Chapter VII

The Learning Enactment of Process Knowledge:
An Approach Anchored on Work Practices

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is concerned with issues of learning enactment within a single organization. More particularly, we look into theory and we provide some empirical evidence regarding the exploration and exploitation of organizational knowledge and capabilities through innovative technological intervention. To this end, we explore the link between work practices and knowledge enactment, knowledge enactment as capability development, capability development in the context of organizational learning and the role of technology along this course. Our study of work practices is anchored on the notion of business processes. It is in the intentions of this research to justify the need of contemporary firms to ‘manage’ knowledge in the context of their business processes, and to establish the main drivers shaping the role of technology in the enactment of learning processes within this perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge-based theories of the firm have been systematically concerned with the socio-economic behavior of contemporary organizations in terms of...
strategy, structure, core capabilities and routines. Dominant in these firm features are the notions of knowledge and learning, which are being proposed as prerequisites for sustainable development as much for economic systems as for individual organisations (Lundvall & Jonson, 1994). Moreover, the proliferation of technology imposes new challenges on the knowledge perspective as an explanatory and normative element of firm behavior. The interplay among knowledge, learning and technology encapsulated in the popular term ‘knowledge management’ are largely thought to drive the ‘knowledge-based’ economy.

As ‘management’ of knowledge we consider both an organizational capability and an organizational practice. The intensive knowledge characteristics of organizational capabilities suggest their strong attachment and specificity to the environment where they have been developed. Applications of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can enable and strengthen the utilization of firm specific resources, knowledge in our case, within the scope of existing work practices. These notions, elaborated *inter alia* in the *learning ladder* framework by Andreu and Ciborra (1996), form our theoretical baseline when we study not only the influence of ICT on the development or support of organizational capabilities, but also the institution of ICT as an organizational capability itself.

The research builds upon three major theoretical streams: knowledge (and learning) enactment, organizational capabilities development and technology (ICT)-enabled organizational change (situated). We consider the change brought forward by the adoption of technology, specifically dealing with the management of operational knowledge, as being closely associated with the organization’s business processes. The notion of ‘business process’ has been earmarked as a key element for reshaping firms’ competitive behavior and strategic orientation (Galliers, 1987; Scott Morton, 1991). As thinking ‘strategically’ about the organization of work in terms of business processes has become an increasingly common approach, we have set as the objective of our research to consider the effects of extending this perspective to explain phenomena related to learning enactment within an organization. For the purposes of the research described in this chapter, a business process is a narrative abstraction of work practices and in many cases the reference point for updating organizational and systems’ designs.

Empirical work described in this chapter, still in its initial stages, is based on a longitudinal case study. We monitor a Retail Bank in a state of rapid business development and intense innovative behavior. Knowledge management is being considered for adoption by this organisation as a practice that could facilitate the sustainable development of new products and services, and, beyond that, the transition to a radically different set of operational arrangements. Specifically, the organization under study has recently established an electronic banking division that is responsible for the creation of new electronic banking services and their
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