the collection is often related to single product or service and no continuous knowledge flow is reached. On the other hand, the sales people visiting companies on a regular basis are able to collect continuous knowledge. The knowledge flow is continuous also in companies in which the customer orientation is an organizational mindset as multiple persons within the organization are collecting the data with all the different kinds of practices.

Based on these different resource allocations for collecting customer insight and the continuity of information flow, four different modes for involving customers were identified. These modes are named as passive involvement, sales based involvement, customer insight expert based involvement, and customer orientation as organizational mindset (See Figure 1). The characteristics of identified modes for customer involvement are presented in Table 3. All of these modes have their own benefits and challenges.
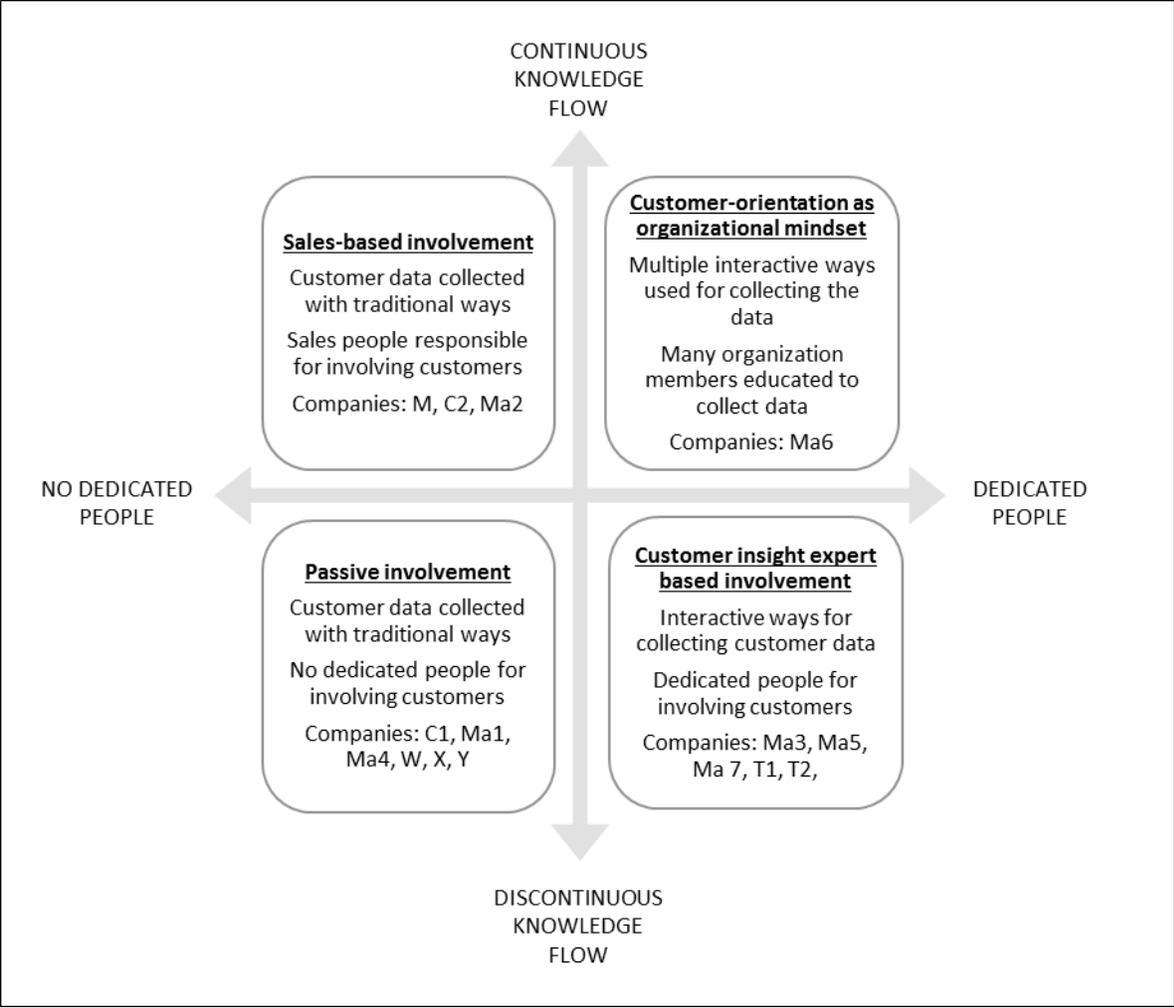
Figure 1. Four involvement modes based on practices and responsibility in organization.

PASSIVE CUSTOMER INVOLVEMENT

In the passive involvement mode, customer information is collected with traditional ways which include reclamations, customer feedback and customer surveys. This mode emphasizes the collection of customer data and typically data is collected automatically so it does not require extra resources. The challenges of this mode includes documenting the data so that it would be available when needed. It also depends on the organization who has access to the information and how well this information used. Furthermore, the data is often backward oriented so it offers little guidance on the further customer needs.

SALES-BASED INVOLVEMENT

In sales-based involvement, sales people are supposed to collect customer knowledge while they are on their sales visits. The practices used by sales people include customer surveys, market

research and sales visits. The benefits of this mode are that no extra resources are needed and sales people often have access to customers. However, there are also challenges in this mode. Collecting customer data is not the first priority for sales people, especially if they cannot see the link to improved sales. Thus, the information may not be collected as carefully as needed. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that sales people may not be competent to collect the data or customers may have negative attitude towards the sales people so they might not share the needed information to the sales people. Finally, in some cases, the knowledge flow may not reach the people responsible for the development. Example of the knowledge flow in one of the studied companies showed that the customer information goes from the sales manager to the product manager and then to development manager before it should reach the project manager of a specific development project. Thus, there is a huge risk that the collected customer knowledge does not reach the right people.

CUSTOMER INSIGHT EXPERT BASED INVOLVEMENT

Customer involvement that is based on customer insight experts relies on specialist who are trained to collect customer information. In the studied companies these specialists typically represented the design function in the organization. These people have the competence to use all possible ways of collecting customer insight and the interviews revealed that the customer insight experts relied on observations and interviews when collecting the customer knowledge. Thus, the emphasis was on collecting qualitative data about the customer and its business environment. The benefit of this mode is that the experts typically are part of the development teams and thus, they are able to report directly to the people responsible of the development project. However, the challenges of this mode include the selection of the customer needs that the company should focus on and the continuity of the knowledge flow after the development project has ended. The qualitative methods for collecting customer information often resulted in many different kinds of customer needs and in some cases it was seen difficult to choose which needs are emphasized. The study also revealed that after the customer insight experts left the development projects, they could not follow if the customer knowledge collected by them were actually used in the development project. Furthermore, for the same continuity problem, they did not receive the customers' feedback after the new product was launched.

CUSTOMER ORIENTATION AS ORGANIZATIONAL MINDSET

Customer orientation as organizational mindset was identified in one of the studied companies. In this company, all organization members were seen to be responsible of collecting customer knowledge and people from different organizational functions, such as sales, installations and development visited customers. These people were also educated to observe customers so that they could collect customer knowledge. In this mode, all possible practices for collecting customer information were in use. The benefit of this mode is that it increases customer orientation throughout organization which makes it easier to decide on new development projects that are based on customer information. Furthermore, this mode guarantees knowledge flow as members from different organizational units are collecting customer knowledge. However, educating personnel to collect insights requires resources and customers may become bored with the

continuous flow of people observing them. Thus, this mode also requires motivating the customers to share information.

Table 3. Different modes for involving customers and their characteristics.

	People in charge	Typical practices	Benefits	Challenges
Passive involvement	-	Reclamations, customer feedback, customer surveys	Usually automatically collected so collecting the data does not require extra resources.	Documenting the massive amount of data so that it is easily accessible and identifying future needs as often the data is backward-oriented.
Sales-based involvement	Sales managers, key account managers	Customer surveys, market research, sales visits	Sales people can collect the information while they are working, does not require extra resources.	Securing the knowledge flow to R&D and making sure that the sales people have competence to collect the data.
Customer insight expert based involvement	Dedicated customer insight experts or design people responsible of collecting customer information	Customer visits, interviews, observation, workshops	Knowledge flows directly to the people responsible for the development.	Selecting the aspects which are the focus of the development and transferring responsibility of collecting and analyzing feedback from the project team after the development project has ended.
Customer orientation as organizational mindset	All organization members	All	Guarantees the knowledge flow and increases the customer-orientation throughout the organization.	Educating personnel to collect customer insight and motivating customers to share their experiences.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of the research was to shed light on the customer involvement practices in large business-to-business companies operating in Finland. The study contributes to the discussions on customer involvement in development (e.g. Blazevic & Lievens, Coviello & Joseph, 2012; Fang, 2015) by revealing practices of customer involvement in development and the modes that companies can select when involving their customers.

Firstly, the study advances understanding on the practices for customer involvement (e.g. Edvardsson et al., 2012) by identifying the practices that companies use for involving customers in need identification, development and collecting feedback on developed offerings. The findings reveal that the practices can be divided as traditional ones that are based on automated systems that collect feedback and advanced practices which are interactive but require more resources. The

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challenge of the traditional practices is to guarantee the knowledge flow to the development people. The companies trying to involve customers more actively use advanced methods, such as observation and workshops to collect customer knowledge. These methods are not just about collecting customer data but they aim to increase understanding on the customer's business environment and thus improve companies' possibilities to create new solutions for customers. These findings support the extant literature, which has shown that the use of qualitative and less traditional ways to get customer insight also helps in the development of radical innovations (Veryzer, 1998).

Secondly, the findings create understanding on the different levels of customer-orientation within companies. The study builds on the findings of extant literature that there are differences between companies on how they develop customer knowledge (Joshi & Sharma, 2004) by identifying four different modes for involving customers in the development. According to the findings, companies relying on passive involvement emphasize the collection of customer information with the least possible investments and thus they do not have systematic practices for using the information. Companies relying on sales-based involvement have designated the collection of customer information for the sales people, but these people may not have the competence to collect customer insight and the knowledge might not reach the people responsible for the development projects. In companies that are emphasizing the quality of collected information, dedicated customer insight experts are collecting the information for the development projects. However, as this information is collected within projects, the collection of feedback after the development project has ended is neglected. Finally, one of the studied organizations was implementing a customer oriented development program in which it was all the organization members' task to collect customer insight. The organization members were also educated to do so. Even if this mode for customer involvement guarantees the continuous collection of customer insight, is also requires lots of resources.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The study has three managerial implications targeted for managers responsible for the customer insight in companies that are aiming to become more customer-oriented in their development processes. Firstly, the study emphasizes that if companies want to become more customer-oriented in their development activities, they must have designated people for collecting customer insight. In the identified companies, these were customer insight managers or customer experience managers who were responsible of collecting customer data either by visiting customer sites personally or educating people to visit customers to collect customer knowledge. Secondly, the findings show that companies aiming for high customer involvement need to adopt multiple ways to involve customers and for the most customer-oriented companies, observations and workshops are important sources of customer insight. This also reveals that the companies that are customer-oriented, are not expecting direct answers but instead they trust their own expertise to identify customer needs as they learn to understand the environment in which the customer operates. Thirdly, the study also points out that customer orientation in the development can be manifested in multiple ways and high customer involvement in which customer orientation is the driving force of the organization is not always the best option but instead companies need to evaluate which mode they want to follow and recognize the challenges and related to the selected mode of customer involvement.

As any study, also this has some limitations. For example, the companies were selected on the basis of their size in revenues and only the largest companies were selected for the study. Even though, small companies and for example start-ups might have innovative practices for customer involvement and would be an interesting topic for further studies, the largest companies were selected for this study which focused on more general customer involvement practices. Furthermore, only 20 of the contacted 88 companies agreed to join the study and it is likely that the findings are biased towards the companies involving their customers in the development at least at some level and companies that are focused on in-house development are not represented in the study. Finally, data was collected form the supplier's side only as the purpose of the study was to find out how suppliers involve their customers. However, in the future, it would be interesting to study what customers think about the used customer involvement practices and modes.

The research opens up also multiple new research directions. Firstly, it would be interesting to find out which kind of transition paths are needed for companies becoming more customer-oriented in their development activities and how do companies implement customer-oriented development. Secondly, the further research could develop measures for customer-oriented development and use quantitative studies to reveal the characteristics of companies involving their customers in development. Finally, further research could also find out the obstacles behind customer-oriented development and dig deeper in the negative aspects of customer-oriented development, so that we would be able to identify the contingent factors affecting customer involvement.

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