

AWARENESS OF E-GOVERNMENT RELATED SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT SERVICES IN CAPE TOWN

Z. Mitrovic

Department of Information Systems
University of the Western Cape
zmitrovic@uwc.ac.za

A. J. Bytheway

Faculty of Informatics and Design
Cape Peninsula University of Technology
bythewaya@cput.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Small businesses are widely regarded by national and international bodies, including the South African government, as an “engine of economic growth”. However, much available evidence suggests that establishing a new small business in South Africa is difficult because of a lack of appropriate support. The project reported here set out to examine the actual support that has been available, and the viewpoints of both the support service providers and the intended beneficiaries – small business owners and managers. It was found that government-based services were predominant in the minds of small businesses and other involved parties, and that much of the interest in these services was based on use of the Internet, in the context of “e-Government”. However, despite claims of success by service providers, it is found that many small businesses are not aware of available support services, and that where they are known there is scepticism about the benefits of engaging with them. Problems therefore centre around a lack of awareness of available services, and a lack of proper engagement between the parties involved.

KEYWORDS

Small business, development, e-government, support services, awareness.

1. INTRODUCTION

“For every [South African] small business that closes ... 6-8 jobs are lost”

Business Times, 13 January 2008

The above statement evidences the importance of the small business sector for South African economic development. An organised effort to support small businesses began in 1994, when the new South African government introduced a white paper¹ acknowledging the importance of this sector and committing itself to the establishment of a number of supportive mechanisms.

1.1 A Problem

Sadly, the overall support that has since been available to this sector has been “disappointingly poor” (Irwin et al., 2001). Research shows a very high failure rate for small businesses, ranging from 70 to over 80 per cent at the national level (Baard & Van den Berg,

¹ Encompassing creation of various small business related organisations such as Ntsika (for wholesalers), Khula (for financial intermediary) or the National Small Business Council (policy creation)

2004). Whilst recognising that there are many reasons for business failure, some of which are irredeemable, this high failure rate strongly indicates a need for more effective support. It raises questions about the breadth and depth of available services and about the varying needs of different kinds of small business. It challenges our fundamental understanding of the nature of the relationship between small businesses and those agencies that are trying to help them, and focuses our attention on the need for a proper awareness of what services are needed, and what are available.

1.2 Early Findings

A variety of potential sources of support was identified by means of an extensive literature study (some elements of which are highlighted below), as well as by discussions with experts, representative small businesses and over-arching service organisations such as the Cape Chamber of Commerce. These sources were found to be principally based upon:

- Seeking advice from other businesses (usually at a cost).
- Working with community-based organisations (within the community in which the small business operates, at very low cost or no cost at all).
- Appealing for help from government (typically, seeking development finance as well as advice, at no cost).

There were a few instances of support outside of these three categories, but within them the majority of references were to *government initiated* support services, and in many cases to the use of the *Internet* to deliver them.

An analysis of data obtained from service providers' websites and from early interviews with service providers' representatives and service beneficiaries, disclosed that there was broad agreement on the need for identifiable, Internet-based, small business development services, that would provide easy access to information that would deliver real benefits to small businesses. It was therefore decided to focus the study on *Internet-based government support services* for small businesses. In taking this decision, it was noted that:

- Small businesses often can not afford expensive professional consultants.
- Community-based support varies widely and works in different modes, involving many variables.
- Government efforts to use the Internet (in support of small businesses and for other reasons) are highly visible and of particular interest to most of those consulted.

Indeed, there is a rising level of interest in "e-government", within which these small business support services and other initiatives are to be found (for example: HPG, 2000; Hägglund, 2001; Heeks, 2002; CEC, 2002; OECD, 2003). The decision to focus this study on Internet-based government support services is further justified by the South African government's commitment to the so-called "Information Society"². Many South African government departments have developed Internet-based services; for example SEDA³ the Smart Cape project⁴ and Batho Pele⁵ - "bringing the front office of government closer to the people". In South Africa, e-government has been intended to improve service delivery to citizens and businesses, but – as in the specific case of support services to small businesses – this has not always been the outcome (Bytheway, 2004; HICTE, 2003).

² In his state of the Nation Address in 2001, President Mbeki established a Presidential International Advisory Council on Information Society and Development comprised of Chief Executives, Presidents and heads of major international corporations and experts who are active in the ICT field.

³ Small enterprise development agency originated by the Department of Trade and Industry

⁴ Originated by the Cape Town local government

⁵ Batho Pele means "People First"; this document is published by Department of Public Services and Administration

This, therefore, was the chosen context for the study. There was (and still is) a high level of interest in the use of the Internet to deliver support services to small businesses, in the context of e-government. However, there are clear perceptions of difficulty and failure to deliver the expected benefits – there are even problems in making the existence of these services known to the intended beneficiaries.

This picture of difficulty justified an investigation of the empirical evidence, and an attempt to understand more clearly the problems and opportunities involved.

1.3 Approach to the Study

In order to identify the possible causes of these problems, and theories that might explain them, further examination of the literature was undertaken. It might be expected that there would be existing theories that would assist, but no applicable theories were found. The criteria used in the search required that the theories should *specifically* address:

- government provided services,
- services to assist small businesses,
- the use of electronic media in delivering services, and
- services geared to business development.

Some loosely-related work was found. For example, there are early exploratory studies of small business Internet commerce issues (Poon & Swatman, 1998), there is a theory of the small firm (Di Tommaso & Dubbini, 2000) and a theory of application service provision (Smith and Kumar, 2004); studies of service delivery and the new economy (Beyers, 2002), the business value of e-government for small firms (Thompson and Rust, 2005), and electronic services infrastructure for community development (Jutla et al., 2003).

However, these loosely-related theories presented a dilemma: should the research proceed by means of a detailed examination and adaptation of these extant theories, or should it set out independently to develop a new theory? An extended review of options was undertaken, for example: action research, network action research, interpretive hermeneutics, and case studies. Most interestingly, email discussions were initiated with international experts⁶ and an open research seminar was held, at which the specific option to use grounded theory methods was defended, discussed, and ultimately agreed. Essentially, this approach offered the advantage that it accommodates and controls complexity and uncertainty in the phenomenon under study (by working at different levels of abstraction), and also accommodates the different interactions between humans, and between humans and technology. It also lays the foundations for further work that can set out to test and validate the theory or theories that emerge.

The study from which this paper is drawn began in November 2005 and was completed in March 2008. Data collection was undertaken initially by analysing three websites belonging to government agencies⁷. This was followed by 58 interviews: 7 interviews with the service providers' representatives and 51 interviews with small business owners and managers. 228 individual first-order constructs (quotations) were identified within the interview content, that led to the development of 109 concepts in five main domains, classified at six conceptual levels.

This paper now summarises the results of the main study, and then identifies a single domain, or area of concern, as an essential pre-requisite for any kind of success: *awareness* of

⁶ An enquiry to the Community Informatics Research Network (ciresearchers@vancouvercommunity.net) initiated a global discussion of this issue over several weeks, with more than 70 contributions. The discussion concluded that a new theory *is* needed, although there were strongly held opinions that the *practical* issues should prevail in any further research.

⁷ SEDA (www.seda.org.za), RED Door (www.capegateway.gov.za/reddoor), The Smart Cape (www.capetown.org.za/smartcape/)

electronic small business development services. This area of concern is then discussed and the findings are compared with existing literature, in order to test the early finding that there were no extant theories, and also test the decision to adopt a grounded theory approach.

2. THE MAIN FINDINGS

Based on available anecdotal evidence concerning the lack of effective, Internet-based, small business development support, this study set out to identify both the cause and possible solutions. The main findings revolve around the identification of gaps in the perceptions held on either side of the service (the provider side and the beneficiary side), and a detailed understanding of the origins and nature of those gaps.

2.1 Service Gaps

Interviews with intended service beneficiaries confirmed that they were not benefiting from available support services, despite the service providers' public declarations of success. It became clear that this significant difference of opinion arose from the different perspectives of the two role players: service providers were primarily concerned to measure success according to *outputs* (for example, the number of businesses that had enquired and the number of questions that had been answered), whereas the intended beneficiaries were only concerned with *outcomes* (the net benefit, in terms of business turnover, for example profitability or market share).

2.2 Origins of the Gaps – The Issue of *Adequacy*

As it became clear that the supplied services were inadequate (as measured in terms of outcome or benefits to the intended beneficiaries), it was possible to postulate a high level concept – *adequacy* – in order to characterise the problem and provide a basis for more detailed analysis. The arrangement of ideas at this stage is shown in Figure 1.

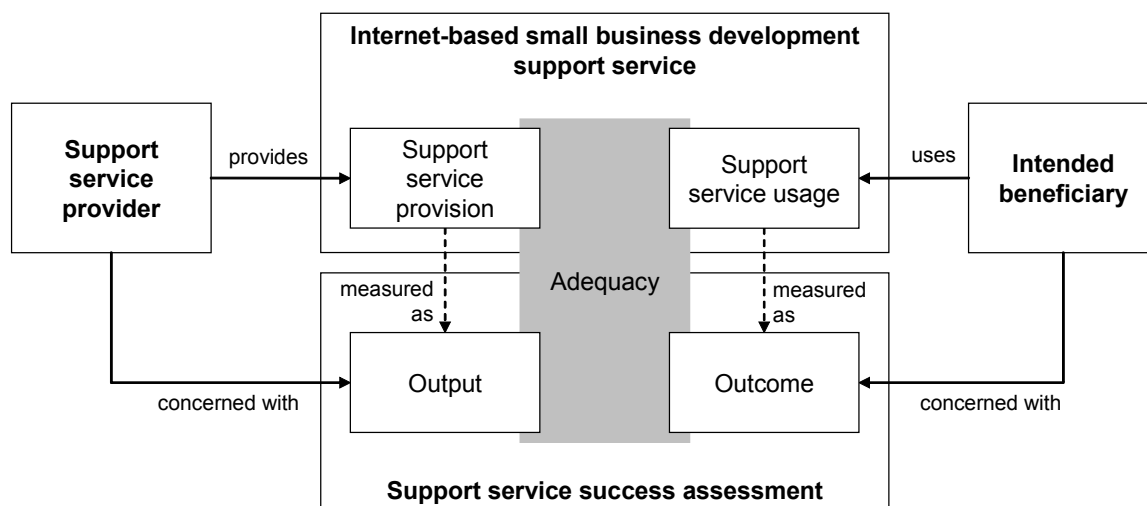


Figure 1: The Servicing *Adequacy* Gap

Starting with the high-level concept of *adequacy*, the next task was to examine its nature and to find a more detailed understanding that might lead to possible service improvements. *Adequacy* is, of course, a very broad term, that needs to be examined for more specific components that make it more meaningful in the context at hand.

[Note: At this stage, it is necessary to formalise the terms used here to refer to the emerging concepts. Italicised text with initial capitals will be used here to identify the

concepts without ambiguity, and so (for example) we will refer to “*Service Adequacy*”, not to “service adequacy”. This style will be used in the discussion that follows].

2.3 Unpacking Adequacy – The Issue of Awareness

Further analysis of the data showed a range of sub-concepts, but the most important attribute of electronic small business electronic services appeared to be *Awareness* of these services. The over-riding result was that, because small business people were not aware of available services, there was only a relatively small base of actual experience to investigate other aspects of adequacy.

The problem of awareness is indicated by the following (and many other) comments provided by interviewees:

“it would have been helpful at the beginning if we had known about it...” (owner of a software company).

“I am not aware of such services...” (small businessman).

“Where are they? I do not really know anything about that... No, I do not know about government or community organisations that provide Internet services for us” (owner of a funeral services business).

“No, never... I do not think my friends either know about it... somebody would tell me...” (owner of a hairdressing salon)

Surprisingly, the issue of awareness even turned full circle, as one representative of a service provider explained that they were not aware of a lack of awareness:

“We are not aware that small businesses are not aware about our services” (service provider’s representative).

Apart from the simple logic of it, the fact that this issue of awareness was evident in discussions with both service providers and service beneficiaries indicates that awareness is a pre-requisite for satisfactory service provision. As a concept, it is still abstract and needs to be examined in more detail to be useful.

Further examination of the interview data provided additional understanding, as illustrated by the selected additional quotations below (and others not presented here). Four sub-concepts emerged, embracing:

- The *existence* of the provided services:

“They need better marketing ... I do not think that many people know about them. They probably do advertising from time to time but it is not enough... Good marketing for that kind of service should be an ongoing activity since more and more people start new businesses...” (owner of marketing company).

- The *usefulness* of the provided services, first in a negative sense:

“...everybody knows that government supports only BBE, AA, and the like⁸... I do not think that they have something interesting for me ... I am more interested in finding customers or business partners than in reading advices of how to create a business plan... You know, that stuff is not relevant...” (owner of an engineering company).

and second, in a more positive sense:

“I used a government website dealing with security issues, I mean, the legislation security issues: application and registration forms. I must admit that those services were very useful” (owner of a security and cleaning company).

- The possible *outcome* of the provided services, where small businesses have a very direct view of what an outcome is:

“...I [just] need to know where to buy or hire quality toys for my kids and make my clients happy and my business more attractive...” (owner of a crèche).

and:

“I needed some money to by furniture for my waiting room ... If computer services can help me to find [someone] who will lend me money for my business ...it would be nice...” (owner of a hairdressing salon).

- The *limitations* of these services that might affect their provision and use:

“We are doing this job since they [the service provider] have no required expertise. We are here to help them in achieving their goals. We are partnering with them for many years now...” (a service provider’s consultant).

and:

“There are some sites that are very much like old bureaucracy where you have to go and stand in a queue and wait there... some web portals are that slow...” (owner of an accounting company).

These findings show that the concept of awareness has at least four principal facets, indicating existence of its sub-concepts. These sub-concepts are accordingly named as:

⁸ “BEE” and “AA” refer to South African concerns with “black economic empowerment”, and “affirmative action”

- Awareness of *Service Existence*
- Awareness of *Service Usefulness*
- Awareness of *Servicing Outcome*
- Awareness of *Servicing Limitations*

The concepts and sub-concepts established thus far can be summarised by adapting and extending Figure 1, as shown below in Figure 2:

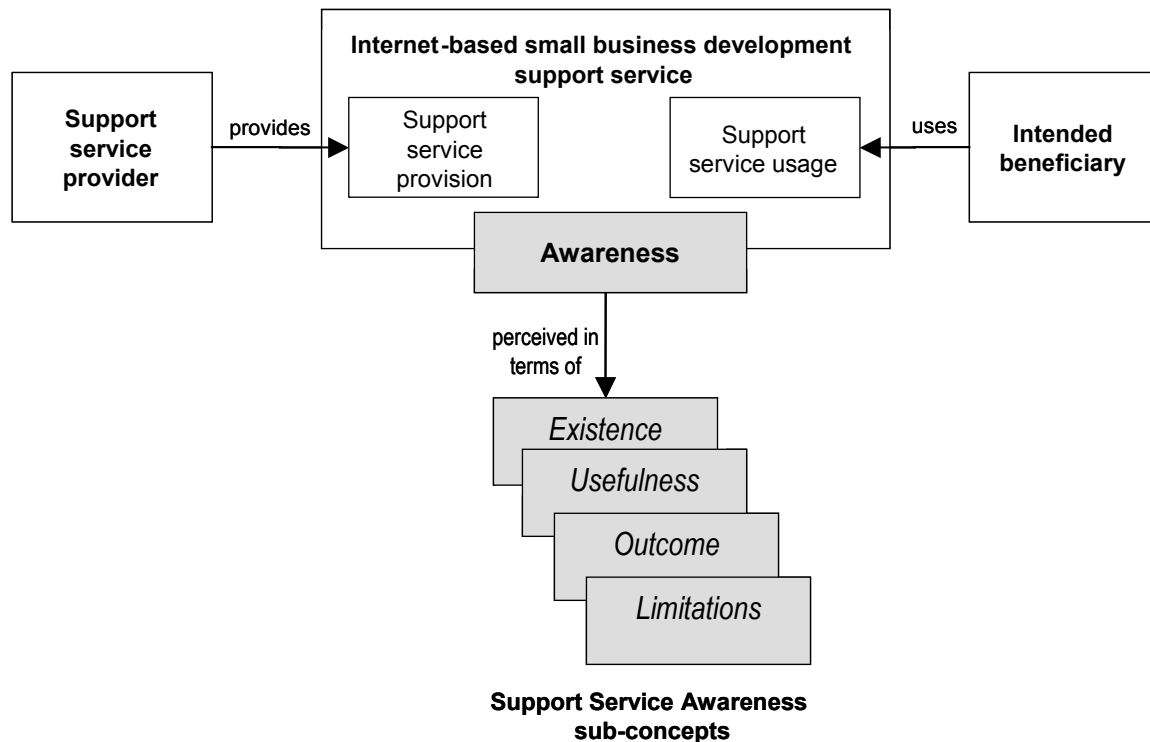


Figure 2: *Service Awareness* and its sub-concepts

3. DISCUSSION

These four sub-concepts will now be discussed in terms of their:

- origins (forming the origin of the entire concept),
- conceptual characteristics (becoming characteristics of the entire concept), and
- possible ways of achieving them (thus achieving an adequate level of *Service Awareness*).

3.1 Origins

The origins of *Service Awareness* are to be found in its four sub-concepts, as revealed by analysis of the content of the interviews. These four sub-concepts are discussed in turn, in the paragraphs that follow.

3.1.1 *Awareness of Service Existence*

The emergence of this concept (and the whole concept of *Service Awareness*) occurred while analysing interviews conducted with a number of service beneficiaries - a majority of respondents were simply not aware that services existed that were intended to assist them. Despite service providers' declarations that their services were successfully used by numerous small businesses, the interviews showed that most small businesses were not aware

of the existence of the service providers, nor the services that they provide. Some representatives of the service providers admitted that awareness of the existence of their services might be insufficient, reinforcing the notion that awareness was an issue on both sides. Hence, we have a concept of *Awareness of Service Existence*.

3.1.2 *Awareness of Service Usefulness*

Where there was knowledge of available services such as RED Door or SEDA, service beneficiaries were still not using them since they were unaware of their actual or potential usefulness. This kind of (un)awareness leads to the concept of *Awareness of Service Usefulness*.

3.1.3 *Awareness of Servicing Outcome*

It was interesting that service providers failed to present any valid evidence of the adequacy of the services they were supplying, in terms of *outcome*. Where they had copious evidence of *outputs* (number of visitors to the web sites, attendees at seminars and workshops), there was little appreciation of the real benefits to the small businesses with which they were interacting.

On the other side, small businesses that were aware of available services denied the existence of benefits (except in a rare number of cases), often based on a strongly held scepticism about government and its motives. It is clear that the benefits of small business support will only come when there are real outcomes, and we have a concept of *Awareness of Servicing Outcome* that is, according to the results of this research, barely evident in the minds of providers and intended beneficiaries.

3.1.4 *Awareness of Servicing Limitations*

Some service providers complained about the limitations they were facing while providing their services, mostly concerning the limited or insufficient resources they had available – particularly human resources. On the other hand, the expectations of the intended beneficiaries were high: they expected to receive services that would solve the majority of their business development problems. Small businesses were generally unaware of the limitations faced by the service providers and, consequently, the potentially limited nature of the services that were provided. The fact that certain limitations in the providing of electronic small business development services were present and that service beneficiaries have not been aware of them leads to the notion of *Awareness of Servicing Limitation*.

3.2 *Characteristics of Service Awareness*

The identification of a single high-level domain – *Adequacy* – and the realisation that it depends upon a single pre-requisite – *Awareness* – is interesting but very abstract. The identification of four sub-concepts that elucidate *Awareness* is helpful, but hardly sufficient to be useful in practical terms. It is necessary to press on still further, to identify properties or characteristics that can form the basis of a method with which to evaluate services, and render them more effective.

This has been done by means of further analysis of the interview data. *Servicing Awareness* can be characterised by a number of lower-level “conceptual properties” – by which we mean properties that can be *measured*, and that will form the basis of an achievable evaluation method. Properties were sought that could be assessed and summed in order to make an overall assessment of *Service Awareness*. They come from an analysis of the data relating to the four sub-concepts. Finally, in order to give a context for measurement and assessment, some comments are also provided here on *Manageability* – the overall capability of all concerned to understand what is needed and deliver it.

Table 1: Basic Conceptual Properties of *Service Awareness* and its Sub-Concepts

Conceptual Property	Potential for Measurement and Evaluation
<i>Service Existence:</i> • Service Visibility • Stakeholder Awareness • Degree of Awareness • Continuity of Awareness	The first sub-concept is <i>Awareness of Service Existence</i>. Respondents sometimes commented that service providers were unable to “market” themselves properly. A combination of stakeholder and marketing analysis would provide useful indicators of the actual state of play, the expectations that actually prevail amongst small businesses, and the actual level of <i>Service Awareness</i>.
<i>Service Usefulness:</i> • Convenience of Service Use • Responsiveness • User Utilisation Capacity • Benefit Production Capacity	The Second Sub-Concept is <i>Awareness of Service Usefulness</i>. Once engaged with a service, small businesses need to find it useful and will expect that there will be real benefits. Benefits will accrue in stages, however, and as familiarity with the service grows, users will judge it by its convenience, its responsiveness, its capacity to assist, and – at the end of the day – the achievement of real benefits that take the small business forwards.
<i>Servicing Outcome:</i> • Degree of Service Usage • Benefit Expectations • Extent of Achieved Benefits	The Third Sub-Concept is <i>Awareness of Servicing Outcome</i>. Real benefits will largely comprise the realisation of stakeholder expectations – the realisation of service provider expectations alone is not sufficient. The service must be seen to be used (there is already an understanding about that within service providers), but it must also deliver to small business expectations as well as to other key stakeholders. This requires a more wide-ranging view of outcomes than generally seems to be the case, and brings us full circle to the idea that the traditional cycle of management must be brought to bear upon the design and delivery of small business support services.

<i>Servicing Limitations:</i> • Sustaining User Expectations • Technology-related Limitations • Organisation-related Limitations	The Fourth Sub-Concept is <i>Awareness of Servicing Limitations</i>. There is extensive evidence in the data that there are real limitations in providing and using services, and that these are appreciated on both sides. To some extent it is simply a question of managing expectations – there is also evidence of unrealistic expectations on both sides – but it is also a matter of dividing the human, organisational and technological limitations up and addressing them accordingly. Better technology in the provision of services will not help small businesses that have no access to technology; bringing in consultants to develop services will not really assist those who have to manage and operate them, if they do not have the innate capability to do so.
<i>Manageability:</i> • Thinking • Planning • Acting • Checking	There is a General Need for <i>Manageability</i>. It is necessary to introduce some level of manageability into the provision of services, in that the failure (on the part of providers) to recognise that <i>Service Adequacy</i> gaps derive from a failure to undertake basic management steps to find out what is needed, to operationalise appropriate capability, and to measure the outcomes. The traditional management cycle of thinking, planning, acting and checking comes strongly to mind. Much of what has been found in the data indicates “acting”, with little prior “thinking” or “planning”, and virtually no “checking”. This conceptual property of <i>Manageability</i> applies across the whole domain of <i>Service Awareness</i>.

3.2 Achieving *Service Awareness*

Achieving an adequate *Service Awareness* requires that its sub-concepts of *Awareness of Service Existence*, *Awareness of Service Usefulness*, *Awareness of Servicing Outcome*, and *Awareness of Servicing Limitations* are all adequately achieved. By attending to the fourteen conceptual properties of these sub-concepts, and by introducing the basic principles of good management, it will be possible to assess *Service Awareness*, identify areas requiring remedial action, and take appropriate steps to bridge the gaps that became clear at the start of this work.

Thus, in order to achieve an adequate level of *Service Awareness*, this study has shown that providers of electronic small business development services should develop a programme of improvement actions based on the 14 conceptual properties. For example:

- increase the degree of awareness of services (Degree of Awareness) by making them sufficiently visible to their users (Service Visibility),
- make service beneficiaries aware of convenience of use of their services (Convenience of Service Use),
- make service beneficiaries continually aware of what they can expect from the provided services and how the supplied services can be useful if used appropriately (Continuity of Awareness, Benefit Expectations, Sustaining User Expectations, Benefit Production Capacity),

- make their users aware of what utilisation capacities (knowledge and/or skills) they should possess in order to use the provided services adequately and, thus, potentially derive business benefits out of using them (User Utilisation Capacity).

Much of this sort of action focuses on good communications between providers and beneficiaries. By communicating well, service providers will develop awareness among service beneficiaries and both parties can understand expectations and capabilities more clearly. This simple expression of what is required is not new, but the detail that underpins it is based upon an extensive survey of current practice that justifies further examination of the affordability and efficacy of the steps that emerge from this kind of analysis.

However, before attempting to improve Service Awareness in any way, the present levels of *Service Existence*, *Service Usefulness*, *Servicing Outcome*, and *Servicing Limitations* should be evaluated using the conceptual properties as indicators. The conceptual property of *Manageability* is particularly important, since we must attend to all tasks in an organised manner. Particular managerial attention should be paid to technology-related and organisational-related limitations. In essence, much of this depends on the availability of pertinent information, and it can be concluded that an adequate information management system is essential for achieving adequate Service Awareness.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 Use of Grounded Theory

It is in the nature of Grounded Theory to pay minimal attention to existing research literature at the start, but it is necessary to come back to the question of existing theories and models before drawing conclusions. For the purposes of this study the literature was therefore reviewed in two phases:

- The first phase occurred before the start of the empirical study, and was concerned with understanding the issues faced by small businesses in Cape Town, searching for possible sources of small business development support, and deciding on a suitable research method. This helped in determining the research problem and deciding how to approach to the work.
- The second phase of the literature study, as prescribed by grounded theory methodology, occurred after the empirical research was completed. The purpose of this phase was to compare the empirical findings of this study with other contemporaneous work and to position the results in relation to existing theories where this might be possible, and useful.

4.2 Comparison with the contemporary literature

Study of the available literature shows that the notion of service-related awareness is not new. The development of modern awareness-related thinking can be traced back to the 17th century, when the first scholarly societies such as the Royal Society of London published early ideas, as reported by Barr (2006). Even before the Internet emerged in the 1990's, it was reported that awareness of service providing agencies (and the services they provide) influenced patterns of service use more than any other factors (Snider, 1980).

In more recent years, the contemporary need for service awareness has become even greater, particularly because of information overload – this is still a major concern in this “information era”. The literature is burgeoning with numerous ideas associated with awareness, in different contexts: *customer emotional awareness*, associated with service recovery attempts (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003), *customer ethical awareness*, associated with awareness of ethical issues (Schwepker & Hartline, 2005), *context-aware services*, associated with finding appropriate services, and a need for more sophisticated

location and context-aware service selection support (Choonhwa & Helal, 2003), and *service awareness in mobile ad hoc environments* as a concept that includes service discovery, advertisement, and server selection (Wu and Zitterbart, 2001).

However, no awareness-related concept was found that is closely allied with the notion of *Service Awareness* that is presented here. Some glimpses of similarity are evident in the “Attribute and overall affect model” (Dabholkar, 1996), by loose association with the *Service Awareness* basic conceptual property of *Servicing Limitations*. Elsewhere, the notion of “brand” can be associated with *Awareness of Service Existence* and *Awareness of Service Usefulness* (Keller, 2003; Vroomen et al., 2005; Zeithaml et al., 2006; Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006; Leone et al., 2006). This is possible since the available brand definitions encompass both attributes: familiarity with the product or service (explicitly), and service or product quality (implicitly).

In summary, although the pertinent servicing literature recognises many types of awareness, it can be concluded that there is no close match to the concept of *Service Awareness* presented here.

4.3 Summary

Given the very high importance of small businesses within the South African economy, the evident failure rate of these businesses, and the South African government’s commitment to develop a so-called “Information Society”, this paper has reported some findings from a broader study that set out to:

- explore the current state of government-initiated small business development services based on use of the Internet, and
- identify the means by which to provide more effective services;

It has been found that the current state of government-initiated small business development services based on use of the Internet is wanting. There is a significant gap between the perceptions of success held by the service providers, and the perceptions of benefits – indeed the very *awareness* of these services – held by the intended beneficiaries, and that has been the focal point of this paper.

It has been found that in order to redress this difficult situation, effective use of the government based electronic services by small businesses in Cape Town largely depends on awareness of their existence, their usefulness and their limitations. Most importantly, it depends on the business benefits associated with their use that are, seemingly, not properly understood by the service providers.

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