

Chapter 4.4

Users as Developers: A Field Study of Call Centre Knowledge Work

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ABSTRACT

We report the findings of a field study of the enactment of ICT supported knowledge work in a Human Resources contact centre, illustrating the negotiable boundary between what constitutes the developer and user. Drawing upon ideas from the social shaping of technology, we examine how discussions regarding producer-user relations require a degree of greater sophistication as we show how users develop technologies and work practices in-situ. In this case different forms of knowledge are practised to create and maintain a knowledge sharing system. We show how as staff simultaneously distance themselves from, and ally with, ICT supported encoded knowledge scripts, the system becomes materially important

to the project of constructing the knowledge characteristic of professional identity. Our work implies that although much has been made of contextualising the user, as a user, further work is required to contextualise users as developers and moreover, developers as users.

INTRODUCTION

In this article we offer insights into how a group of users interact with what can be seen as a knowledge sharing system—an ICT-supported repository used by call centre staff who offer expert advice on employment issues as HR management workers. The study provides a case of ICT-enabled knowledge sharing, insights into complex knowledge

work in what is often regarded as a highly standard, rules-based environment and, in particular, we emphasize the role of knowledge in systems development and use. To do this we focus upon the roles of users in the development, tailoring, and maintenance of “the knowledge” component of the system in everyday practice. Our research question was: How is knowledge made by professional users, and given the presence of ICTs in our field site, what is their role in this practice, if any? Drawing upon the social shaping tradition, which we shall expand upon later, we argue for the recognition of the, oft politically constructed and negotiable boundary between developers and users. In the remainder of this section, we briefly set our view of knowledge as a practice.

Although there are those who privilege ICTs as “the” mechanism for capturing, storing, and disseminating knowledge, this has been challenged as lacking insight into different kinds of knowledge and its provisional situated nature (Blackler, 1995; Fleck, 1997; Marshall & Brady, 2001; Sutton, 2001). For example, knowledge may be embodied (knowledge about how to do something, gained through doing), embedded (where routine arrangements are deployed), em-brained (akin to the holding of conceptual skills and cognitive abilities), encultured (rooted in shared understandings), and encoded (conveyed by signs and symbols) (Blackler, 1995; Collins, 1993). However, it has been further argued that greater insights can be gained by studying the processes of knowledge construction, rather than trying to describe and define its different forms. Knowledge is mediated by various things, situated in a given time and place, provisional in that it is socially constructed, pragmatic in that it is purposive and object oriented, and contested as it has links with power and politics (Blackler, 1995). Blackler (1995) therefore recommends that we focus upon the systems through which people achieve their knowing, on the changes that are occurring within such systems, and on the process through which new knowledge may be generated.

Indeed, it has been further argued that rather than simply define or describe knowledge networks, the challenge is to show how particular practices and discourses sustain networks of power-knowledge relations (Knights, Murray, & Willmott, 1993). For example, historically, task-continuous status organisations were prevalent where functional and hierarchical differentiation coincided. In this environment, positions were defined, by, among other things, knowledge ownership (Offe, 1976). But modern organisations are said to exhibit increased task-discontinuation structuring of status and the function of work performed (Hardy & Clegg, 1996). We therefore emphasize the need to go beyond simplistic notions of knowledge as a commodity to be extracted and transferred (Walsham, 2001). Knowledge may be used in innovation appropriation processes to provide access to other relevant knowledge and systems and as a political tool in support of particular interests (Hislop, Newell, Scarbrough, & Swan, 2000). Knowledge informs and justifies how we act, when it is taken as “truth,” especially when it is understood as neutral and authoritative, then it is powerful (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). As mentioned earlier, knowledge is situated and therefore it is necessary to understand that knowledge construction is somewhat predetermined by the fact of “growing up” in a society (Mannheim, 2004), in our case, an organisation. Thus we have to be careful to avoid an excessively volunteeristic account of knowledge work in which actors are depicted as autonomous agents who possess sufficient resources to make their network a reality (Knights et al., 1993). Indeed, as Orlikowski (2002, 2006) argues the role of material forms, systems, spaces, and infrastructures in everyday knowledgeable practice are important.

In this study we explore the ICT-related organisational practices in a call centre environment, “CarePoint,” where complex forms of knowledge and processes for the construction of knowledge are used in practice. We examine how a group of staff maintain an important knowledge sharing

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