

Information Access and Workplace Learning in “Peopleless Offices” by “Officeless People” Proposed Research Platform for Digital Workplace Development

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Introduction

Information behavior research aims at understanding people’s use of information, and thus to illuminate the prerequisites for facilitating access to relevant information. In this paper, information related activities at work are scrutinized from a practice-theoretical orientation with influences of Giddens’ structuration theory (1994), Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner’s learning in landscapes of practice (2015) and Engeström’s activity theory (2000). This orientation emphasizes work and the context where the work is happening.

Work and its context are outlined – more or less loosely – by structures that outline the boundaries, which guide and regulate what requirements, procedures and solutions are suitable in carrying out a work task and arriving at a result. The sociality of any work activity mirrors learning in general; a person learns how to be a worker in a specific workplace through participation, for instance how to be a university professor (a professional practice) at Oslo and Akershus University College (a local practice). Since other persons as well as material and intellectual objects in the work environment carry with them traditions, values and an agreed-upon set of facts, this learning is attached to a trajectory of time – happening now, but inescapably relating to both the past and the future.

However, the socio-material/cognitive structures are not fixed as such or demarcating people’s actions. People are able to choose not to comply with the existing structures, even if this may require a considerable effort; and as the circumstances alter so will eventually the structures. In the process of learning, a person assumes not only a role of an able worker in her setting, but also that

of an active participant in the practice(s) involved; mediating, changing and thus developing the traditions, values and facts further. (cf. Giddens, 1984; Engeström, 2000; Billett, 2004; Fidel, 2014; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Information plays a role in all such social practices. Practices formed around information related activities (for example, needing, searching, seeking, valuing, producing, organizing, using and sharing information) as well as associated strategies and goals are (a part of) work practice(s).

Information acquisition is one of such daily work practices in connection to social and individual purposes for goal-oriented tasks and long-term progress in both routine work and urgent problems. There is a push in any work practice to look for certain information (and ignore others), to get hold of it through certain ways (and ignore others) and to utilize certain information from certain sources (and ignore others). In most workplaces, the most conventional information sources are made readily available in order to make the work flow efficiently. They are part of the activities learned in relation to general and local work practices. Moreover, information that is available through these channels and source is being emphasized. This means that by learning to use certain information channels and sources, the worker is also instilled in the kind of information and the relevant kinds of information needs (i.e., those that can be satisfied by using the channels and sources). Thus, a work task and use of information – even if performed by a single person – are never activities in solitude, but related to other past, current and future doings and people in the workplace, as well as they always present a potential learning opportunity. (cf. Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978; Byström, 1999; Byström, 2014; Byström & Lloyd, 2012; Lloyd, 2010; Cox, 2012).

Especially during the last decade, prerequisites for the conception of work and workplaces have changed radically due to developments in information technology. One consequence is a work life to an increasing degree happens in digital environments. Digital workplaces emerge when an organization's workforce collectively carry out their work in digital, rather than in physical workplaces. Many workplaces are already now hybrids where work activities addressed, tools utilized and information consumed are the same no matter if engaged in in the office or at home.

Digital workplaces present a set of challenges for workplace learning. The sophisticated information systems that retrieve, combine and present information based on complicated algorithms beyond most employees' comprehension pose one such challenge. The information systems that are fundamental for the existence of a digital workplace, do not necessary provide access to limitless amount of information, but also have the capacity to narrow the scope of information seeking and use (cf. functions such as personalized search and peer recommendations).

Some 40 years ago, Alvin Toffler (1981) presented the then futuristic idea of paperless offices that a modern digital workplace may finally come about. Our time's futuristic idea might be the *peopleless offices*, or the *officeless people*, that will possibly require less time to happen. In what ways do these post-modern, true information-age organizations modify our possibilities to learn at a workplace? A key question is, what happens when the physical setting of a workplace loses its primacy, gets dissolved, and when the pre-eminence in working is instead furnished by elusive digital workplaces?

This development calls for investigating the connections between information acquisition and workplace learning with an aim to establish its potentiality to better understand the role of information at workplaces, and to ensure an auspicious development of digital workplaces. An example of such connections are the iterative, triangular relationships between information (re)sources, work-task performance and information needs. At least questions arise:

Essence of Information Acquisition

What makes a shared knowledge base? Information acquisition happens in different information modalities, different kinds and types of information are accessed from different sources through different channels. In what ways does the digital workplace differ from physical ones as comes to workplace learning through information acquisition? How does practices of workplace learning through information acquisition develop – what sustains, what changes? What kinds of tensions arise during information acquisition? What are the consequences for service professions and arts professions where tacit, bodily knowledge is essential?

Source Authority

Whom to ask/whom to trust/who decides? Ever since information acquisition at work has been studied, one of the main findings is that a colleague is the best source for information, for specific details as well as for overviews and explanations (e.g., Allen, 1969). How do digital workplaces maintain collegial sharing in information acquisition? What are (new) standards for source authority?

Relevancy of Information Acquisition

What are the information needs? Way back physical workplaces had physical information landscapes. Over the years, these have been replaced by hybrid information landscapes consisting of physical as well as digital information sources. What kind of consequences does a partly or entirely digital workplace have regarding collectively shared views on information landscapes as well as on understanding relevant information, appropriate information needs and appropriate resolutions?

In sum, I have argued that information acquisition in/for work has a relation to workplace learning, and being a phenomenon of much wider scope than just finding a neutral answer to a neutral question. Moreover, the relationship between information acquisition and workplace learning is iterative. The possibilities and constraints presented by digital workplaces add additional dynamics in these connections. I believe that the knowledge on and about these connections is a necessary complement for the technological knowledge in designing future digital workplaces.

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