

Intranet and Organizational Learning

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will analyze the cultural dimension of intranets as knowledge management tools within organizations. An intranet is an information communication technology (ICT) based upon Internet technology (<http://www>, TCP/IP). The intranet phenomenon was introduced in the early 1990s following the idea that it can integrate all the computers, software, and databases within a particular organization into a single system that enables employees to find and share all the information they need for their work (Bernard, 1997; Cortese, 1996). Intranets function as a computer-mediated communication (CMC) tool and are used as computing networks used for sharing organizational information. While Internet technology is leading, access is restricted exclusively to organizational members (by means of electronic firewalls). In a study to the role of intranets in strategic management decisions, Curry and Stancich (2000) define Intranets as "...private computing networks, internal to an organization, allowing access only to authorized users" (p. 250). The term *private* indicates that an intranet is a network that can be accessed only by members of a particular organization. The term *network* emphasizes the connection between computers that enables corporate communication. Intranets run on open but controlled networks that enable organization members to employ the same WWW servers and browsers, which are distributed over the local area network (LAN).

In recent debates on strategic management and learning, an organizational learning *culture* has been introduced as one of the main 'critical success factors' underlying the effective use of intranets (Carayannis, 1998). The aim of this article is to analyze the cultural aspects of intranets as tools in organizational learning processes. It is not so much a presentation of the instrumental effects of intranets for the learning organization culture—the way an intranet influences organizational learning processes is not taken for granted, but studied by the way it is used in different settings. We will present a framework for analyzing the cultural dimension of intranets within specific organizational contexts.

Many studies of intranets dealing with the effectiveness and efficiency of knowledge sharing and knowledge management take a static and deterministic point of view. That means that the focus is on structural constraints, without paying attention to the actual use of intranets. In contrast with this, we plea for an approach focusing upon communicative actions, and stress the communication between people on the intranet on the basis of normative agreement and feelings of mutual understanding and belonging. We furthermore highlight three dimensions from which this cultural context of an intranet can be defined, studied, and analyzed. These dimensions, which indeed apply to any enterprise system (ES) and which in a way also represent historical phases in the development of technology (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996), will in our contextual analysis be specified as the 'constitution' of an intranet, the intranet as a 'condition' of the learning organization, and the (unintended) 'consequences' of intranet use. An analysis on these levels is crucial for those scholars who want to grasp the cultural dimension in the actual use of intranets as a knowledge management tool.

Intranet and Organizational Culture

Often, the objective for the implementation of an intranet is that it will facilitate knowledge sharing among members within a single organization. There is a growing body of publications that see an intranet as a tool for organizational learning (e.g., Carayannis, 1998; Curry & Stancich, 2000; Scott, 1998; Sridhar, 1998; Ottosson, 2003). With regard to knowledge management, it has been analyzed in terms of knowledge banks, e-learning platforms, expert networks, online information sharing tools, and the like. Recently, intranets were identified as an infrastructure supporting knowledge management (Harvey, Palmer, & Speier, 1998; Damsgaard & Scheepers, 2001). In this body of literature, intranets are presented as promising knowledge management ICT tools in the sense that intranets will be complementary to or even replace existing information and communication carriers within and among organizations. In addition, intranets are seen as promising instruments for

information sharing and collaboration across departments, functions, and information systems (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 1999). Internet-based ICTs like an intranet are even introduced as radical and disruptive innovations, since the implementation is intended strongly to influence the knowledge base of the organization (Lyytinen & Rose, 2003; Mustonen-Ollila & Lyytinen, 2003).

Together with the stories on the promising aspect of intranets, however, came the stories about organizational restrictions, misalignments, and user resistance. Discussions can be found about organizational constraints, such as the lack of standards, immature interfaces, weak linkages to other information systems, bandwidth availability and information overload, and the lack of an internal organization to authorize, support, and organize the quality of the information. On many occasions, it is the organizational culture that has been introduced as an explanation for misalignments or as a condition for a successful implementation and use of intranets (Damsgaard & Scheepers, 2001, p. 5). Curry and Stanchich (2000) state: "To obtain maximum value from an intranet, both the 'soft' cultural issues of information sharing and change in work processes must be addressed alongside the 'hard' systems issues of managing the intranet as an information system and a business resource" (p. 255). Moreover, it has been argued that a cultural shift to information sharing is necessary to solve problems of information sharing by means of intranets (Harvey et al., 1998). A positive culture, in this respect, is the motivation to create, share, and use information and knowledge to solve problems with each other within the organization.

It is, however, difficult and often misleading to establish direct causal links between organizational culture and the performance of intranets, since we must realize that culture is part and parcel of the entire organization and affects all kinds of actions and relations (Alvesson, 2002). The definition of 'organizational culture' is itself problematic. It has been described in the literature as a pattern of shared assumptions often produced by top management (Schein, 1992). Such a description of culture as a set of shared assumptions is rather oversimplified (Martin, 1992). Empirical research provides us with a far more complex picture, and shows that tensions can grow and remain between the individuals' interests and organization aims. Because of cognitive and normative diversity within an organization, the attribution of meaning (which is an important part of the cultural process) is complicated and leads to integration as well as fragmentation, and unity as well as diversity.

In line with this, organizational culture has been defined as a sensemaking process (Weick, 1995). That means that we have to study how individual workers give meaning to their actions. In using intranets, like texts such as reports, statistics, protocols, and minutes, the

organizational members give meaning to their activities. In this way "...we can understand such interpretations as stemming from the very use of intranet itself" (Edenius & Borgerson, 2003, p. 131). The use of an intranet can generate a kind of consensual knowledge and, as long as different workers get into mutual trust, this can lead to a feeling of belonging. To use an intranet is making sense of experiences, routines, and insights. On a more abstract level, Wenger introduced the term 'communities of practice' to describe the process of people who share common goals or interests and how the people interact with each other to learn how to do better. These communities are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Communities of practice enable practitioners to share knowledge, to create a link between learning and performance, and to make connections among others across structural organizational borders. Because of this, we will discuss intranet and organizational culture in terms of 'shared' meaningful work practices, while at the same time recognizing the existence of multiple working cultures dealing with intranets.

Intranet and Organizational Learning

As argued above, an intranet can facilitate knowledge sharing among organization members. The idea is that the knowledge put on the intranet is explicit knowledge (in the terms of Polanyi) that can easily be shared by members of the user group. However, the term 'knowledge sharing' is problematic, because the people's tacit knowing—that is, how to do things—is never fully shared (Walsham, 2002). Only if the data (the explicit knowledge) on the intranet is connected to the tacit knowing, then can the intranet offer something interesting to that user—it can generate a kind of consensual knowledge. That implies that the user must have the skills and competence in selecting the appropriate explicit knowledge. In other words, the knowledge is not in the computer system, but within the human being. It is the end-users that give sense to the data and messages on the intranet by means of their tacit knowing.

Like other ICTs, intranets are the outcome of choices made by individual actors or groups and of organizational constraints that together influence the character of this particular technology. This is known in the literature as the process of mutual shaping (Williams & Edge, 1996; Orlikowski, 2000). While using intranets, actors produce and reproduce communication and information patterns within organizations. Organizational learning on intranets thus can be analyzed as a social process of structuration (in line with Berends, Boersma, & Wegeman,

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