Managing information and culture in organisations?

Outline of today’s lecture

1. Culture in organisations, and its relevance to information management
2. Some studies
3. Next week’s lab and tute exercises

1. Culture in organisations

In the last lecture, we looked at some writers who argued that information systems can only be understood by taking into account the culture in which they are immersed.

So what is meant by culture here?

‘an organizational culture is the way things are done - especially when no one is looking.’

(Umiker 1999: 22)

From this point of view, it is through cultural practices that power relations express themselves in organisations

1. Organisations as culture(s)

- ‘an active, living phenomenon through which people create the world in which they live’
- ‘subcultures maintain distinctive character and ascribe different meanings to same events’

(Walsham 1993: 47)

1. Other approaches to organisational culture

A lot of management literature addresses organisational culture in a prescriptive — and often one-dimensional — way.

Some writers can only see the official, dominant culture that has been laid down by an organisation’s founders/owners/managers.
1. Can organisational culture be ‘managed’?

For example, Umiker (1999: 23):
- ‘Culture is ubiquitous’
- ‘Organizational culture provides a mechanism for controlling behaviours’
- ‘A positive culture instills values that commit both employees and customers to the organization’s financial goals’

- ‘The wrong culture can sabotage visions, sandbag goals, and undermine values’
- ‘Change can destroy organizations with cultures that do not adapt’

These are views consistent with the ‘hard’ wing of human resources thinking, which makes claims to offer managers ‘an increasingly acceptable and effective influence mechanism to increase efficiency through selectively increasing conformity and predictability in behaviour’ (Collins 1986: 4)

Impression management ...

is another management literature approach that claims that organisational culture can be (micro) managed:
- ‘It is commonly accepted that individuals in organizations use impression management tactics to control the information available to others about themselves in order to control the image presented’ (Kacmar et al. 1996: 35)

1. IM consequences of management decisions

According to Sias et al. (1997), many organisations are sceptical that temporary staff contribute to local innovation:
- ‘If organizations are populated by significantly larger proportions of disposable or contingency workers and information is not sought from these workers … organizational knowledge and innovation may decrease.’

Organisational memory

- ‘memories are a particular type of information’
- ‘managers need to examine the degree to which their organizations support the retrieval of knowledge from the past and the impact of that knowledge on organizational effectiveness’ (Stein 1995: 22, 31)
1. Cross-cultural relations and IM ...

is a central concern of Walsham’s 2001 book *Making a World of Difference*. There (p.220) he quotes Mikko Korpela, a Finnish writer who has worked in Africa:

‘If one is going to practise systems development in a given cultural setting, one needs to know how to behave in that culture; either by being raised within it or by studying the cultural traditions in question.’

2. Some studies

- An Australian government department
- The Good Soldier Svejk
- Culture and management information systems
- Global virtual teams and suchlike

2. Learning your place in the public service (Wright 1994)

‘You had to teach people that they came to work to work and not to do the crossword … Although, of course … once people learned what they could get away with, it made everyone’s job so much easier. And it was all about learning to look busy …’

2. Learning your place in the public service (Wright 1994)

‘That was even said to me: “I don’t care if you’re not doing anything, but just look busy.” Well, obviously it depended on the supervisor. And people learned pretty fast that they should never say that they didn’t have anything to do, because they’d always be given something (laughs).’

2. Sharing information with clients (Wright 1994)

‘Explaining to someone why you’ve cut their pension in half: you can explain it to them in technical terms — you know, “It’s been cut in half because your income’s gone up, bad luck” — but there are other sorts of skills that the department expects people to have which are not technical skills …’

2. Sharing information with clients (Wright 1994)

‘There are some people who are better suited to client contact work than others. The structure of the department and the structure of training doesn’t take this into account; the assumption is that everyone’s sort of an empty vessel and you just put the information in, fill them up — you’ll get a certain uniform product to come out at the end.’
2. Learning from the Good Soldier Svejk

As example of unofficial subcultures, often in the absence of sanctioned spaces for dissent within organisations

Fleming and Sewell (2002: 869) believe that while open conflict in organisations over the effort bargain is less evident of late, many employees have adopted

‘a set of practices that are animated by cynicism, irony and guile …’

2. Installing a management information system

(taken from Martinson & Westwood 1997: 225)

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<tr>
<th>Chinese cultural characteristic</th>
<th>Nature of constraint on MIS use</th>
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<tr>
<td>High context communications</td>
<td>Data and information are perceived</td>
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<td>Decision-making based on</td>
<td>to lose much of their meaning if</td>
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<td>intuition and experience</td>
<td>they are encoded</td>
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<td>People should adapt to the</td>
<td>Reduced need for data collection</td>
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<td>environment rather than attempt</td>
<td>and analysis</td>
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<td>to control it in order to maintain</td>
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<td>harmony</td>
<td>Reduced need for business planning and scenario</td>
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<td>development/analysis</td>
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2. Global virtual teams and suchlike

‘The test group here was the best in the corporation and they were really saving USTech with their customers in the field. So we had all these American managers coming over telling them they were the greatest and how they were the best thing since sliced pan.’

(Irish manager, quoted in O Riain 2000: 187)

2. Global virtual teams and suchlike

‘That’s OK the first time, but after a while the people here started saying among themselves “Quit the bullshit — if you think we’re so great, give us a raise or at least buy us a few pints”’

(Irish manager, quoted in O Riain 2000: 187)

3. Lab exercises for Week 4

• Explore the websites of some large organisations, looking for pointers about their formal and informal information systems
3. Tute exercises for Week 4

- Participate in the discussion around this week’s readings
- Discuss the place of individual knowledge in a number of organisational contexts

3. Starting to think about Assignment 1

You will be required to:
- construct a hierarchical classification schema
- construct an associated thesaurus
- discuss some of the IM issues that arise with the use of your thesaurus within an organisation

3. Hierarchical classification

**Unsorted terms:**
- apple, cantaloupe, fruit, orange, peach, pipped fruit, plum, rockmelon, stoned fruit

3. Identifying relationships

**Fruit**
- pipped fruit
  - apple
  - cantaloupe
  - orange
  - stoned fruit
  - peach
  - plum

3. Thesaurus entry

**APPLE**
- Pipped fruit (BT)
- Cantaloupe (RT)
- Orange (RT)

**FRUIT**
(SN): ‘the ripened ovary or ovaries of a seed-bearing plant’
(http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=fruit)
- Pipped fruit (NT)
- Stoned fruit (NT)

4. Further reading