Asymmetrical collaboration in print shop-customer relationships

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Abstract. The service provider-customer relationship, although not perhaps considered a typical collaborative relationship, is clearly collaborative work. However, such work is constrained by the very (service) nature of the relationship. Customer-service provider interaction can be characterised as interaction at the boundaries of organisations, each of which is likely to have their own workflows and orientations. Many service organisations attempt to facilitate this interaction by configuring their customers, using standardised forms or applications. In this way they bring the customers workflow into line with their own. In this paper we describe field work examining one particular service relationship; that between print shops and their customers. A notable feature of print shop-customer relationships is that customers prepare the material that the print shop then prints. This makes the standardization of workflows difficult, particularly within the service relationship. Technologies exist which aim to automate and standardize the workflow from customers to print shops. However, they have, up to now, largely failed to live up to their promise, leaving print shops to adopt ad hoc solutions. This paper describes the hidden work that the print shops do to make the service relationship work.

Introduction

The service relationship, between service provider and customer, is an important one for CSCW. Although it may not typically represent what we think about when we talk about collaboration, examining the customer-service provider interaction demonstrates that it is clearly collaborative work (cf. Hughes, Randall & Shapiro, 1991). Such collaboration may be necessary for that service relationship to work,
but at the same time it is constrained by the very (service) nature of the relationship. It is not one of straightforward cooperation with both parties on an equal footing, and the relative responsibilities for ensuring a satisfactory service provision for both sides may be unequal. This is especially true in the print industry where, as we shall see, the service relationship is maintained through collaborative work to make the artefacts from the customers workflow fit into the print shops workflow. The asymmetry in the collaboration comes from the print shop taking on the bulk of the work to make the service relationship work. In this paper, we explore this asymmetrical collaboration between print shops and their customers.

In business there is an increasing move to remote channels for service provision, with organisations interacting with their customers using information and communication technologies (ICTs), the Internet and so on. In addition many service organisations have technologically managed workflows and thus make use of on-line forms, standardised files and applications – web interfaces and such like – in an attempt to create a smooth process across organisational boundaries, minimising the need for face-to-face and even telephone contact. In this Internet age large portions of the service sector now do business online from government services to on line banking and insurance. A recurring theme with industries that have made this change is that moving customers to remote channels may be highly profitable but that doing so requires some re-configuration of the relationship with the customer and carefully thought through technology design (Bowers and Martin 2000; Rouncefield, Harper & Randall, 1999). Focusing on printing we see that it is a service industry that is moving in this direction. Technologically managed workflows are being widely adopted. Job submission is often remote, with files frequently being sent by email. In addition many print shops are seeking to conduct more business online, whereby customers submit jobs using standardised templates. In some areas, attempts have been made to fully automate aspects of the workflow so that collaboration between print shops and their customers is minimised. Many jobs are submitted as ‘ready to print’, that is, jobs which can be printed out and dispatched to the customer with, in theory, no extra work required to prepare the document for printing on a digital production press.

Digital print shops cater for a wide range of customers with diverse requirements and this is part of their selling point. However, that very diversity of customers, as well as the service provider role, presents problems in process standardization and movement to remote channels for customer-organisation interaction. Their customer diversity means that it is difficult to employ standard workflows across various customers and consequently learning and re-use from customer to customer is not optimised. Moreover, the service banner means that they are often involved in doing extra (often not ‘costed’) work in order to produce a printed product that is good enough in terms of content and aesthetics.