Chapter 6

Why Do We Need to Share Information?
Analysis of Collaborative Task Management Meetings

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ABSTRACT

In order to study collaborative information behaviour (e.g. information search, creation, and sharing) in the work environment, it is important that we take into consideration its embedded nature in collaborative work, however not many studies have actually taken this into consideration. In conducting fieldwork, we studied group task management in the work of IT product hardware designers. The study shows how understanding the details of information activities embedded in task management allowed us to generate some ideas for transforming task management into a more collaborative activity, and for reembedding task management more thoroughly into their work practices together with the practitioners. The paper discusses how taking an ethnomethodological approach can be fruitful for researchers who want to gain a close understanding of actual collaborative information activities and their embedded nature in work, and how understandings of this kind can be important for developing ideas for transforming practice, both with or without the introduction of technology.

INTRODUCTION

When management introduces new policies for their personnel to carry out an activity where information sharing is involved, it is often assumed that it is a good thing to do so. However, members of personnel often do not know how they can actually make use of such occasions and some feel that will involve extra work for them. The policy of information sharing or visualisation itself may be treated as a goal until people come to realise
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that it is a means for accomplishing something. In such cases, members’ involvement in the activity can vary and their motivation for the activity is not necessarily high. Some studies have been carried out in CSCW examining why people do not want to invest their time in using new collaborative systems that encourage information sharing (Grudin, 1988; Orlikowski, 1992). First of all, it has been found that management often fails to convey to the employees the intention and goals that will be achieved by introducing a new system. Such communication is necessary for the employees to see the reason for using the new system, and then decide to invest the time to learn the new technology, adjust their work practice around it, and so on. But it has been recognised that management is not necessarily aware of the efforts and consequent work necessary to adopt a new policy or technology (Huysman & de Wit, 2003). However, there have been few studies that examine the problem of ‘information and knowledge sharing activities’ as embedded in peoples’ everyday work (Mengis & Eppler, 2005). Specifically, there have not been many studies which look in detail at how people actually deal with a new technology or policy for information sharing as part of their work by studying the ways in which they organise their work in a natural setting through interactions, focusing on understanding their practice.

Our aim in this chapter is to show how much information sharing is embedded in the work; and thus how important it is to take into consideration this embedded nature when introducing new technologies or new policies in relation to information sharing. This is especially true as the new technology or policy is bound to affect the existing work practices and therefore may just be seen as additional work if employees cannot see the point in using it. The second point we want to demonstrate is how much information sharing is collaboratively achieved in the work; and thus how important it is to take into consideration this collaborative nature, again, when introducing new technologies or new policies related to information sharing.

We conducted a fieldwork study of IT product designers of a large company in Japan. Our focus was mainly on a particular group; following members as they attended various meetings, worked with computers, and did other tasks. This chapter focuses on one kind of regular meeting introduced by the management for enhancing collaboration. They call this weekly task management meeting ‘Tanaoroshi-kai’, which literally means ‘stock taking meeting’. In this meeting, the team members were expected to share with each other what tasks they were planning to do. The management provided a task schedule format to be used for task management and the rest was up to the members regarding how they carried out task management in the meeting.

What we found was that the newly introduced meeting was not yet fully embedded in the team members’ daily work. The meeting was not yet ingrained in the ways of organising their work and thus, they were treating it as an extra task on top of what they already had to do. The meeting itself was not yet part of the rhythm of how their work was organised (Reddy & Dourish, 2002). Based on a detailed analysis of the meeting, we provided some ideas for redesigning activities related to the meeting, and implemented these ideas with the members.

This chapter first describes how a group of IT product designers actually try to carry out information sharing activities through the meeting. Through ethnomethodological analysis of ethnographic data including actual interactions, it will be demonstrated how members experience difficulties in getting engaged in the activity and in achieving what is supposed to be achieved. In other words, it will be shown how the new meeting was not actually embedded in their work (i.e., the members were making as little effort as possible for the new meeting as it meant ‘extra work’ to them). Further, sharing information in the meeting was carried out on an individual basis (between a member and the group leader), so it appeared to the members that this was an activity solely for the