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# Microfoundations of Servitization: An Individual-Level Perspective

Wim Coreynen

## 1 Introduction

Firms increasingly create value for customers by combining products and services into integrated solutions (Davies, 2004). They do so for a variety of reasons: to increase their competitive edge, to enhance customer loyalty, and to create new and stable revenue streams (Raddats et al., 2016). Yet moving from basic offerings to solutions is not easy, and firms often do not see immediate financial return, if at all (Gebauer et al., 2005). On top of explaining *why* product firms should rethink their business, the literature has started to stress *how* they can achieve growth through services (Kowalkowski et al., 2017). The last two decades, the majority of papers published has been concerned with finding how firms can alter their strategy, restructure their organization, and what type of capabilities they should develop to successfully create, sell, and deliver services (Raddats et al., 2019). Despite this variety of

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highly relevant topics, most papers share one shortcoming: They view servitization entirely from the *firm* level while often neglecting the *individual* level (Rabetino et al., 2018; Rese & Maiwald, 2013).

In the increasing focus on strategy, structure and capabilities, the elementary truth about firms—that they are made up of individuals—seems to have been forgotten (Felin & Foss, 2005). Many strategy researchers choose the firm rather than the individual as the core level of analysis (Powell et al., 2011), yet people and their different characteristics are the building blocks of many collective phenomena and require careful consideration in both theory development and empirical research (Felin et al., 2012). Also, there have been several calls in recent servitization work to pay more attention to the role of individuals and their influence on organizational outcomes (e.g., Rabetino et al., 2017; Valtakoski, 2017).

This chapter discusses the current state of the microfoundations of servitization from an individual-level perspective. First, we briefly introduce the microfoundations movement and explain why it is a fruitful avenue for future research. Next, we consult and summarize prior research on individual-level components—namely cognitions, motivations, abilities, traits, and behavior—and their relationship with servitization. Based on these insights, we present a conceptual framework that can serve as inspiration for more microfoundational work to follow suit. We end this chapter by discussing its implications for theory and also management.

## 2 Theory Development

### Microfoundations

A microfoundations approach explains collective phenomena, such as firms' innovation strategies, by considering lower-level entities, such as organizational processes and individuals, as well as their interactions (Felin et al., 2012). Conceptually, the microfoundations movement began in the early 2000s, as a reaction to the overemphasis on macro-level factors in strategy and organization theory, and empirical work started to take off in the 2010s (Felin et al., 2015). Researchers also started to focus on firms' microfoundations to build stronger conceptual foundations for servitization. For example, Kindström et al. (2013) identified several key microfoundations that allow product-centric firms to create dynamic capabilities for service innovation. So far, servitization scholars have applied a microfoundations approach only

to a limited extent, and recent work calls for future studies to further explore the micro-level mechanisms of this service phenomenon (Valtakoski, 2017).

Exploring the microfoundations of servitization is a fruitful avenue for further research for two main reasons. First, as a multi-level approach, it aims to locate the cause(s) of a particular phenomenon at a level of analysis that is lower than the phenomenon itself (Felin et al., 2015). In other words: the microfoundations are concerned with at least two levels—the lowest level being the individual. Thus, in order to explain firm strategy and organizational behavior (as macro-level outcomes), the microfoundations approach considers individual-level factors as potential causes. For example, Gebauer et al. (2005) explain how different cognitive processes limit managers to extend into the service business (we will explain this study's results in further detail shortly). Second, it sheds light on firm-level heterogeneity by considering individual-level components, such as people's characteristics, abilities, and cognitions (Felin et al., 2012). In particular, behavioral strategy uses insights from cognitive and social psychology to enrich strategic management theory and practice (Powell et al., 2011). For example, Coreynen et al. (2020) recently found that decision-makers driven by different motives pursue servitization for different strategic purposes (we will also address this further later).

## Cognitions

A person's cognitions are one of many building blocks to understand collective phenomena (Felin et al., 2012). Cognitive psychology focuses on the mental processes present within individuals (Powell et al., 2011). When people try to envision future scenarios and strategies, they rely on their cognitions, especially when there is little experience to draw on (Felin & Zenger, 2009).

Going back to the study by Gebauer et al. (2005), the authors found that several cognitive phenomena limit managers to extend into the service business: an overemphasis on tangible product characteristics, a failure to recognize the economic potential of services, and an aversion of the internal risks (e.g., the firm may not have the required capabilities) and external risks (e.g., customers may not be willing to share knowledge outside the firm) that come with servitization. These cognitions are often embedded in manufacturing firms, and changing them is often a process that should grow organically. When they are present, it has been found that managerial motivation to extend into service is limited and that the share of investments is small (Gebauer & Fleisch, 2007). Once managers overcome these cognitions—that

is, when they put less emphasis on products' tangible features, see the value of services, and are less risk-averse—they are more likely to develop a service business strategy (Gebauer, 2009). On top, they will empower and coach employees to behave in a service-oriented way.

It is not only important that managers change their cognitions, but also employees should be convinced of the value of services. When employees see the financial potential of services, they will leverage them to augment the product offering and improve the customer relationship, which leads to better firm performance (Gebauer et al., 2010).

## Motivations

Related to, yet different from, cognitions are a person's motivations, which refer to an individual's willingness to perform a task, and the level of effort they choose to exert (Johnstone et al., 2014). In short: motivation explains why people act a certain way. For instance, managers are motivated to extend into service when they place a high reward on it, perceive a high probability that they will be successful in their efforts and that their efforts will result in the reward (Gebauer et al., 2005).

McClelland (1987), one of the pioneering scholars to use a motivational perspective for studying entrepreneurial behavior (Frese & Gielnik, 2014), identified several key *intrinsic* motives, including the need to achieve (i.e., to excel by mastering difficult skills), to affiliate (i.e., to maintain good relations) and the need for power (i.e., to control and influence). In their empirical study, Coreynen et al. (2020) found that decision-makers driven by achievement or affiliation are likely to pursue servitization, whereas those driven by power are not. They also found that achievement-driven decision-makers prefer servitization to compete through highly innovative product-service offerings rather than low prices, for instance. Though this type of research is still in its infancy, it shows that people's underlying motivational structure influences how they behave in business.

Also from a service employee's point of view, it has been found that people are better at selling services when they are intrinsically motivated to do so (Uлага & Loveland, 2014), and that people will deliver higher-quality services when they believe the nature of their work is interesting, fulfilling, and challenging, and when it allows them to use their abilities and personal skills (Kreye, 2016).

People can also be *extrinsically* motivated to sell and deliver high-quality services—for instance, some firms create different financial incentives and rewards systems to change employees' behavior (Antioco et al., 2008; Gebauer

et al., 2010; Johnstone et al., 2014)—yet these extrinsic motivational drivers have been found less important than people's intrinsic motivation (Kreye, 2016).

## Abilities

A person's ability refers to the knowledge and skills that are necessary to perform a job, and it is influenced by factors such as education, experience, and personality traits (Johnstone et al., 2014). The microfoundations movement considers individual abilities as the cornerstone for building firm capabilities (Helfat & Peteraf, 2015), and therefore they may be considered even more important (Felin & Hesterly, 2007). Some people have an aptitude for particular service skills and develop them more easily, while others may have an aversion to move into service-oriented roles (or they are limited in the role they can take in the organization) (Baines et al., 2013; Johnstone et al., 2014). It is estimated that only one-third of employees switch easily from selling products to services. The majority of salespeople needs massive train or need to be reassigned—sometimes firms even need to bring in new people with entirely different skills and mindsets (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). Therefore, recruitment and training are crucial success factors for servitization (Fliess & Lexutt, 2019; Kohtamäki et al., 2015).

Overall, employees in charge of delivering services need to possess both product and technical knowledge, combined with various excellent service delivery attitudes and behaviors (Johnstone et al., 2014). Also in digital servitization, which refers to the integration of service and technology, the right mindset and skills are considered at least as important as technical roles (Schymanietz & Jonas, 2020). So far, the literature discusses three main abilities that sales representatives of product firms should possess in order to successfully sell services.

First, sales reps should be more humanistic in their behavior, as opposed to people in production who think more technocratically (Baines et al., 2013). For example, they should be able to listen and appeal to the customer (Antioco et al., 2008), be empathetic with their problems (Baines et al., 2013), build close customer relationships (Rese & Maiwald, 2013), and remain knowledgeable about customers' goals and processes (Böhm et al., 2020). Second, they need to be able to go outside their comfort zone (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011), modify their working routine to comply with customer requirements (Baines et al., 2013), and find creative solutions to solve customer problems (Matthyssens & Vandenbempt, 1998). Third, they need good networking skills, so they can access the right decision-makers in

the customer organization—often higher-up in the hierarchy—and consult and coordinate with employees of their own organization (Baines et al., 2013; Böhm et al., 2020; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011).

## Traits

A person's ability to sell and deliver high-quality services is influenced by her/his personality traits (Johnstone et al., 2014). As one manager explained: "*Product salespeople are from Mars, while services sales people are from Venus*" (Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011: 13). So far, there has been limited research into the personality traits associated with successful servitization. Two relevant studies are by Ulaga and Loveland (2014) and Baines et al. (2013), who identified several traits related to high service sales and positive customer experience, respectively.

First, employees should be intelligent and eager to learn. They should be able to think abstractly (i.e., focus on the big picture rather than on the practical details), be open to experiment with new ideas, techniques and procedures to find answers to their own questions, and work to continuously improve themselves. Second, they should be authentic and have a desire to help others. They should genuinely commit to helping customers and also be prepared to tell them the truth. Third, they should be dependable and strive hard to honor all commitments until the assignment is completed. Finally, they should be resilient and emotionally stable, so they can better deal with the pressures and stress associated with working with customers.

## Behavior

Depending on an individual's cognition, motivation, and ability to extend into service, (s)he will either support or resist servitization (Rese & Maiwald, 2013). When managers see the value of servitization, they are more likely to behave in a service-oriented way by empowering employees to respond to a broader range of customer problems, setting rewards, coaching, and supporting them in solving customer problems. This in turn increases employees' valuation of services, leading them to start serving customers as trusted advisors, problem solvers and performance enablers (Gebauer et al., 2010). They may even change their working hours and tasks to match customer demand (Baines et al., 2013).

When faced with organizational resistance to servitization, employees can adopt several tactics (Lenka et al., 2018). In case of cultural resistance, which often occurs when manufacturers do not see the value of servitization, employees can build awareness and convince others (i.e., evangelizing) to adopt service initiatives. For instance, they can demonstrate how services relate to the overall goals of the firm (Antioco et al., 2008). When there is structural resistance—meaning the firm’s structure simply does not allow employees to pursue new service ideas—they can work covertly and without authorization (i.e., bootlegging). For example, a business unit of a stainless-steel pump manufacturer developed its own sales approach focused on offering customers “peace-of-mind” (Shankar et al., 2009) rather than just selling equipment (Coreynen, 2019). In case of strategic resistance—that is, the firm emphasizes the pursuit of other business opportunities—employees can leverage internal (or external) resources and try to define the agenda, including success criteria, to keep servitization implementation moving (Antioco et al., 2008). Finally, in case of procedural resistance, they can collaborate with colleagues to overcome internal obstacles to servitization initiatives. For instance, personnel can convince top management by presenting the gains that they will obtain from supporting services (Antioco et al., 2008).

## Conceptual Framework

Recently, Coreynen et al., (2020: 190) defined the microfoundations of servitization as “*the influence of individual-level factors on firm-level service decisions, actions and outcomes.*” Based on this definition and the consulted literature, we present the following preliminary conceptual framework (see Fig. 1). Its purpose is to further advance research in the microfoundations of servitization by further unraveling the influence of individual-level factors—cognitions, motivations, abilities, traits, behavior, and more—on firm-level components, such service strategies, capabilities, organization, culture, and performance.

Because the microfoundations are a multi-level approach that aims to locate the causes of particular phenomena at a lower level of analysis than the phenomenon itself (Felin & Foss, 2005), we draw a dividing line between *firm-level* and *individual-level* components. Also, we separate firms’ performance and people’s behavior, which are *extrinsic* and directly noticeable, from their *inherent* components such as firms’ culture and people’s motivations, which are often less observable. For example, a firm’s growth can be easily measured by calculating its revenues or profits, but it is more difficult to put



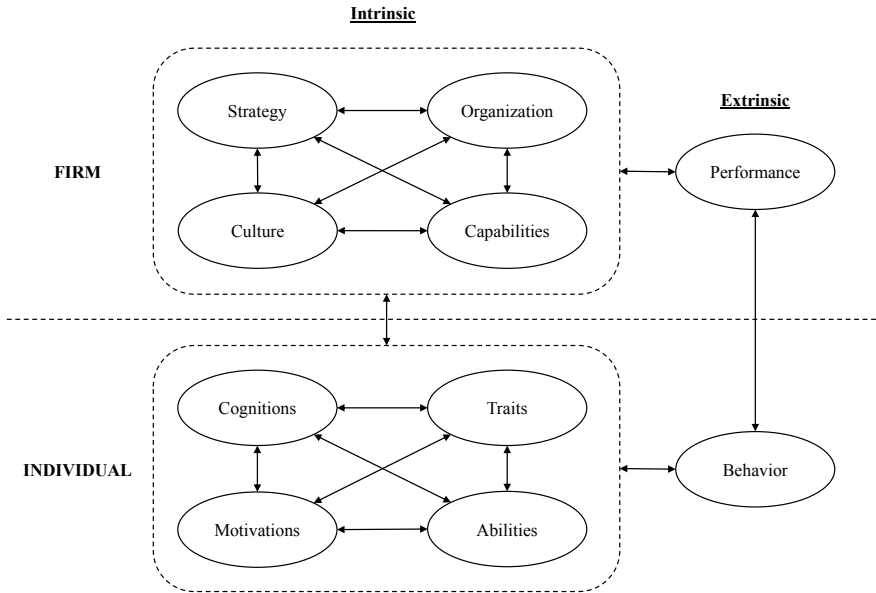


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

a number on a firm's service strategy and culture. Similarly, it is easier to observe a person's behavior than her/his cognitions and motivations.

Based on the consulted literature, we are able to see several connections (for sake of clarity, we do not plot all relationships in Fig. 1). For example, depending on managers' *motivations* and *cognitions vis-à-vis* services, firms are more (or less) less likely to develop a service business *strategy* (Coreynen et al., 2020; Gebauer, 2009); managers with problem-solving *abilities* are likely to make sound *strategic* investments related to business model design (Helfat & Peteraf, 2015); when managers and employees *behave* in a service-oriented way, the satisfaction and loyalty of customers will be enhanced and the *performance* of their firm increases (Gebauer et al., 2010); firms also *perform* better at selling and delivering high-quality services when employees are *motivated* to do so (Kreye, 2016; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014), and so on. Plotting these connections reveal many potential direct, moderating, and mediating relationships (Venkatraman, 1989), which have either already been confirmed by prior research or require further investigation. Also, the components presented in Fig. 1 cover a variety of more specific research topics, such as a person's *intrinsic* versus *extrinsic* motives (Coreynen et al., 2020; Kreye, 2016), her/his ability to *listen* and *appeal* to the customer (Antioco et al., 2008), and personality traits, such as *introversion*, *openness*, and *conscientiousness*, which have been associated with successfully selling services (Ulaga &

Loveland, 2014), and for which scales can be drawn from literature, such as McClelland's (1987) Big Three motives and the HEXACO Personality Inventory (Lee & Ashton, 2004).

We purposefully use no single but double arrows for Fig. 1. Though the purpose of microfoundations research is to find individual-level causes for firm-level phenomena (suggesting arrows that point upwards and rightwards), the relationships are more complex. For example, when firms alter their *strategy*, the *motivation* of employees to sell services will change (Ulaga & Loveland, 2014), suggesting a downwards pointing arrow. Also, when firms initially *perform* bad at providing services, the *motivation* of managers may disappear (Gebauer et al., 2005), suggesting a downwards and leftwards pointing arrow. In sum, rather than proposing direct, causal effects between individual-level and firm-level service components, we consider the relationships to be more complex and very much interrelated.

Of course, Fig. 1 does not take into account *all* individual-level factors that may influence servitization. For instance, people's education, job tenure and social network (Felin et al., 2012) are left out for the simple reason that—to the best of our knowledge—there currently is no literature available on the matter. It could be argued, for example, that job tenure negatively relates to managers' motivation to develop service opportunities. Managers that have been around the firm for a long time may prefer the status quo—that is, they focus on improving and selling highly innovative products—whereas later generations, who are more familiar with service platforms such as Uber and Spotify, may be more likely to explore new business models. Furthermore, on the firm-level side, additional elements such as firms' HRM practices may also be considered. Though HRM is found to significantly influence firms' performance (Homburg et al., 2003; Kohtamäki et al., 2015), its foundations probably also lie at the level of the individual. For example, HR managers' cognitions, motivations, and abilities probably strongly influence a firm's personnel recruitment and training practices.

### 3 Conclusion

#### Theoretical Implications

This chapter calls for further research into the microfoundations of servitization. For too long, the strategy and management domain and the servitization research field in particular have looked at firms emphasizing heterogeneous strategies and leveraging different capabilities with varying degrees of success,

implicitly sidelining the people that build the organization as homogeneous, malleable beings. Yet in the context of industrial services, the people component is an important driver for creating competitive advantage (Matthyssens & Vandenbempt, 1998). In sum: heterogeneity not only exists on the firm-level, but it is present on all levels—the individual being the most basic, foundational level that should be considered (Felin et al., 2015).

Based on a diverse set of articles, this chapter shows that people are made of different components—cognitions, motivations, abilities, traits, behavior and more—that either support or hinder firms in their service transition (Rese & Maiwald, 2013). Furthermore, by plotting these individual and firm-level components as well as their relationships onto a conceptual framework, we provide inspiration for more microfoundational work to follow suit. This chapter thus joins the call for more theoretical foundations and substantial theoretical extensions in servitization research from a micro-level, individual perspective (Rabetino et al., 2017; Valtakoski, 2017).

## Managerial Implications

Moving from basic offerings to integrated solutions is not only a matter of changing the organization to better sell services on top of products, it also requires a transformation of the people involved. Managers should be aware of the complex interactions between different individual-level components (Gebauer et al., 2010), such as cognitions, motivations, abilities, and traits, and be closely involved in shaping and managing people's beliefs, skills and behavior. A service-oriented mindset should be shared by the *entire* organization, not just the people that deal with customers (Kohtamäki et al., 2015).

In order to win over people's hearts and minds about servitization, there should be more internal discussions about the benefits and risks of maintaining the current product business versus developing new services. Individuals with a strong service conviction should take the lead in convincing others to adopt new service initiatives, thus generating more organization-wide support (Lenka et al., 2018). Also, employees should receive proper training in order to create, sell, and deliver services. This requires entirely different skillsets, such as the ability to listen and be empathic to customer problems (Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). Managers should also actively reconsider the way employees are assessed and compensated (Homburg et al., 2003), for example, by emphasizing customer satisfaction and retention numbers rather than pure sales figures. Finally, when recruiting personnel, the firm should

use different criteria that focus not only on experience and skills but also on motivations and personality.

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