

Chapter 5.1

A Practice Perspective on Transforming Mobile Work

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ABSTRACT

This study explores users' experiences during an organizational implementation. The implementation of a new mobile information technology took place in public home care environment. The home care case illustrates differences between implementation project goals and expectations, and on the other hand, the daily organizing and carrying out care work, where previously, no information technology was utilized. While implementing mobile technology was expected to enhance the efficiency of care working, the project outcomes include resistance due to surveillance aspect of the new technology as well as technological problems during the implementation. Successful outcomes of the implementation include better planning of working hours and more even distribution of work resources.

INTRODUCTION

New information technology is often implemented with the hopes of modernizing work practices. Public services have been developed in e-government projects that are technology-driven, and seem to be legitimized with the claim of increased efficiency in service delivery (Bekkers & Homburg, 2007; Adler & Henman, 2007; Henriksen

& Damsgaard, 2007). While some benefits, such as increases of democratic practices and better access to public services are proposed outcomes, the area of technology mediated public services still needs research to gain more understanding of these effects. The rhetoric of an implementation project and the reality of everyday working don't necessarily match. This has caused increasing criticism on the real benefits from public service development projects (Bekkers & Homburg, 2007; Clarke et al, 2000). When the expectations

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have not been met, the implemented e-commerce paradigm has been accused as one contributor to focusing in a limited or mechanistic view on the citizens' responses and behaviour as customers to public services. McGrath (2003) criticizes the deterministic view that implementation of a new information technology would impact in organizational effectiveness, while an implementation can as well cause unintended consequences that may even challenge the original objectiveness of the whole implementation.

This paper presents a case study of an organizational implementation of mobile information technology in public social services in Finland. The implementation of mobile information technology in a home care environment took place in anticipation of future where there is increasing percentage of older citizens needing the home care services and less availability of care workers to provide the services. The organizational implementation had a strong managerial push that reflects on the objectives of the implementation. The main goals in the organizational implementation were increasing efficiency, standardizing service processes and decreasing costs. The transforming of work practices was not an easy process, as not all of the e-government macro issues and managerial trends translated well on the micro-level – that is on the level of the home care workers carrying out the mundane service tasks. While I wanted to explore the micro level issues of organizing and carrying out every day working, I adopted a practice oriented perspective for the study. Orlikowski (2002), and later, Levina and Vaast (2005) suggest using a practice perspective to understand the actual changes taking place during an organizational implementation. Here, work practices are defined as enacted – as lived experience where actions are informed by shared technologies, projects, identities, and interests. Work practices are embedded and routinized within the socio-material boundaries of working, and organizational power is manifested in enacted practices.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Home care is by nature mobile work, where the care workers visit their clients around the city area and also around the clock in day and night shifts. Implementing mobile information technology in the home care environment had several issues to deal with; the biggest problems associated with home care services were the inadequacy of planning and accounting the services, the quality of care, and work related fatigue or stress amongst the personnel due to constant feelings of haste at work. Management had the opinion that most of these issues could be solved with better planning of working hours and more even distribution of care resources. There is a growing body of evidence illustrating benefits of mobile technology implemented in the context of distributed care working (Turner, 2005; Tooey, 2004; Fisher, 2003; Sausser, 2002), and also in the home care, a mobile solution was seen as only possibility for the implementation of information technology. Successful outcomes of organizational implementation of various hand held devices would suggest, for example, the decrease of time spent on documenting care or exchanging information about the clients, and the increase of time spent in the actual care work.

This study explores the nature of work practices as instances of collective action in a work context where information technology was introduced for the first time and where the formerly suitable work practices became outdated (Suchman, 2002). During an organizational implementation of a new information technology, the old work practices needed to be re-formed or re-fitted on the new situation and to the new tools at work. The main aim of this work is to understand and describe changes at work and in work practices. Orlikowski and Barley (2001) argue that transformations occurring in work and organizations cannot be explained only through technological changes but also institutions and organizational activity as social context to the change process

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