Social Impacts of Computer-Mediated Communication on Strategic Change Processes

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INTRODUCTION

Communication in the workplace has been revolutionized by workers having individual access to networked computers. Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) enables staff members to interact electronically and actively participate in a group or organization-wide debate from their desk. Email, video-conferencing, groupware, and intranet-based systems are all examples of CMC technologies. Universities have been early adopters of CMC because of a number of factors, including easy individual access to a networked computer and readily available software. This has also meant that universities have been amongst the first to experience the socio-organizational effects of these media of communication.

This case is about a University, named Uni-X, which adopted and appropriated CMC to support a University-wide consultative process to inform its future strategic directions. Strategic change was required in response to a number of external political and economic factors. The President and the Executive Committee decided to use the consultative process both to increase staff awareness of the circumstances being faced by the University and to engage them in an exploratory process leading to the decisions that were to be made. The CMC system used was intended to provide equal access to information by all staff, to enable a University-wide electronic forum for discussion, and to support the coordination of a multitude of the other in-vivo tasks arising from the process.

The case enables examination of (at least) three controversial issues of CMC deployment: equality of access, equality of participation, and democratizing potential. Equality of access means that all the participants have an equal opportunity to access the communication network and information resources in the system. Equality of access has to be distinguished from the equality of participation, which denotes equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion, both to affect and be affected by the opinion of others. CMC's democratizing potential is an even more complex issue that refers to CMC's contribution to the openness and transparency of organizational processes and to consensus-based participatory decision-making. Understanding the use and appropriation of CMC by individuals as members of different groups and as members of the Uni-X University, together with understanding the uniqueness of their specific local contexts, is a prerequisite for exploring the richness of social impacts, and why and how they emerged.

CASE QUESTIONS

- In what ways can technology be used to enhance communication in a large educational institution?
- What makes using technology-enhanced communication appealing?
- What effect does technology-enhanced communication have on social interactions?

CASE NARRATIVE

Background

The Uni-X University is situated in a semi-rural area on the outskirts of a large metropolitan center. It was originally established in 1891 as a single purpose college and evolved over the ensuing years to become a part of a greater university network in 1989. It has an enrollment of about 6,000 students. The staff body comprises approximately 250 academic staff distributed over five faculties and approximately 420 general staff members, including administrative staff, technical and scientific officers, and field and maintenance staff.

Confronted with long-term budget cuts, increased competition, and other economic, political, and social challenges, Uni-X embarked on a strategic change process in 1997. This organization-wide restructuring was the first carried out as an explicitly designed consultative process. Substantial workloads severely restricted the time available for staff to meet face-to-face. The use of CMC was, therefore, considered the only way to achieve such broad-based contributions. This was indeed a realistic option as all staff had access to the Uni-X electronic network, and they were generally proficient in the use of this form of electronic communication. A CMC system based on email and the intranet was deployed to enable organization-wide communication, equal access, and broad participation.

The University and Computer-Mediated Communications

In 1997, the Uni-X President released a paper entitled "Strategic Issues and Actions," and shortly after that, the Uni-X Executive Committee published five additional papers that dealt with the university's future. The papers addressed teaching and learning, research and consulting, funding and income generation, the structure and management of Uni-X, and the organizational culture. The papers were distributed on email using the "Uni-X–All" listserve containing addresses of all Uni-X members. The President and other members of the Executive Committee invited all the staff to respond to the strategic papers by providing comments and feedback on the issues raised by the papers. Staff members were invited to send their messages either directly to the Executive Committee or to a facilitator, who published them in batches via Uni-X-All. Individual staff could not publish on Uni-X-All without approval, and initial staff response was far below the expectations of the Executive Committee.

Further opportunity for the members of Uni-X to express their views and opinions was provided through the "Staff Survey – Critical Issues" administered via both email and hard copy (also available for downloading from the Uni-X intranet). Members had the option of answering the questions either individually or in groups. The facilitators involved in the consultative process analyzed, categorized, and summarized the responses, and published the results via email and the intranet.

The strategic papers, several public discussions, and the survey provided a rich source of knowledge and critical-thinking that served as the basis for a Planning Conference held in mid-1997. At this Conference, approximately 10% of Uni-X staff, selected by the Executive Committee, addressed all the major issues concerning the structure and function

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