

Chapter 3.3

Intranet and Organizational Learning

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will analyze the cultural dimension of intranets as knowledge management tools within organizations. An intranet is an information communication technology (ICT) based upon Internet technology (<http://www>, TCP/IP). The intranet phenomenon was introduced in the early 1990s following the idea that it can integrate all the computers, software, and databases within a particular organization into a single system that enables employees to find and share all the information they need for their work (Bernard, 1997; Cortese, 1996). Intranets function as a computer-mediated communication (CMC) tool and are used as computing networks used for sharing organizational information. While Internet technology is leading, access is restricted exclusively to organizational members (by means of electronic firewalls). In a study to the role of in-

tranets in strategic management decisions, Curry and Stancich (2000) define Intranets as "...private computing networks, internal to an organization, allowing access only to authorized users" (p. 250). The term private indicates that an intranet is a network that can be accessed only by members of a particular organization. The term network emphasizes the connection between computers that enables corporate communication. Intranets run on open but controlled networks that enable organization members to employ the same WWW servers and browsers, which are distributed over the local area network (LAN).

In recent debates on strategic management and learning, an organizational learning culture has been introduced as one of the main 'critical success factors' underlying the effective use of intranets (Carayannis, 1998). The aim of this article is to analyze the cultural aspects of intranets as tools in organizational learning processes. It

is not so much a presentation of the instrumental effects of intranets for the learning organization culture—the way an intranet influences organizational learning processes is not taken for granted, but studied by the way it is used in different settings. We will present a framework for analyzing the cultural dimension of intranets within specific organizational contexts.

Many studies of intranets dealing with the effectiveness and efficiency of knowledge sharing and knowledge management take a static and deterministic point of view. That means that the focus is on structural constraints, without paying attention to the actual use of intranets. In contrast with this, we plea for an approach focusing upon communicative actions, and stress the communication between people on the intranet on the basis of normative agreement and feelings of mutual understanding and belonging. We furthermore highlight three dimensions from which this cultural context of an intranet can be defined, studied, and analyzed. These dimensions, which indeed apply to any enterprise system (ES) and which in a way also represent historical phases in the development of technology (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996), will in our contextual analysis be specified as the ‘constitution’ of an intranet, the intranet as a ‘condition’ of the learning organization, and the (unintended) ‘consequences’ of intranet use. An analysis on these levels is crucial for those scholars who want to grasp the cultural dimension in the actual use of intranets as a knowledge management tool.

INTRANET AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Often, the objective for the implementation of an intranet is that it will facilitate knowledge sharing among members within a single organization. There is a growing body of publications that see an intranet as a tool for organizational learning (e.g., Carayannis, 1998; Curry & Stancich, 2000; Scott,

1998; Sridhar, 1998; Ottosson, 2003). With regard to knowledge management, it has been analyzed in terms of knowledge banks, e-learning platforms, expert networks, online information sharing tools, and the like. Recently, intranets were identified as an infrastructure supporting knowledge management (Harvey, Palmer, & Speier, 1998; Damsgaard & Scheepers, 2001). In this body of literature, intranets are presented as promising knowledge management ICT tools in the sense that intranets will be complementary to or even replace existing information and communication carriers within and among organizations. In addition, intranets are seen as promising instruments for information sharing and collaboration across departments, functions, and information systems (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999). Internet-based ICTs like an intranet are even introduced as radical and disruptive innovations, since the implementation is intended strongly to influence the knowledge base of the organization (Lyytinen & Rose, 2003; Mustonen-Ollila & Lyytinen, 2003).

Together with the stories on the promising aspect of intranets, however, came the stories about organizational restrictions, misalignments, and user resistance. Discussions can be found about organizational constraints, such as the lack of standards, immature interfaces, weak linkages to other information systems, bandwidth availability and information overload, and the lack of an internal organization to authorize, support, and organize the quality of the information. On many occasions, it is the organizational culture that has been introduced as an explanation for misalignments or as a condition for a successful implementation and use of intranets (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 2001, p. 5). Curry and Stancich (2000) state: “To obtain maximum value from an intranet, both the ‘soft’ cultural issues of information sharing and change in work processes must be addressed alongside the ‘hard’ systems issues of managing the intranet as an information system and a business resource” (p. 255). Moreover, it has been argued that a cultural shift to information

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