Sharing Work Practice in the Distributed Organization

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organizations today are looking for new ways to support knowledge-sharing and learning activities among their employees by the use of IT. The case describes how inspectors share their work experiences, reflect upon them, and learn from each other at a distance by using stories, pictures, and documents, which is made possible by the GoToMeeting™ tool. In this case the GoToMeeting™ tool supports learning activities across geographical and organizational boundaries and contributes to efficient conditions for sharing inspection practices. The issues covered are learning activities facilitated by IT as well as the limitations of the tool in use.

Keywords: Communities of Practice, Competence Networks, Distributed Organization, GoToMeeting™, Knowledge Sharing, Learning, Pictures, Public Administration, Traceable Practice

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

The inspection authority (herein referred to as the authority) discussed is a large distributed health and safety inspection authority in a Nordic country. The main task of the authority is to ensure that the work environment in the country is in accordance with the statutory requirements. The employees are based at several locations and they are given a high degree of individual autonomy. The employees in this organization often work alone at small district offices or home offices. Over the years the inspectors have developed individual inspection practices, making it difficult to promote sharing and learning in the organization. Different districts involve different industries, which have also influenced inspection practices and created variations in competences among the distributed inspectors.

The authority is challenged by rapid changes within the domain for which it is responsible, such as changes regarding how clients behave and new insights from research – all of which might change the use of the legislation it oversees and with which its clients have to comply. The region 1 unit, 1 of 7 in the authority, has around 50 employees and of these around 40 are inspectors. The budget is approximately 40 million kroner (equal to US$6.6 million). The networks' mission is to ensure organizational learning in the authority on the topic area for which they are set up. The organizational culture among the inspectors can be described as a very independent work culture, in which the inspectors are used to working alone or in pairs and making their

Figure 1. The organizational chart of the inspection authority
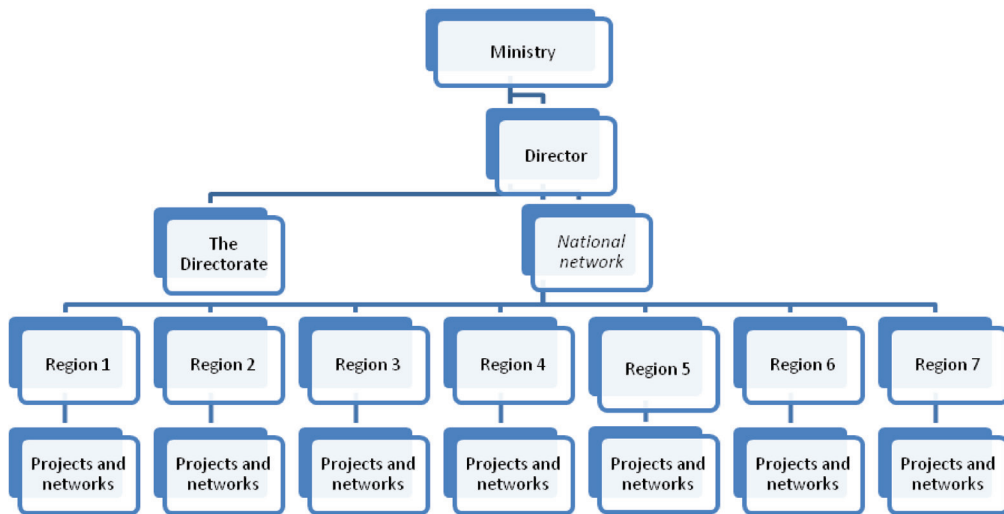
own decisions; they often work with their clients more than with their colleagues. Even though they often work alone and have few colleagues at the office, a sense of identity with a group and identity with the organization has been developed by telephone calls to colleagues conducting similar tasks or experts at the core of the organization (the directorate, see the organizational chart in Figure 1).

The inspectors conduct inspections of the use and storing of chemicals, installed ventilation facilities, and measures taken to prevent accidents at work. Usually they are at their office or home office when communicating with each other in the competence network meetings. This case focuses on the ability of GoToMeeting™ to promote knowledge sharing by the representation of inspection practice online. In this context knowledge about chemistry or engineering, experiences, and the legislation has to be integrated. The IT infrastructure consists of many applications and newer and very old software. Sometimes the same information has to be reported in several systems.

Organizational Structure and Management Responsibilities

The organization has a long history that extends back more than a hundred years. The authority's mission is to encourage its clients to work systematically towards compliance with the laws and regulations. The organization has undergone substantial changes in the last seven years. The core of the organization, the directorate, has had its number of employees reduced, and responsibilities have been handed over to the seven regions in the authority. An organizational chart is presented in Figure 1.

The conducting of inspections by this authority is meant to take place in projects and organizational learning in the networks. The purpose of the national networks is to ensure knowledge sharing and learning across the regions. These networks are set up with coordinators from the regional networks. In Mintzberg's (1983) terminology the organization has reduced its techno-structure and moved towards more flexible forms of organizing using more project work and networking, much in line with the current trend in organizational design. The organization-specific

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