

Chapter 41

Authenticity in Online Knowledge Sharing: Experiences from Networks of Competence Meetings

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ABSTRACT

Authenticity means that the closeness of observation matters for acceptance of new knowledge. The social norm of authenticity can have positive effects of colleagues to appreciate “better” knowledge within opportunity structures for knowledge sharing. However, how ICTs influence authenticity in knowledge sharing needs more attention in research on knowledge sharing through online networks. This chapter discusses recent findings of how ICTs (here the interactive tool GoToMeeting™) facilitate authenticity.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology has, due to the weight given to communication and information in knowledge work, been closely associated with the development of knowledge management initiatives and in the commercial arena knowledge management have a strong IT focus (Hayes, 2011). Much of the literature and practice on knowledge management assumes that knowledge can be codified and stored. Sambamurthy and Subramani (2005) is an example of this assumption, when they suggest that knowledge management involves:

developing searchable document repositories to support the digital capture, storage, retrieval, and distribution of an organization’s explicit documented knowledge.(p. 2)

The assumption that knowledge can be transferred by the use of ICT has attracted criticism from process and practice based researchers. Brown (1998) maintains that reliance on IT (internet) as a means for transferring knowledge is insufficient. In particular, it is regarded as more difficult if the sharing takes place across domains of knowledge. Abstractions recorded and shared on the Internet must, according to Brown, be considered as

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inseparable from historical and social locations of practice. When there is no history of working together, Zack (1999) argues that integrative applications are unsuitable. Instead, he recommends the use of interactive applications (chat, videoconferencing) that support collaboration, of which GoToMeeting™ in this study is an example. While the apprentices in Lave and Wenger (1991)'s community of practice can observe the genuine know-how of the master first-hand with considerable accuracy with the ability to observe (face-to-face) a certain level of detail, this article illustrates how a collaborative tool, GoToMeeting™, facilitates the observation of detail.

CASE DESCRIPTION

The Inspection Authority (herein referred to as the Authority) discussed is a large distributed health and safety inspection authority in a Nordic country. The main task of the authority is to supervise that the work environment in the country are according to the statutory requirements. The employees are based at several locations and they are given a high degree of individual autonomy. The employees in this organization often work alone at small district offices or from home offices. The inspectors have over the years developed individual inspection practices, which has made it difficult to promote sharing and learning in the organization. Different districts have different industries, which has also influenced inspection practices and created variations in competences among the distributed inspectors.

The authority is challenged by rapid changes within the domain it is responsible for, such as changes regarding how clients behave and new insights from research – all of which might change the use of the legislation it is overseeing that has to be complied with by its clients. The region 1 unit, one out of seven in the authority, has around 50 employees and out of these around 40 are inspectors. The budget is approximately 40 million

kroner (equal to US\$6.6 million). The networks' mission is to ensure organizational learning in the authority on the topic area they are set up for. The organizational culture among the inspectors can be described as a very independent work culture, where the inspectors are used to working alone or in pairs and making their own decisions; often working with their clients more than with colleagues. Even though they often work alone, and have few colleagues at the office, a sense of identity with a group and identity with the organization have been developed by telephone calls to colleagues conducting similar tasks or experts at the core of the organization (the directorate, see Figure 1, The organizational chart).

The Inspectors conduct inspections of use and storing of chemicals, installed ventilation facilities as well as measure taken to prevent accidents at work. Usually they are at their office or home office when communicating with each other in the competence network meetings. This case focuses on the ability of GoToMeeting™ to promote knowledge sharing by the representation of inspection practice online. A context were knowledge about chemistry or engineering, experiences and the legislation has to be integrated. The IT infrastructure consists of many applications, newer and very old software. Sometimes the same information has to be reported into several systems.

Organizational Structure and Management Responsibilities

The organization has a long history that goes back more than 100 years. The authority's mission is to encourage its clients to work systematically towards compliance with the laws and regulations. The organization has gone through substantial changes in the last seven years. The core of the organization, the directorate, has had its number of employees reduced, and responsibilities have been handed over to the seven regions in the authority. An organizational chart is presented in Figure 1.

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