



The workflow application as an unintended medium for organizational learning: A longitudinal field study

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Abstract

Research on information technology (IT) and organizational learning has treated IT as either a subject of or an intentionally designed platform for organizational learning. In contrast, this study investigates the unintentional effects of IT use on organizational learning processes. The findings of this longitudinal field study suggest that an IT platform can serve as both reification and propagation media for experimentation with new work practices. The use of an IT platform can produce online profiles of new work practices and spread them within a user community immediately and simultaneously in a decontextualized fashion. As a consequence, the intensity of collective learning in the process of institutionalizing new work practices can be reduced.

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1. Introduction

Research on information technology (IT) and organizational learning has consisted of two main streams of analyses (Robey, Boudreau, & Rose, 2000) that seem to assume implicitly that IT is a single-purpose technological platform. Whereas the first stream

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perceives IT as a technology platform for work and uses organizational learning concepts to explain IT implementation (e.g., Attewell, 1992; Martins & Kambil, 1999; Orlikowski, 1996; Robey & Boudreau, 1999), the second explores IT as a technology platform intentionally designed to support organizational learning (e.g., Boland, Tenkasi, & Te'eni, 1994; Goodman & Darr, 1998; Hine & Goul, 1998; Stein & Zwass, 1995). Out of these two main streams of research, however, some emerging empirical evidence and theoretical discourses (e.g., Käkölä & Koota, 1999; Kuutti & Virkkunen, 1995) suggest a third potential research stream: Might the use of an IT program designed as a technological platform for work unintentionally affect the associated organizational learning processes? This question is becoming increasingly relevant and important in light of recent widespread deployments of new IT applications, such as workflow and enterprise resource planning, as key business process platforms (e.g., Elmes, Strong, & Volkoff, 2005; Newell, Huang, Galliers, & Pan, 2003; Robey, Ross, & Boudreau, 2002). Some of their distinctive characteristics seem to suggest that these new mission-critical IT applications have the potential to affect organizational learning processes.

This potential can be illustrated better with the concrete example of sales practices, in which context we can consider an organization's sales practices at both individual and collective levels. In a traditional sales support IT environment, data about individual sales practices are scattered across a variety of public and private domain applications, and the customer records and sales transactions generated by a salesperson are likely stored in a database. These transaction records, however, report little about *how* the sales were made. The more revealing types of documents—such as forms, memos, customer correspondences, contracts, and meeting minutes—are generated by office applications and stored in private directories, so their dispersed, private storage essentially denies systematic public access to these documents. Suppose a shared workflow application, which enables salespeople to create and store documents online in a consolidated fashion, is deployed to support the sales function. As either an intended or unintended consequence, the publicly accessible nature of the new application makes the consolidated online documents available to others. In this sense, the new workflow application might effectively act as a propagation medium that transmits individual sales practices to other users quickly and collectively. As such, it has the potential to influence the collective learning process by which individual sales practices get assimilated into the collective sales practice.

If an IT application deployed as a work platform acts as a propagation medium, how does it affect the organizational learning process associated with the transformation in work practices that follows its deployment? Answering this research question is important for several reasons. First, examining organizational learning processes will yield knowledge about how and why an organizational learning outcome might be produced. Second, because IT is much more commonly deployed as a work rather than a learning platform, the research question pertains to an important, pervasive phenomenon. Third, research in this area will not only provide guidance for IT design and management but also contribute to management research on organizational learning.

To understand the effects of IT use on organizational learning processes, the process must be observed as it evolves in its natural setting. Therefore, I conducted a longitudinal field investigation to answer the research question. The following discussion addresses the conceptual underpinning of the study, methodology and research design, the results of the data analysis, and their theoretical implications for conceptualizing organizational learning processes.

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