

Chapter 8

A Framework for How Expertise Is Communicated and Valued in Contemporary Organizations: Why Process Work Matters

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ABSTRACT

Changes in contemporary organizations and work environments suggest reconsideration of how expertise is constituted in organizations. Specifically, a communicative view of expertise is advanced that views expertise in organizations as the product of communicative signals that are associated with an actor, and attributed as expertise by an observer. This lens is discussed as particularly valuable given the ways communication technologies and distributed work arrangements obscure visibility into the work practices of individuals, and the ways communication alters assessments of expertise. Two distinctively communicative forms of expertise are presented as alternatives to more traditional domain-focused views of expertise: interactional expertise and process expertise. A framework is presented for how organizational communication scholars can study process expertise, and how this research will help build and extend theory related to the constitutive nature of expertise in organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Quick, try to describe the work of a management consultant, business analyst, or marketing specialist. It is not an easy task. Intuitively, most people would probably associate these occupations with professionalism, and assume individuals in these roles are well educated, and well compensated. In reflecting on these professionals' work, the actual practices involved in doing these occupations, one might assume it involves analytical tasks, working with clients, and numerous hours sitting in front of a computer screen

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working with databases or specialized software applications. However, beyond the fact that these jobs involve working with or within organizations, and involve some type of communicative tasks, it is not readily apparent to most observers what workers in these positions do from day to day or hour to hour. Yet, individuals in such positions, or organizations made up of individuals in these positions, are increasingly offering expert professional services and claiming they have some form of expertise that others lack (Aakhus, Dadlani, Gigliotti, Goldthwaite, Kosterich, & Sahay, 2016; Stehr & Grundmann, 2011). As knowledge-based organizations and occupations continue to proliferate in the global economy it is important for organizational communication scholars to better understand the expertise at play in these ambiguous contexts (Alvesson, 1993). Building on recent scholarship advancing a communicative lens for the study of expertise (Treem, 2012; Treem & Leonardi, 2016), this chapter argues that traditional approaches to the study of organizations that treat expertise as a resource or status overlook the diverse ways that expertise may be constituted in contexts of organizing. By understanding the process of experts' day-to-day work we can uncover the mechanisms by which expertise is communicatively constructed, and come to reveal distinctly communicative forms of expertise that are overlooked by extant accounts of expertise and expert work.

Currently, a bias exists in scholarship and applied settings that views expertise as tied to knowledge and practice within a recognized domain of work or professional community. This perspective directs attention to more clearly defined professional roles and tasks and in doing so obscures a) the ways in which individuals can actively shape communication about work, and b) recognition of the work processes that inform and facilitate expert practice. An alternative approach to the study of expertise in organizations is to focus more on the processes that make professional work possible. This concern with process work, which focuses on the management of information as opposed to the direct application of domain knowledge, is increasingly relevant due to the growth of knowledge-intensive organizations that largely rely on information goods as the inputs and outputs of production. This chapter discusses the value of viewing process work as its own domain of knowing, in which some individuals may possess greater expertise than others. After presenting a case for the important role of process expertise in organizations, a set of grounded examples and strategies is offered to demonstrate why process expertise matters in modern organizations, and how the study of process expertise is important for extending theory in organizational communication.

Why Revisit the Study of Expertise and Organizational Communication?

Traditionally, expertise is thought of in relation to a specific domain, task, or body of knowledge; one is not merely a general expert, but an expert in or at something (Treem & Barley, 2016). When expertise is seen through this lens, it is treated as something that can be acquired through experience, training, and deliberate practice in a domain, and once attained this expertise resides with the individual who has attained it (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). This view that expertise is primarily associated with domain experience is predicated on two principles. The first is that exposure over time in a particular domain is necessary to develop a form of exclusive knowledge or ability that constitutes expertise. This knowledge takes the form of explicit rules and instructions governing actions, and technical knowledge related to the use of artifacts or necessary physical tasks to operate in a domain. In other words, the belief is that an inexperienced actor would, at worst, lack the knowledge or ability to competently act, or at best perform at a level that would be demonstrably worse than that of an experienced expert. The second, and related, idea is that experience in a particular domain provides individuals with access to

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