

Chapter 63

The Significance of Trust to the Adoption of E-Working Practices Within Local Government

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon an in-depth study of one local authority based in the United Kingdom, this article examines the significance of trust to local government workers who are beginning to make increasing use of e-technologies through e-working practices. The article identifies trust to be of particular significance but that the examined context is not supportive of that trust being developed. It notes differences in the perceptions surrounding trust development, that consideration of trust is not just limited to the relationship between management and their workers, and that there is a fear that trust is at risk of abuse. In the face of e-work serving to raise the profile of trust as a significant factor for concern, the associated technologies are suggested to have the potential to offer a solution to some of the issues arising.

INTRODUCTION

When considering the increasing use of e-technologies, electronically facilitated technology-based provision, focus tends to be placed on the associated hardware and software. Receiving less attention are the perceptions of those who are called upon to use those resources; the workforce. Since it is the workforce who execute organisational information technology strategies (Iyamu, 2014), and change associated with technology is acknowledged to cause uncertainty (Meier et al., 2013), this is surprising. One effect of this decreased focus is the development of a mythologised environment and a risk of management being based on assumptions (Van den Broek & Keating, 2011).

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This paper is drawn from an unpublished doctoral research study investigating the increasing use of e-working in one local authority organisation based in the United Kingdom (UK). The study's context is significant in that there is little material about worker use of e-technologies within local government in the UK, much less studies in that context which focus on the perceptions of workers.

E-working is a term readily used in practice but which has received limited explanation within the literature. It is, therefore, a term which has contributed to the perpetuation of what Barley (1990) terms 'a maze of analytic abstractions'. An analysis of the related literature, undertaken as part of the aforementioned doctoral study identified e-working to be

...a mechanism for executing work tasks utilising technology in the form of electronic media. Since these tasks are so broad ranging, what the work tasks associated with e-working amount to is largely immaterial. Technological media is subject to development. This developmental factor, seen in the literature as having impeded the provision of technology related definitions, is central to the reality of working with technology. Embracement of development contributes to terminological longevity. It also heightens awareness of innovative practice; including ways of culturing and sustaining the relationship between the worker and the technology made available to them. Thus, in brief, e-working is...both a way of being a worker as well as a way, or mechanism, for carrying out the work task.

In this paper it is in relation to trust, noted to be a 'complex, multi-faceted, and context dependant concept' (Corritore et al., 2012), that the e-working focus is examined. Making use of the aforementioned conceptualisation of e-working, the focus of this paper is how trust is perceived to be relevant to local government workers who are making increasing use of e-technologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is considered under three headings. After this brief introduction where the trust term is explored, attention turns to the context of the study; local government. This is followed by two sections examining factors significant to the perception of trust in the e-environment; the potential for liberation arising from use of, and communication in the presence of, e-technologies.

Trust is a term which is regarded to be 'intuitively understood' despite being context specific (Mouzas et al., 2007). Indeed, there is suggestion that 'the domain of trust is rarely specified and its conceptual dimensions are used with imprecision and ambiguity' as a consequence of the concept being associated with inherently personalised factors such as beliefs and expectations (Mouzas et al., 2007). In the context of this paper, the issue of trust is contained to an organisational context; deemed to be a popular area of the trust debate (Vidotto et al., 2008; Kramer and Lewicki, 2010).

There are two strands of organisation-related trust debate apparent within the literature. Firstly, there is the debate relating to the repairing of trust, specifically where the perception of trust has been compromised and, secondly, there is the debate relating to how an existing level of trust can be sustained (Kramer and Lewicki, 2010; Caldwell et al., 2008). Both hinge on the perception that the presence of trust is inherently positive and something that is worth striving to achieve (Goel et al., 2005). Operationally the effect of trust is related to the links which can be drawn between how the worker feels, for example how trusted they consider themselves to be, and how they behave - the reaction to the perception of trust

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