Workarounds and Security

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BACKGROUND

The project uses an actor network (ANT) framework. The value of this approach in relation to the adoption of technology is well established (Callon, 1987; Latour, 1996; Star, 1991; Law, 2000). ANT presents an alternative to the concept that innovations spread by diffusion. The adoption of innovation is seen rather as complex and unpredictable, laborious and political.

Brey (1997) summarising common features of the social constructivist approach and the ANT approach describes technological change as a number of technological disagreements or difficulties that involve different human and non human actors, including the technology itself and natural forces, who engage in strategies to shape technology use to their own plan.

ANT is interested in description, rather than judgments about the proper purpose of artifacts or about how well or badly an artifact may be operated (Brey, 1997). The benefit of avoiding evaluation in research is that the situation may be studied without projecting the direction of changes (Suchman, 1994). The researcher’s task is to describe what is and how it came about so that the actors can make choices about appropriate future directions.

Workarounds

Workaround is an informal term, which is grouped with concepts like boundary crossing, substitution, circumvention, detour, improvisation, fixes or kludges. Workaround may have a deliberately political aspect, such as resistance (Pollock, 2001), or intentional subversion such as using a computer in ways for which it was not designed or avoiding a computer’s use (Glasser, 1986).

Workaround has a user focus, often it represents the view of those who are not authorised to change the system. Frequently the people doing these fixes get the technology to work despite their limited knowledge of computers. However, to identify a workaround involves adopting a position of knowledge of a real or authoritative purpose that is dissonant with the local application. In this way an action may be perceived as a workaround by some people but not by others.

The study is conducted in the anthropological fieldwork genre of participant observer, based on that used by Latour (Austrin & Farnsworth, 2002), formal and informal interviews, workplace observation and conversations with staff and IT technicians were drawn over a two year period.

This study takes place on a small island in far North Queensland, Australia, 180 kilometers from the local business centre and 1000 kilometers for the regional business center. The population is approximately 150 and all but one of the permanent residents are indigenous. Services available on the island comprise a general store, a primary school and a medical aid post. There is a church and the council which provides municipal services. The council administration office is the setting of the project.

A short exchange is used to launch my analysis.

THE STORY

Jane says: “Excuse me Anna, before you go could you log me into your computer, I want to look at the payroll...wait a moment, your Windows screen save will lock me out anyway...no, I don’t want to know your network password, or your screen saver password.”

Anna says: “Well, you could ask Susan to log you in, or I could disable the screen saver like this, and you just put it back on when you are finished.”

ANALYSIS

“What can we learn from this short exchange?” Jane, the visiting consultant, asks Anna, the senior clerk, to log her in, using Anna’s user name and password. Then Anna accepts Jane’s right of access is shown in her willingness to do it, she actually offers three alternatives. Furthermore, it is not a subversive request, she suggests Jane could also ask Susan, the council clerk to do it.

It shows the office social network being reinforced by Jane’s seeking help, and acknowledging Anna’s ownership of the computer.

Also evident is the fact that the responsibility for making even small changes to the set-up has been placed outside the workplace, with the remote technician. The staff neither attempts to do it themselves, nor call the technician to be talked through the process.