Supporting Empathetic Boundary Spanning in Participatory Workshops with Scenarios and Personas

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the employment of design methods in combination with SimLab™ process simulation method in the context of developing IT-based support and processes for the fuzzy-front end innovation in a real-world organizational setting. The authors bring together theories and concepts from the fields of design studies and knowledge management across boundaries. They use these theories, rooted in the practice-based perspective, as analytical lenses in the case study. Acting at the interface of different knowledge domains, the authors look into the role of empathy-laden boundary objects as potential enablers of boundary spanning. The authors present empirically grounded findings from an ongoing research project with an emphasis on the methods and techniques employed. Their empirical data consists of recorded and transcribed group discussions from a participatory workshop, and individual thematic interviews have been used as raw material for constructing the process map, personas and scenarios (the boundary objects). The data was analyzed applying qualitative content analysis with an interpretative approach. Their findings are explored more closely in the article.

Keywords: Boundary Objects, Boundary Spanning, Business Process Development, Co-Creation, Co-Design, Collaboration, Empathy, Fuzzy-Front End of Innovation, Personas, Scenario-Based Design

1. INTRODUCTION

The problems in present-day organizational development are growing increasingly complex. Today organizations are faced with challenges in interaction between its often globally distributed employees, in planning processes and practices for carrying out work tasks as well as in choosing technologies to facilitate the interaction and to enable performing the day-to-day work that increasingly relies on collaboration. The multifacetedness of the problems calls for a
development approach that draws from diverse methodological sources. These problems pose a challenge for action researchers involved in developing the organizations that need to address various interrelated organizational matters. At the heart of such development approaches is the involvement of company employees in the development of the work processes and related IT systems. The benefits of such participatory techniques lie in the inclusion of relevant experience and knowledge of the work context into the planning sessions. The central assumption behind such methods is that typically it is the employees that have the deepest knowledge on their work and thus they should be taking part in the improvement activities. Typically these co-creation processes culminate in workshops during which the participants, aided by facilitators, participate in discussing identified problems and creating solutions. Multiple methods need to be employed in order for the collaborative development efforts to reach new knowledge that extends over different knowledge domains.

This paper describes knowledge co-creation method development in a research case that centers around improving an organization’s innovation process based around an IT system. The development process is a collaborative attempt between employees of the organization and a multidisciplinary team of researchers. The focus of this analysis is a development workshop that was the first in a series of five workshops that were held over a two-year period. The participatory workshop was a culmination of a five-month knowledge gathering inquiry into the company’s front-end innovation process. It involved several group and individual interviews as well as a survey. This knowledge was brought together in the workshop, which utilized a process simulation method called SimLab™ and scenario and persona techniques derived from design methodology. The purpose of the workshop was to create a shared understanding between participants of the central challenges of the innovation process at that time. For us researchers the aims of this study are two-fold. On one hand we are involved in a collaborative effort to develop the organization’s innovation activities, and on the other hand, we are studying and developing the methods that we use to carry out the developmental research activity.

The focus of the method development was on those users that were unable to participate in the workshops due to issues of geographical distance. This is a problem especially in organizations whose processes span several continents and where flying participants for single workshops is not economically, ecologically or practically sound. Still, the points-of-view of the remote participants are important when developing processes or systems that cover the whole organization. How to include the experiences and knowledge of these employees? In this paper we present a case study in which we utilized personas and scenarios in combination with a process map for introducing the experiences of employees that were not present in the workshop. Although we do not suppose that this method could replace actual presence, we believe that scenarios and personas can assist in creating empathic understanding between employees and assist in spanning geographical, cultural and professional boundaries. We think that empathy and knowledge transformation oriented approaches in combination are key components when reaching for new knowledge about how the work around innovation in the organization should be organized in the future. The process simulation and scenarios operate on two levels: 1) as methods of inquiry into organizational culture, people’s practices and business processes and, 2) as techniques of bringing people together for the purpose of creating a shared understanding and new knowledge.

The paper is theoretically positioned at the intersection between design theory and the management of knowledge across boundaries. Our view on managing knowledge across boundaries is rooted in the practice-based perspective on knowledge management in organizations (e.g., Carlile, 2002; Orlikowski, 2002; Brown & Duguid, 2001). Thus, in this study we focus on the everyday practices taking place in the case organization. In the design literature there is at least a fifteen years’ long tradition