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Case study

Collaborative working in a large pharmaceutical company: Developing better practices through a structurational schema

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Abstract

This paper presents the ongoing case study of a large pharmaceutical organisation currently undertaking a number of changes to their work practices. These collaborative changes are being facilitated by groupware systems. In many instances this has led to the rejection of or resistance to the more complex tools. The paper outlines research, based on a perspective informed by structuration theory, that provides the organisation with an approach to supporting staff in this new 'collaborative environment'. An example, drawn from the case study, shows how such support might be developed and presents a set of recommendations for supporting a particular group, based on this research schema.
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Keywords: Collaborative practices; Pharmaceutical organisation; Social theory; Structuration theory

1. Introduction

One aspect of information systems (IS) adoption is the use and application of collaborative technologies in an organisational setting (Alexander, 2002; Ngwenyama, 1998). It is possible for these technologies to organise work processes without reference to hierarchical, divisional or time-geographic boundaries. As a consequence the nature of how work is conducted in groups and organisations is in the process of a critical change (Karsten, 1999). Collaborative technology has lessened the importance of physical proximity to be a prerequisite in the formation of social and

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organisational groups. Research has shown that groups are now more heterogeneous, cross-functional and cross-cultural in coming together for a common purpose (Chandler, 2001; Robey, Khoo, & Powers, 2000).

The paper presents details of an ongoing case study in the manufacture and supply department of a large pharmaceuticals organisation. This organisation has recently begun to roll out a wide variety of groupware with the explicit aim of developing and sustaining a new 'collaborative culture'. Employees, in many cases, have been asked to alter their expectations of their work processes. This research aims to provide a means of supporting this change through the development of a sensitising approach, or schema, based on Structuration Theory, for coaching users of groupware.

While structuration theory has been influential in IS research (Avison, Wood-Harper, Vidgen, & Wood, 2002; Brodie, Brooks, Evans, & Perry, 2003; Brooks, 1997; Jones, 1997; Orlikowski, 1992, 2002; Rose, 1998) there is still an insistence that the theory be applied in a relatively simple retrospective manner. That structuration theory can be used to highlight issues of importance in any IS should be assumed. To move the theoretical scope of structuration theory forward, IS research should be attempting ways to harness the potential of the theory in an empirical manner (Jones & Karsten, 2003).

Instead of post-hoc analyses, which offer contributions of limited value, establishing a coherent epistemological approach to studying IS phenomena can begin to develop a dynamic version of the theory, whereby problems or issues are identified and a structurational perspective or schema provides the potential for solution, or set of recommendations to follow. The paper presents what such a schema could look like, and provides an analysis of an example from the case itself.

2. Case study profile

This case study looks at the manufacture and supply (MS) division of a large multinational pharmaceutical organisation, whose operations are located globally. The MS department consists of over 30,000 employees and is one of seven sub-departments of the organisation. The research is positioned within the IT department of the MS division (MS IT). One of the responsibilities of MS IT is the introduction, implementation and coaching of a set of tools that enable collaboration to occur across the geographic and hierarchical boundaries that are an evident feature of such an organisation. The main objectives of the case study were to obtain the following information:

- The processes involved in contributing to individual and group strategic action with regard to collaboration.
- The structural principles employed in informing methods of collaborating among employees.
- Contexts where collaboration occur.

2.1. Background

While collaboration is a major element of MS (particularly where data and information needs to be extracted, modified, distributed and generally re-purposed), a number of the tools employed