

Chapter 10

Distributed “Knowing in Practice” in Workshare Contexts: A Case Study of a Knowledge Management System

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ABSTRACT

Many companies set up operations offshore and complete projects by ‘worksharing’ where responsibilities are split between geographically dispersed offices. This chapter looks at how knowledge management systems facilitate practices essential for collaborative, distributed work. A qualitative case study is conducted at a large multinational engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) company that has successfully implemented a knowledge management system. The study uses the framework of ‘knowing in practice’ to the context of worksharing. This chapter contributes to the practice by providing specific suggestions that can be implemented from a social technical perspective to facilitate worksharing, specifically, suggesting technological factors and efforts needed by users and managers in facilitating worksharing. This chapter contributes to research by applying the lens of ‘knowing in practice’ to the context of worksharing.

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INTRODUCTION

Many companies set up operations offshore and complete projects employing ‘workshare’ practices, where responsibilities are split between geographically dispersed offices in order to increase operational efficiency (Zhang et al., 2016). The decision to offshore within organizational boundaries, sometimes referred to as “captive offshoring” (Tate and Bals, 2017) may stem from minimizing risk of contracting with third party vendors, while leveraging cost and labor benefits of global markets¹. While offshore centers were originally used for non-central, data processing-type work, they are now more a part of strategic operations (Leonardi and Bailey, 2017). Offshore offices play an integral role in procuring projects and employ local expertise to work in tandem with employees at the principal offices. This sharing of responsibilities overseas is called worksharing or job-sharing. Besides cost benefits, worksharing helps organizations work around the clock, providing service to global clients at any time (Jarvenpaa, 2016).

Research on the phenomena of offshore worksharing is not commensurate with its growing importance to organizations (Jarvenpaa, 2016). Prior literature, business articles and cases inform us about the mixed success and challenges faced due to cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries (George, 2006; Nuwangi et al., 2014; Lacity and Willcocks, 2017). A majority of this research is restricted to the context of offshore outsourcing, rather than worksharing. This paper presents a case study of a multinational engineering, procurement, construction, and maintenance services company that workshares projects across 51 offices in 25 countries, and theorizes on how it uses a knowledge management system (KMS) successfully in the effort to workshare across offices located in different countries. This is done by drawing on the framework of knowing in practice (Orlikowski, 2002).

Knowing in practice has been used to explain competent distributed organizing in new product development at a geographically dispersed organization. The theory identifies a repertoire of practices needed to overcome the challenges of working across temporal, geographical, political, and cultural boundaries. The focus of this paper is to study how a KMS facilitates the practices of distributed organizing, enabling worksharing. This study fits within a sociotechnical approach to studying systems that recognizes the interaction between people and technology in workplace practices (Mumford, 1985). Data from interviews, company documents, observations, and archival records is used and interpreted in the light of the theoretical framework. In the discussion section, technological features of a KMS and efforts required on behalf of the users and managers of the system to enable the practices are identified. Lastly, limitations and conclusions are discussed.

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