

Chapter 5.3

How Groupware Systems Can Change How an Organisation Makes Decisions: A Case Study in the Publishing Industry¹

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, a newspaper company which has implemented a computerised editorial system is studied in an attempt to understand the impact that groupware systems can have on the decision making processes of an organisation. First, the case study protocol is presented, and the findings of the case are described in detail. Conclusions are then presented which pertain both to this case and to

the implementation of decision support systems that have a groupware dimension.

BACKGROUND TO THE CASE

XYZ Publications Ltd (XYZ) is a news organisation which has published two newspapers: a national morning newspaper and a local afternoon newspaper, since the 19th Century. The publishing industry is one which has faced many challenges

over the last 20 years and XYZ has undergone considerable change of both structural and commercial nature consistent with what has happened in the rest of this industry.

In XYZ, the researchers interviewed key actors in an attempt to understand the nature of the changes undergone by the firm and their implications for the decision making routines of the firm. One of the key changes was the implementation, at the end of a long process of analysis, of a collaborative computer system to support the creation of the newspapers.

A case study protocol was put together which focused on understanding in detail how editorial and commercial decisions are made, that is, how knowledge is collected, stored, selected, organised, and circulated. We also analysed the impact which the implementation of the groupware editorial system has had on decision making processes. Our interest in this case was motivated by the observation that XYZ has a very open decision making style, a highly developed circulation of information, and very quick decision making cycles reflecting the nature of the industry in which XYZ operates. This gave the opportunity to observe many repetitions of editorial decision making cycles within a short timeframe.

MAIN FOCUS: THE STUDY AT XYZ

Management and decision making at XYZ is overwhelmingly characterised by the nature of the firm's activity, whereby the publication of two daily newspaper titles dictates the pace of every aspect of operational decision making. One interviewee likened this situation to working for a company which must produce two new products every day; each of these products having a life span of 6 hours maximum! This cyclical process has implications for every aspect of XYZ's business as key decisions related to the information content of the papers and the key steps that lead to them are repeated every few hours following

highly informal processes nevertheless routinised by usage.

Thus, whatever happens, the national title must be ready for 2:00 a.m. while the local title must be ready by 12:00 p.m. and all the work is organised around these two daily deadlines. The natural leaders of the organisation are the editor-in-chief, the sales manager (in charge of selling the advertising space without which no newspaper can exist) and the Managing Director (MD). The finance department plays more of an arbitration role, reminding actors that maximising revenues is also critical to XYZ's success (even good newspapers can go bankrupt) as some editorial decisions are sometimes very costly and have an uncertain impact on the short term and long term success of the paper. This dichotomy between editorial decision making and editorial expenditure on the one hand, and the financial success of the newspaper on the other hand, is a fundamental feature of this case study.

CHARACTERISING DECISION MAKING AT XYZ

Decision making in XYZ is characterised by two dominant types of problems. These are: editorial decisions and decision about the sales of advertising space, which overall must "balance the books." In these two areas, XYZ's managers display different styles and use different routines as explained in the next sections.

Editorial Decision Making

The core decision making process at XYZ is concerned with the creation of the two newspaper titles, twice a day. It is characterised by an abundance of routine, unstructured decisions made by the editorial team from its core position at the centre of a complex network of information-rich relationships with a large number of actors inside and outside the firm. The production of a

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