Where and When was Knowledge Managed? Exploring Multiple Versions of KM in Organizations

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Abstract: The chapter presents a case study of new technology in a rapid response social work unit that is part of an e-government program in a Scottish municipality. The objective of the project was to improve the configuration and delivery of resources for housebound clients, and it was construed as a simple knowledge integration exercise by senior management. Taking a social informatics perspective, the authors interpret the case in terms of competing discourses or multiple versions of KM, and suggest that KM versioning is a characteristic, but underexplored, feature of complex projects that involve multiple actors with different knowledge trajectories.

1 Introduction

The chapter explores a case study of a knowledge management project in a municipal public administration in the UK. The case is an instance of service transformation that is driven by major societal programs (e-learning, e-government) initiated by governments within the European Community and elsewhere to enact an “information” or “knowledge” society (Van Bastelaer, 2001). Many of these programs are based on the assumption that knowledge has not been “managed” in the relevant sectors, or that it has been inadequately managed. They are also premised on assumptions about the relationship between knowledge, technology and work that are as much ideological as rational in intent (Davenport & Horton, 2005).

One way to address the intricacies of knowledge management in cases like this is to consider them in terms of versioning. The first section of the chapter explores an extensive and contradictory literature that presents different versions of KM, and raises a number of questions. If knowledge can be shown to have been managed in the case organization before the implementation of government directives, then for whom was the managerialist version, a discourse of “prior incompetence” intended? And for whom was the discourse of “competent intervention” intended, one that was more or less compromised
by “where and when” narratives that emerged in fieldwork? Does KM inevitably involve multiple versions and diverse discourses, some of which gain salience in specific circumstances according to the prevalent political forces in different localities at different times in a KM project?

In a world where multiple accounts (or versions) of KM are available and multiple audiences are addressed, what can a researcher achieve? The second section of the chapter presents a research approach that can accommodate and explicate multiple versions of KM. As analysts working in the Social Informatics domain, we provide a framework that draws on concepts and techniques from our fellow researchers. These provide explanations of sociotechnical phenomena in organizations that span different levels of organizational order, and different timeframes. They allow an analyst not just to identify, and explain conflicting versions, but to track what we call knowledge trajectories, shifts in versions of KM over time which are rarely smooth, as traces of earlier versions persist in later ones.

The case is presented in detail in the third part of the chapter. The starting point is a work environment before a major managerial intervention intended to improve, by means of technology, efficiency and effectiveness (with the parameters of these qualities left unclear at the start of the projects, and, indeed, defined by external consultants once the projects were underway). The time frame of the case is years rather than months. It is clear that knowledge was managed at many different levels (the “where” of the title) and at many different stages (“when”). Before the intervention, for example, an organizational rationale had to be constructed and articulated, otherwise work could not have been approved that met, more or less, requirements to comply with government directives. One version of KM in the case study involves the work of outsiders hired to implement the (outsourced) systems to produce the desired transformation. Another is the knowledge managed by those whose work was to be transformed. Knowledge at this level could be described as a complex of elements such as professional expertise, organizational acumen and day to day practice, shifting in accord with evolving circumstances.

Though many discrepancies can be observed between the different versions of knowledge managed by the “ordering” side and the “receiving” side of the technology implementation described in the case, continuity was broadly achieved through co-development and transformations of practice many of which were not anticipated. Some transformations however, can be seen as degradations rather than enhancements, altering the balance of professional and routine work, managing knowledge “down” rather than “up.”

2 Multiple Versions of KM

The term “Knowledge Management” is used in diverse ways, a cause of controversy in the domain. Two broad (and related) analytic trends can be identified: the first is based on semantic analysis, or term occurrence in