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Innovation Support in Swedish Municipalities – Challenges on the Way to Increased Innovation Capacity in Public Organisations

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Abstract

Public sector innovation and innovation capacity have gained increased attention in research and policy in recent decades, but empirical knowledge is still limited. This article focuses on initiatives to systematically support innovation in the public sector, with the aim of exploring challenges related to the organisation of innovation support in Swedish municipalities. The study is based on three case studies of municipal innovation support operations and 23 qualitative interviews with participants within these operations. The findings show how different innovation support strategies were chosen, ranging from suggestion box setups to idea coaching and training using service design methodology. Regardless of strategy, the initiatives faced challenges related to a lack of direction on what to innovate and implementation phases not being part of the innovation support. Other challenges related to managers being involved too late in the innovation processes and difficulties securing a commitment to work with innovation within the organisation. These findings point to both the general challenges of supporting change in organisations and the specific challenges of introducing innovation and setting up innovation support in public sector organisations.

Introduction

Public sector organisations and welfare providers, such as municipalities, have not traditionally been considered sites for innovation. However, in recent years innovation has become a prominent part of the European public service discourse (OECD, 2017), not least in the Scandinavian countries (Høyer, 2009; Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017; Torfing, 2012). In innovation studies and policy, the public sector has been viewed as a facilitator of innovation that provides or funds research in the private sector and stimulates innovation procurement, as a participant in innovation systems and collaborative clusters, or as a recipient of innovation (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000; Uyarra et al., 2014; Wihlman et al., 2013; Windrum & Koch, 2008). The role of recipient or user of innovation is often related to technology implementations, such as digital administrative solutions in public sector organisations (Moore, 2005). The reason why the public sector now needs to renew itself and increase its innovation capacity is often related to a growing need to address current societal challenges by developing new working methods and new solutions for the future (OECD, 2017). However, the literature on public sector innovation has also identified challenges to innovation processes in public organisations, such as a culture of risk aversion, administrative and bureaucratic burdens, unclear

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responsibilities in relation to innovation (Albury, 2005) and a limited understanding of the term 'innovation' and hence what is needed to support innovation (Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017; Wihlman et al., 2016).

In the Swedish context, Vinnova, the government innovation agency, has had an explicit mandate to increase the public sector's innovation capacity from 2012 onwards. Vinnova and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) have also had a joint agreement since 2012 to promote the enhancement of the public sector's innovation capacity. This is a key issue on a national level, but how can the public sector increase its innovation capacity on a local level? One such initiative is the Swedish national programme (2016–2019) in which Vinnova provided municipalities with financial support to help establish innovation support within their operations. Within this programme, 12 innovation support projects – involving 57 municipalities – were set up. These projects were deliberate efforts to systematise innovative practices, and lessons can therefore be learned about increasing municipalities' innovation capacity. This is valuable knowledge, because little empirical research is available dealing with innovation support in the public sector and especially in municipal settings. Insights from a number of these projects are therefore provided to increase understanding of innovation support in public sector organisations. The specific aim is to explore challenges related to organising innovation support in Swedish municipalities. The article draws on empirical material based on three cases of innovation support, including interviews with 23 participants.

In the next section, a selection of previous studies and perspectives on innovation will be briefly described, with a particular focus on what characterises innovation in the public sector and how innovation support can be conceptualised. The research context is then described, followed by an account of the study's methodological considerations. The subsequent section presents the findings in the form of three case descriptions of municipal innovation support. Finally, these cases are compared and discussed, and the article closes with some concluding remarks on the challenges of organising innovation support in municipalities.

Innovation in the Public Sector

This section starts by focusing on 'innovation in the public sector' to clarify what is actually to be supported. It then addresses tentative conceptualisations and operationalisations of innovation support in the public sector.

Research on public sector innovation

Research on innovation is spread across several academic disciplines, including innovation studies and public administration (Albury, 2005; Hartley, 2005; Osborne & Brown, 2011), but studies on innovation in the public sector are still sparse compared to studies of innovation in manufacturing (Fagerberg, 2005). Research interest has been directed towards distinguishing innovation in the public sector from innovation in the manufacturing sector, including the differences between service and product innovation. Nevertheless, approaches to innovation in the public sector vary considerably, and there is a lack of theoretical consensus and a joint conceptual apparatus, as well as a lack of

empirical research (Bloch & Bugge, 2013; De Vries et al., 2016). Research on public sector innovation has focused on what is typical of innovation in this context, how public sector innovation can be measured, and the drivers, challenges and conditions for innovation in the public sector (Arundel & Huber, 2013; Demircioglu & Audretsch, 2017; Nählinder, 2013). The most common types of innovation in the public sector are service innovation and process and organisational innovation (OECD, 2018). These three types of innovation are often combined because new services may require new working methods or processes and new ways of organising work (Fogelberg Eriksson, 2014). Some innovation types are unique to the public sector. These concern democracy, governance and policy innovation (Bason, 2018; Moore & Hartley, 2008). Based on the above characteristics, a broad conceptualisation of innovation in the public sector is provided, which is general enough to embrace the possible variations of innovation that emerge and are implemented in public organisations, and which denote some sort of change aimed at value creation.

Conceptualising innovation support

Although the term 'innovation' has different meanings and is used in different research contexts (Kattel et al., 2013), a common denominator in the literature is that if something is to be considered an innovation, it needs be new to some degree and put into practice (Kattel et al., 2013). A simple definition, as used in this article, is as follows:

> *[…] public sector innovation is about new ideas that work at creating public value. The ideas have to be at least in part new (rather than improvements); they have to be taken up (rather than just being good ideas); and they have to be useful. (Mulgan, 2007, p. 6)*

According to this definition, innovation is not just an outcome, or a product – but also a product of a process (Van de Ven, 1999). Using the term 'innovation' in public sector contexts sometimes explicitly or implicitly includes the activities of the innovation process, spanning from idea generation and development to implementation of the innovation (Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2019). Innovation support, as understood in this study, therefore focuses on deliberate efforts to support and systematise innovation practices, building on systematic ways of working with innovation processes, and creating favourable conditions for innovation on workplace and organisational levels (Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017). One dilemma is that such efforts are not always seen as innovation support, and what counts as innovation support within policy is not developed in parallel with theory development on public sector innovation (Osborne & Brown, 2013). This becomes apparent when searching for published studies of public sector innovation support, because it is striking how few innovation support models relate to the municipal context. Therefore, the following description is based on both previous research and policy initiatives and grey literature in order to describe the features of innovation support. One example is the OECD (2017) report, which analyses government-initiated innovation support for public sector organisations in 34 countries. This analysis presents a wide range of how innovation units have

operated, as well as three recurring features that these units shared regardless of organisation or country. First, the innovation units often worked from a central department or agency. Second, their focus was on achieving outcomes, for example 'better health', rather than measuring outputs. Third, the innovation units were project-based and operated for a limited period, rather than being part of a more permanent policy programme (OECD, 2017, p. 144 ff). These are not exceptional features; instead, they are very similar to other change efforts and policy programmes directed towards public organisations (Svensson et al., 2013). The features of the support can be beneficial when they contribute knowledge building, expertise and extra resources, but the disadvantage is that they can limit the opportunities for integrating and transforming activities into regular operations to achieve long-term sustainability (Halvarsson Lundkvist, 2019; Johansson et al., 2007).

Innovation support in the public sector – two trends

At least two different trends can be identified in connection with innovation support in the public sector, according to what the support aims to support. The first trend is mainly policy-driven and targets the innovation itself and the innovation process, while the second trend is both policy- and theory-driven, and targets conditions facilitating innovation practices with a focus on the workplace and innovation contexts.

Innovation support associated with the first trend includes digital handling of ideas, written guides, methods and technique training, idea coaching from experts and test labs (see e.g. toolkits from Nesta (nesta.org.uk) and OPSI (oecd-opsi.org)). Digital handling of ideas resembles the traditional 'suggestion box' in continuous improvement work, but ideas are submitted in a digital interface to facilitate idea management and so-called smart technologies are used (Criado & Gil-Garcia, 2019). Making these websites available to employees creates opportunities to share ideas that are not directly related to their own area of work. Test labs or innovation labs are built for innovation processes (Tõnurist et al., 2017), such as supporting idea development, and prototyping, testing and scaling new solutions (Puttick, 2014). These kinds of labs take place in physical spaces, often organised as a parallel structure outside or within the main organisation. In Sweden, such initiatives – known as test beds or reality labs – have received support from Vinnova for use in health care (Östlund et al., 2017) and municipalities.

In the Swedish context, the innovation process for local and regional government that SALAR promotes rests on service design principles (cf. Holmlid & Wetter Edman, 2021), and such principles also apply to Denmark (Mindlab) and the United Kingdom (Nesta), for example. The Innovation Guide on SALAR's website was launched in 2016, and offers a six-step online method – from identifying challenges, users and their needs, through idea development, to realisation – for developing innovations in the public sector (SKR, 2021a). Organisations seeking help can also obtain training and contact innovation coaches. Innovation Guide courses have proven popular, with many municipalities sending employees to be trained in innovation processes. During 2018–2020, SALAR arranged eleven development programmes for a total of 116

teams. The teams were provided with training, coaching and a digital toolbox to work through an innovation process for a period of 8–9 months (SKR, 2021a).

The second trend in relation to public sector innovation support targets conditions facilitating innovation practices in a broader sense. From a workplace perspective, innovation is embedded in everyday learning in the workplace (Ellström, 2010; Halvarsson Lundkvist & Gustavsson, 2018; Høyrup, 2010). The innovation support is therefore directed at the innovators: the employees in the workplace. This way of supporting employees is clearly in line with the long Scandinavian tradition of employee participation in working life (Sandberg, 2013), and with policy initiatives to enhance innovation capacity in both public and private sector organisations (Alasoini, 2011; Danish Government, 2006; Danske LO, 2008; Norwegian Government, 2008). As broad groups of employees are expected to be involved in innovation processes in municipalities (Wihlman et al., 2014), conditions for employee-driven innovation (EDI) (also labelled bottom-up innovation) become a central focus in the workplace.

> *Innovation is driven by employees' resources: ideas, creativity, competence and problem-solving abilities. These innovative activities are embedded in employees' daily work activities – often in working teams – on the basis of their experience and on-the-job learning. (Høyrup, 2010, p. 149)*

As shown in the quotation above, employee resources such as their ideas and skills drive innovation when innovation activities and processes are embedded in employees' everyday work (Billett, 2012; Ellström, 2010; Evans et al., 2011; Fogelberg Eriksson, 2014; Halvarsson Lundkvist & Gustavsson, 2018). However, there is no point in targeting employee-driven innovation in the workplace without creating the necessary conditions for employees to drive innovation based on their engagement and resources. There are a number of conditions for involving employees in innovation activities in everyday work, such as increasing work autonomy, promoting diversity to encourage employees' ideas, informality in presence and cooperation, de-emphasising organisational structures, and support in the form of backup for employees (Hansen et al., 2017). Other conditions to support employees' participation in innovation activities involve teamwork, planned reflection, supportive management and creating trust and openness for change (Ellström, 2010). In an innovation practice, or a 'knowledgeable practice' (Evans, 2015), the employees not only do the work tasks but also change the work in a way that benefits both themselves and their organisation. Using employees' innovation abilities can be a matter of workplace design (Ellström, 2011) and fostering innovative behaviours by providing competence development and formal training interwoven with everyday work activities (Halvarsson Lundkvist & Gustavsson, 2018). Accordingly, providing favourable conditions for employee-driven innovation seems to be important.

Employee-driven innovation also shares similarities with the concept of 'workplace innovation', which was launched by the European Commission in 2013 and has since been further developed in research (Oeij et al., 2017). In the policy framing of workplace innovation, employee-driven innovation is a prominent feature in order to create workplace practices that continually engage

employees in discovering better ways of doing things and leveraging creativity from across the organisation (Totterdill, 2015).

Both employee-driven innovation and workplace innovation point to the importance of understanding innovation in the workplace and the organisation, rather than separating innovation and innovation support from these contexts.

Research Setting

The study was carried out in Swedish municipalities, which are politically governed organisations with responsibility for diverse welfare services such as social care, schooling, community planning, environment and health protection, waste disposal and sewers, housing, emergency services and libraries. In Sweden, the 290 municipalities together employ nearly 900,000 people (out of a total of 4.8 million employed in the Swedish labour market), making municipalities the largest employer in the public sector (SKR, 2021b). Municipalities vary considerably in terms of employee numbers, from 325 to 43,000, and the majority (79%) of employees are women (SKR, 2021b). The studied municipalities participated in the Swedish national programme for establishing innovation support in municipalities funded by Vinnova during 2016–2019. The programme's aim was to:

> *… increase the innovation capacity of municipal activities by bringing forward and developing ideas, testing solutions and utilising them. A prerequisite for this is to create a climate where innovation is encouraged. This can be done by developing processes, structures and regulations that promote, support and reward individuals who, based on need, have good ideas for solutions and want to pursue these further […] The long-term goal is for innovation support to be included as part of the regular activities of the municipality/municipalities, the municipal association or the regional association. The goal is also for innovations to be spread to other municipalities. (Vinnova, 2016, translated by authors)*

Vinnova's call for proposals did not define precisely what an innovation support operation should comprise, but that it could be "a physical or virtual environment or structure with processes to capture and develop ideas, test solutions and implement these in different parts of municipal operations" (Vinnova, 2016, translated by authors). The municipalities were free to decide how to organise and staff the innovation support, and individual municipalities or several collaborating municipalities were invited to submit project proposals. In the call for proposals and the performance target for the initiative, Vinnova emphasised the importance of making the innovation support part of regular operations. Applicants were therefore instructed to define the innovation support clearly, and to establish future ownership, operation, use and financing of the innovation support (Vinnova, 2016). The performance target also stated that the innovation support needed to be clearly anchored in the organisation and that processes for implementing innovations in the municipality needed to be put in

place. Each project application could be granted a maximum of SEK 4,000,000, but the municipalities had to match the project funding as the grant covered up to 50 per cent of the eligible costs.

In total, 12 projects – involving 57 Swedish municipalities – received funding from Vinnova to set up innovation support. The selection of innovation support operations for this study is presented in the next section.

Method

Design and selection

This study applies a multiple-case study design, using qualitative interviews with 23 participants in three cases of innovation support. The three cases were strategically selected from the 12 innovation support operations established with financial support from Vinnova within the programme described above. To ensure variation in the sample, the municipalities were selected based on 1) whether the innovation support served one or more municipalities, 2) whether the support operation supported an entire municipality or parts of it (departments or units), and 3) what the innovation support strategy was (as described in the grant application). Detailed descriptions of the cases are presented below in the findings.

The 23 interview participants were selected strategically. All participants either had experience of establishing innovation support or had taken part in the resulting measures such as training and/or coaching. The interviewed participants were six innovation coaches (one of whom was also a project manager) who worked within the innovation support operation, two executives who were responsible for the innovation support operation, one project group member, seven first-line managers, who were affected by the innovation support in different ways, and seven employees who had experience of innovation support (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants from the three cases.

Case A (n=8)	Case B (n=9)	Case C (n=6)
Two innovation coaches	Two innovation coaches	One project manager/innovation coach
One executive manager	One executive manager	One innovation coach
Two first-line managers	Four first-line managers	One project group member
Three employees	Two employees	One first-line manager
		Two employees

As shown in Table 1, there are fewer participants in case C than in the other cases due to difficulties recruiting participants after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data collection

All interviews were conducted by the first author of this article, with six taking place face-to-face at case locations and 17 via telephone or video conferencing in the spring of 2020. Due to national restrictions as a result of the Covid-19

pandemic, the 17 remote interviews could not be held on site as planned. Before the interview, the participants received written information about the aim of the study and details of data handling and personal data processing in accordance with the EU General Data Protection (GDPR), as well as information about their right to withdraw from further participation at any time and for any reason. Prior to commencing the interviews, this information was reiterated orally and permission to record the interview was requested.

The semi-structured interview guide included topics such as: the innovation support strategy, challenges regarding the innovation support, changes made during the project and thoughts about the future of the innovation support initiative. In addition, innovation coaches and executives were also encouraged to reflect on their role within the project and the organisation of the innovation support in the municipal context. Managers were also encouraged to consider how the innovation practices affected their role and work.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative content analysis was carried out stepwise, inspired by Schreier (2014). In the initial step of the data analysis, the interview transcripts for each case were read to get an overview. Thereafter, each case was sorted into a large matrix based on the interview topics, under which the respondents' perceptions and thoughts were categorised. This inductively driven categorisation resulted in two main categories: innovation support strategy and challenges related to setting up the innovation support.

The first main category, 'innovation support strategy', was then further divided up in a deeper analysis into 'innovation support strategy', 'project activities' and 'support organisation', with the latter two representing an operationalisation of the strategy. Statements categorised as 'innovation support strategy' included descriptions of why a certain supportive strategy was chosen, imagined implications, plans and definitions. Statements categorised as 'innovation support activities' included accounts of which activities had been carried out as part of the innovation support initiative. The 'innovation support organisation' category included statements concerning key participants and their roles, as well as remarks on organisational affiliation.

The second main category, 'challenges related to setting up the innovation support', concerned statements about challenges that emerged as a part of planning, organising and carrying out the aforementioned activities. Once each case had been analysed, a cross-case analysis was carried out to identify patterns of similarity and difference between the three cases.

Findings

This section describes the innovation support in each case, after which the cases are summarised and compared with a focus on differences and similarities related to the innovation support.

Case A: Training as innovation support

In case A, the innovation support served one medium-sized municipality and all its administrations. The municipality was located in a rural area in the south of Sweden and had approximately 8,000 employees. A training strategy was used, with the aim of training employees and managers on service design methodology and the concept of innovation. The innovation support organisation was made up of two innovation coaches, one working full-time and the other working part-time. They were employed at the municipality's management office, and their responsibility was to create and deliver training, create and update training materials, and support employees who had taken part in the training.

Courses in service design methodology varied in length but were based on SALAR's Innovation Guide. Between the course sessions, participants were supposed to run their own innovation activities in their workplaces with instruction and support from the coaches. This more informal innovation support was appreciated by both managers and employees, who described it as a form of help for applying the user inquiry techniques taught during the course sessions.

Besides courses, the innovation support also comprised two types of educational material: a web portal describing all the service design methods in detail, and portable 'innovation kits' including pens, sticky notes and idea triggering cards for use in creative sessions. Certain conference rooms had also been turned into 'creative spaces' with the addition of posters, sticky notes, Lego and special furniture to facilitate collaboration. All course materials were made available on the web portal, thereby serving as a methodological reference.

The coaches described the training strategy as targeting all employees interested in innovative practices, and the goal of the chosen strategy was to train enough employees to reach a 'tipping point', leading to an organisation-wide, user-centred approach to innovation. The goal was also to train enough staff at each municipal administration to make them autonomous in terms of innovation practice know-how. As one innovation coach put it:

> *The idea was that we would [be] like… a cloning machine, that we would clone ourselves by creating more and more innovation coaches who would be out there where they could be close to their peers and be supportive and encourage this way of working.*

The participating managers and employees also described the innovation support as a training initiative aimed at spreading knowledge about why and how to conduct user-centred service design. They echoed the coaches' message that innovation did not have to be revolutionary, disruptive or difficult to have a significant impact on delivered services, and that the training had brought a new, more user-centred perspective on change and innovation.

However, the strategy applied at case A seemed to have resulted in three major challenges regarding what to innovate, how to implement the results and how to involve managers. The innovation coaches said that it was difficult to know how to direct the innovation initiatives. They wished the municipality had provided direction regarding which problems were particularly important to address and in need of innovative solutions, instead of 'setting creative forces completely free'.

The second challenge identified in case A related to the implementation phase of the innovation process. Issues related to the implementation of innovations were mentioned throughout the interviews, and the analysis showed that the innovation support had not dealt with implementation questions at all, as it was deemed to be out of scope.

The third challenge related to middle management involvement, and that the middle managers involved in everyday operations should have been involved earlier in the innovation support implementation. Courses for managers were added towards the end of the project, but the strategy of creating a willingness to innovate among employees without involving managers had already resulted in conflicts in everyday work between what was learned and what was doable in the workplace.

Case B: Coaching as innovation support

In case B, the innovation support also served one municipality and all its administrations. The municipality was in a medium-sized urban area in central Sweden and had approximately 9,000 employees. The innovation support organisation was made up of two coaches working full-time and a project manager working part-time with the project, all employed at the municipal management office. The coaches spent most of their time supporting employees in their innovative endeavours, and the project manager led and coordinated the project.

At this location, a coaching strategy was used which meant that the coaches supported employees who had innovative ideas that needed refining. An important part of the coaching strategy was the process of scaling down ideas to arrive at something that could be tested on users, and the innovation coaches reiterated the significance of including users and learning from user testing to guide further development of innovative solutions. Some courses and lectures on user-centred innovation were also provided, even though the coaches spent most of their time coaching employees who had ideas they wanted to explore. The methods taught in class and applied in practice were all based on SALAR's Innovation Guide.

The innovation coaches said that all employees – regardless of their role, position or managerial support (or lack thereof) – were welcome to seek coaching. The innovation process would usually begin with a meeting, where a coach and an employee assessed the value and feasibility of the idea, based on a simplified version of the NABC model (developed by Stanford Research Institute). In some cases, this initial step had a gatekeeping effect. An idea could be dropped by the employee, who realised that the idea was of limited use or that completing the innovation process would involve too much work. (The underlying precondition for the innovation support strategy was that the employee who came up with the idea should also lead the innovation process; there was no option to hand over the idea to someone else.) At the end of the innovation process, the outcome (result) was presented to managers, sometimes in the form of a written report. The presentation would typically include what had been learned and observed during development and testing.

Both managers and employees had positive experiences of the innovation coaches being centrally located within the organisation, since the coaches could

maintain a 'bird's eye view' of all the innovation initiatives passing through at municipality level. The innovation coaches noted that this enabled them to connect innovators who worked with similar innovation processes and identify collaborations that could generate synergy effects.

Since the coaches were not employed by any of the administrations they served, they described themselves as having only superficial knowledge of the processes, goals and objectives of the municipal administrations. This was however described as beneficial by some employees, who stressed that this enabled the coaches to see beyond old ways of working and focus on end-user needs.

In terms of challenges, case B shared similar struggles to case A in relation to implementing the results and where to focus the innovation efforts. The challenges related to implementation were described by one manager as:

> *You reach a certain level, but then when it's time for implementation that's where it ends. Maybe out of fear that it will be costly, and that you have to make certain purchases or investments or something like that, so it's hard to fully adopt it. […] You reach a point where you feel like it is getting real, and that's where it ends.*

The lack of direction to guide innovation initiatives was also noted in case B and one innovation coach connected the two challenges, arguing that by identifying challenges that the organisation found particularly difficult and generating solutions, the chances of winning approval during the implementation phase would also increase.

Case C: Mixing training and coaching as innovation support

In case C, the innovation support primarily served the social services departments in three medium-sized municipalities. The municipalities were located in southern Sweden and had approximately 13,500 employees. The innovation support organisation was made up of a project group consisting of one project manager and representatives from social services departments in the three municipalities, as well as a representative from the association of local authorities.

The innovation support strategy initially included setting up a digital 'suggestion box' on the local municipal networks. Social services employees from the three municipalities were invited to submit their ideas for assessment based on whether the idea could benefit more than one municipality in the area. Those who submitted ideas that were considered valuable would then get support developing the idea, and where appropriate they would be connected to partners from the private sector.

The reach was subsequently broadened, as social services employees from 11 other local municipalities were also encouraged to submit their ideas. All types of ideas were initially welcomed, but later on focused assignments were also presented where employees were asked to send in innovative solutions to problems that the organisation found particularly challenging. The ambition was to use challenges identified via existing internal quality systems as a starting point for more focused innovation initiatives. However, due to a lack of ideas

received, the innovation support strategy underwent a major change halfway through and the initial strategy was replaced with an approach based more on training. The project manager explained the shift as follows:

> *The initial idea was to develop an idea-coaching establishment, to deal with ideas from employees and to find ways of collaborating with the private sector… but this project did not turn out that way… We ended up working with methods and techniques for innovation and change management, and creating a culture in our organisations that would deal with ideas from employees without having an idea-coaching structure. We ended up there because we saw that adding idea coaches did not help, since the employees did not have time to generate ideas anyway. We had to work from a grassroots perspective instead.*

The shift in focus led to several training initiatives focusing on innovation methodology and change management. The project manager took on the role of instructor and innovation coach, and another instructor/coach was also added to the project group to support the new initiative. Two-day courses in service design and easy-to-use techniques for needs-based development were developed in line with SALAR's Innovation Guide. These courses were initially offered to social services employees in the three municipalities, but were later also offered to two smaller municipalities with a total of 3,000 employees.

Another type of training was also developed towards the later stages of the project, providing participants from the five municipalities with coaching and hands-on experience in working with their own innovation projects for six months. In addition to these courses, leadership courses targeting managers were also designed with a focus on change management, digital transformation and 'future-oriented leadership'.

Apart from the fact that the innovation project was launched in the wake of the migrant crisis of 2015, the project manager and the project group member in case C stated that many of the challenges in implementing innovation support stemmed from difficulties reaching a commitment to work with innovation within the municipalities. Innovation coaches and employees said that in order for innovation initiatives to reach organisation-wide permeation, direction and support from executives and politicians was crucial and that this type of support was lacking in case C. One manager also pointed out that the municipal organisation is governed by many laws and restrictions, and that the government needs to look proactively at which laws may inhibit innovative practices in the municipal context.

In addition, organising the innovation support across municipalities was affected by unexpected turnover of project group members, and when members left, the enthusiasm and accumulated knowledge disappeared. Members were included in the group based on their interest in innovation rather than their particular roles or formal responsibilities within the municipalities involved. One innovation coach theorised that this may have led to difficulties maintaining continuity when replacing project members. On the other hand, it was speculated

that forced participation would have led to participants being less active, and one group member justified the recruitment strategy by saying:

> *[If] you are part of a group because you have a certain role, that does not mean that you are the one who will be able to accomplish the most or that you are the one with the most passionate interest which will lead you to really work with the issues that come up. Instead, you are there to monitor because you have the mandate, and you are expected to be there.*

Table 2 presents a cross-case analysis of the findings, including both similarities and differences between the three cases of innovation support in terms of organisation, strategy, activities and challenges.

Table 2. Summary of similarities and differences between the cases concerning the innovation support organisation, strategy, activities and challenges.

Dimension	Case A	Case B	Case C
Innovation support organisation	One full-time coach and one part-time coach. One support organisation serving one municipality, all administrations.	Two coaches. One support organisation serving one municipality, all administrations.	Initially: one project group with one project manager and representatives from three municipalities, as well as the association of local authorities. Later: Two coaches (one of them also served as project manager). One support organisation serving social services administrations in several participating municipalities.
Innovation support strategy	Training. Targeting interested employees, regardless of role.	Coaching. Targeting interested employees, regardless of role.	Started with suggestion box, switched to training and coaching. Targeting employees at social services departments.
Innovation support activities	Courses in service design methodology. Web portal describing service design methodology. 'Innovation kits'/innovation rooms.	Mainly coaching employees with ideas. Also courses in service design methodology.	Call for ideas with setup of digital 'suggestion box'. Later in the project: Courses in service design methodology as well as leadership courses targeting managers.
Challenges	Lack of direction on what to innovate. Middle managers involved too late. Implementation phase not part of innovation support.	Lack of direction on what to innovate. Implementation phase not part of innovation support.	Difficulty reaching a commitment to work with innovation within the organisations. Lack of support from executives, politicians and government. Staff turnover in project group.

Discussion

The case studies provide insights into three different innovation support set-ups in Swedish municipalities. As the findings show, organising innovation support and the choice of innovation support strategy and activities created various challenges that influenced the implementation and operation of the innovation process.

Regardless of which innovation support strategy was adopted, it related to the identified trend of supporting the innovation itself and the innovation process. The support clearly focused on ideas and emphasised the initial phases of the innovation process, such as searching for ideas and setting up digital suggestion boxes, as well as training and coaching for idea development. Critics of this type of support have highlighted a tendency to support idea generation and not the entire innovation process in organisations, since idea generation tends to be conflated with innovation (Kastelle & Steen, 2011). Prioritising early phases of the innovation processes could hence be one potential challenge in the organisation of innovation support in municipalities, since this type of support does not include the vital phases of adoption, implementation and retention of innovations.

However, the clear emphasis of the innovation support on early innovation stages may be attributed to the fact that there is very little research on how to set up innovation support, and even less on how to do it in a municipal setting (Wihlman et al., 2016). The municipalities in this study hence faced a pioneering task when structuring their innovation support. It is reasonable to assume that the presence of an established process for 'doing' innovation – such as the Innovation Guide, created and backed by SALAR – would therefore influence the efforts. The guide is clearly defined and easy to use and has quickly gained widespread acceptance among a multitude of Swedish organisations in the public sector. The content of the guide itself may have contributed to the focus on the early stages of the innovation process, since five of the six steps included in the guide focus on the earlier stages of the processes, and only one focuses on implementation (SKR, 2021a). Even though the Innovation Guide is based on a user-centred perspective to develop needs-based solutions, this will not contribute to smarter work practices if the solutions, i.e. the innovations, do not make it through the implementation phase.

Defaulted implementation of the innovations can be detrimental in the municipal context, ultimately due to ineffective use of taxpayers' money, but also resulting in a loss of valuable time, dissatisfaction among employees and even the entire innovation initiative being discredited. The rhetoric behind innovation in the public sector is based on the argument that the solutions to many of the complex societal challenges of our time lie in the advancement of innovation practices, i.e. that we need to work differently if we want to achieve different results (Albury, 2005). However, if employees embrace new ways of working but do not see the effects of their efforts through implemented innovations, the pressure for change may drop, discrediting innovation initiatives as empty promises.

Nevertheless, the findings show that there were positive effects of focusing on methodology and techniques for user inquiry, as this provided participants

with tangible take-aways from training and coaching. However, along the way, it seemed that participants began to wonder when, where and why they were supposed to apply their newfound knowledge. A common view among interviewees was that techniques for doing something also called for direction on what to do, meaning which organisational problems needed innovative solutions. Letting "a thousand flowers bloom" – as one respondent put it – may have increased creativity, but also frustration when ideas were not implemented at a later stage. This lack of direction on what kinds of innovations were needed within the organisation was expressed at all case locations. One challenge when setting up innovation support hence seemed to be clarifying and communicating the organisational reasons for innovating. Organisations need to know why they want to innovate, because without such direction it is hard to identify which kinds of innovations are needed, and the innovative endeavours risk becoming ends in themselves, not a means to an end (Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017). Direction regarding what to focus on in innovation may be even more important in the municipal context, since municipalities are politically governed bodies and budgets are set well in advance and are controlled and directed high up in the organisational hierarchies. Working on innovations in line with the organisational focus and budget may be crucial to make implementation possible. Clearer direction on which problems to solve through innovation may also help managers to decide which innovations to invest in and implement. Respondents in this study expressed this through their call for direction to guide innovation incentives, as managers' lack of interest in implementation would inevitably put an end to the innovation processes.

While managers play a crucial role in deciding what to implement, they also play an important role in supporting employees throughout the innovation process. Managers hence need to be included when planning and implementing, but this seemed to be a challenge when organising municipal innovation support. Participants from all three cases stated that the innovation support initiatives started off with a clear focus on reaching out to employees rather than managers. Many of the participants' key take-aways from the project were that the support should have focused on managers earlier in the project, and in case C courses were subsequently created to offer leadership courses in change management, digital transformation and 'future-oriented leadership'. Without including managers, innovation risks becoming an orphaned subject in the organisation, being owned by everyone and no one. It is unclear why so little focus was placed on managers, but this may have stemmed from the results objectives in the call for funding, which stated that the first objective was to create "a clear, thorough and equal process for dealing with ideas from, above all, employees" (Vinnova, 2016).

The clear focus on employees may be termed a bottom-up or 'grassroots' approach to innovation (Høyrup, 2010), and some respondents pointed out that this differentiated the initiative from the top-down common practice of the public sector. However, an analysis of the respondents' statements suggested that this may not have been a clear bottom-up or top-down approach, but rather a type of 'side approach' as the innovation support was set up and organised as a parallel structure. As such, the separation of the innovation process from everyday activities risked creating a side-track within the organisation, and of

not achieving integration into regular operations in a long-term, sustainable manner (Halvarsson Lundkvist, 2019; Johansson et al., 2007). As the findings showed, setting up innovation support as a parallel organisation created challenges in linking the innovation process back to the workplace where the innovation would eventually be implemented, involving both managers and employees.

Facilitating employee involvement in all parts of the organisation is also an important factor if we consider innovation support as a matter of enabling innovation practices in the workplace, i.e. as an engine for employee-driven innovation (Høyrup, 2010), knowledgeable practice (Evans, 2015) and workplace innovation (Totterdill, 2015). Designing innovation support as an offering that only targets those who are interested may work against such organisational objectives. If the incentive for creating an innovation support structure is to achieve deep-rooted organisational change through innovative practices but only a small portion of the organisation is affected by the change, something is amiss. Reaching out to 'early adopters' is a common strategy for starting various movements, but from a strategic standpoint this needs to be recognised as a kick-off technique accompanied by a plan for reaching the rest of the organisation.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a new understanding of the challenges related to organising innovation support in municipalities. Regardless of the strategy for innovation support, the initiatives faced challenges relating to a lack of direction on what to innovate and implementation phases not being part of the innovation support. Other challenges related to managers being involved too late in the innovation processes and difficulties achieving a commitment to work with innovation within the entire municipal organisation.

Public organisations are often very complex entities: municipalities encompass diverse operations, assignments, groups of employees, managers and politicians. In these types of organisations, innovation support – in terms of creating favourable conditions for innovation and organising for innovation in the workplace – is therefore a challenge in itself, as it involves a multitude of actors as well as complex public responsibilities and organisational structures.

Innovation support cannot therefore address all known barriers to public sector innovation (Mulgan, 2007), but the choices made when setting up the support will inevitably affect innovators, the process and the innovation outcome. A more comprehensive approach to innovation support in the public sector could be made possible by combining training and different organisational arrangements for developing workplace innovations with creating favourable conditions for employee-driven innovation in the workplace. We suggest that this could be a route towards increased innovation capacity in public organisations, but several questions remain unanswered at present. Further work is required to establish how to design innovation support that gives innovation initiatives the necessary organisational direction, involves managers throughout the innovation process, and includes an explicit focus on supporting the

implementation phase for incorporating and retaining innovative solutions and newfound ways of working in current municipal practices.

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