

Chapter 1

An Exploratory Theoretical Framework for Understanding Information Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Recent trends in researching Information Behaviour in organisations show that the initial focus on technology has shifted to cognitive methods that take the individual into account, but more recently there has been a move to the social sciences approach. Literature shows that this approach has been informative but rather theoretic as there has been limited work using this approach to handle information problems in organisations. There is a need to develop and test theories to help understand Information Behaviour in organisations in a social science context that gives direct benefits to the organisation. It is useful to view organisations as complex social networks of interactions, where importance is put on the relationships between people in the organisations, as well as on the individual actor. A need exists to evaluate and connect insights from social sciences communities of practice, and complexity theory. This paper explores insights from these theories and develops a conceptual framework for understanding Information Behaviour in organisations. Data collection is in a preliminary stage, reflections and observations, of the researcher and a few participants. The intention is to provoke thoughts along the lines of seeking to use a synergy between theories that can offer different and useful platforms to help better understand the impact of information behaviour on organizational culture.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on developing and exploring a conceptual framework to contribute to the understanding of Information Behaviour (IB) in organisations, by attempting to achieve a synergy

between enactive cognitive science, social science research and communities of practice, and complexity theory. The need for such a framework has arisen from the necessity to adopt a holistic approach encompassing the study of individual behaviours, human interactions, and cultural

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characteristics in diagnosing and improving the information environment in organisations. The study is grounded in the authors' experience in research and consultancy in a manufacturing company and their efforts to develop methods that deliver results in practice.

The theories are explained in later sections, to give you a good insight to what they all offer, and where there is possibility to achieve synergy between them. But first there is a discussion of research in information behaviour and factors that have been issues till date.

Interdisciplinary Nature and General Overview of Information Behaviour Research

Information behaviour (IB) has been studied in various fields most notably, psychology, sociology, information sciences, etc. The main platform of theories, which the studies have progressed from, were proposed by cognitive scientists with the focus on the characteristics of the individual human actor (Mutsheva, 2007), and social sciences with the focus on how the individual's surroundings play a part in IB (Wilson, 2000; Pettigrew, Fidel, & Bruce, 2001). The interdisciplinary nature of IB has led to various researchers having different definitions for the same terms and differing ideas, and thus, there has not been a general consensus in the study of IB. This may be a good thing considering the fact that it is a relatively new discourse, and the disparate views could be what the field needs to move forward and seek new findings to enhance understanding. A definition of IB that allows for a general description and wider focus is used in this paper: "Information Behaviour (IB) is the perceptions and actions of individuals towards approaching and handling information" (Davenport, 1997).

It is well established in literature that information behaviour is directly related to the specific situations or contexts that give rise to the information need or use (Julien & Michels, 2000;

Niedzwiedzka, 2003). Just like the context, there are other variables which Wilson (2000) calls intervening variables like the role the individual is in at the time. For example, an individual's behaviour could be, different when in a professional role, and could be different in another role for the same individual. The environment also matters as one of the intervening variables, which could be looked at on a local or organisational level.

This shows that the context in which IB is studied plays an important role in the understanding elicited from the study. In effect, the way the organisation is viewed when studying it, has an impact on the nature of understanding that we get from the study. To put this in plain terms: "What we can know is determined by the available methods of knowing" (Poole & McPhee, 1994). There are also other factors that determine the information behaviour in organisations, such as the leadership, industry, media of communication, etc.

Most of the research on Information Behaviour in organisations, have focused on information seeking behaviour (Vakkari, 2008), a single type of proactive behaviour. Though information use has been sometimes incorporated in these studies, the individual's variety of behaviours of information use, have not been looked at in detail, although these have an impact on organisational performance. For example, ignoring information, hoarding information, forwarding useful information to other actors, could be considered as part of the various dimensions of information behaviour. The involvement of the researcher in the study of the complex phenomenon of IB needs rethinking too, as the research process determines the quality of the outcomes.

Most of the research in IB has focused on studying the information behaviour of employees in organisations, but has delivered very limited results on understanding how to improve the information environment. For example, Choo, Bergerson, Detlor, and Heaton (2008) suggests three information capabilities that organisations should be strong in to realize superior perfor-

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