Chapter III
E–Work and Labor Processes Transformation

Barbara Imperatori
Catholic University, Milan, Italy

Marco De Marco
Catholic University, Milan, Italy

ABSTRACT

The evolution of the managerial discourse is the result of fashion lifecycles that sometimes have no rational or technical foundations and find no real application within the firms. Taking our cue from the new-institutional perspective, the chapter explores the real labor transformation processes related to the introduction of e-work projects, considering their outputs, outcomes and impacts. The study is based on a multiple-case analysis and underscores the relevance and impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on both “rational” firm’s productivity and “normative” employees’ psychological contract, also considering different institutional environments. Some critical issues and guidelines inherent the design and implementation of technology-based work systems are discussed, such as the dual perspective approach (the organizational and the employer viewpoint) during the needs-analysis and goal-setting phases; the relevance of coherent organizational culture and human resource practices; the removal of organizational structural constraints; the management of cognitive resistance; and the importance of the evaluation and monitoring phases.
INTRODUCTION

Many economic business analyses confirm the strategic relevance of both internal resources and organizational flexibility: in the global scenario, modern firms can remain competitive if these are able to continually develop distinctive competencies (Grant, 1991, Lepak, Takeuchi & Snell, 2003, Prahalad & Hamel, 1990), maintaining their agility and efficiency (Sambamurthy, Bharadwaj & Grover, 2003). According to this double imperative, firms invest in their human capital to attract new talents and to generate new knowledge and skills (Taylor & LaBarre, 2006) and yet are also on a continual search for organizational solutions capable of responding to changes that are unpredictable. These dynamics have a substantial impact on the organizational structures and operating systems that influence the working practice and relationships within the firms (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993).

The new technological opportunities seem to bridge the two diverse outlooks of flexibility and knowledge development, yet have a huge impact on the labor processes (Empirica, 2003; Valenduc & Vendramin, 2001).

Is ‘e-work’ just a managerial fashion or a real practice? Do firms invest in technology to support new ways of working to create real business opportunities or to enhance their social legitimation among the institutional environment?

BACKGROUND AND MAIN FOCUS

In recent years, the academic and managerial literature (the “discourse”) on e-work has developed by also taking into account the impact of the technology on work flexibility (Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau, 1994).

Some scholars suggest that the evolution of the managerial discourse—what is said and written about managerial issues - is the result of fashion lifecycles that sometimes have no rational economic foundations (Abrahamson, 1996) and which do not always find valid application within the firms (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999).

According to the new-institutional theory, institutional pressures lead to convergence in an organization’s structural features through a process of isomorphism. Indeed, the isomorphism of organizations that share a common context helps to legitimize the actual organizational methods, thereby increasing the likelihood of survival (Hinings & Greenwood, 1988; Powell & DiMaggio 1991).

These institutional pressures include the legal aspects that characterize the socio-economic context, but also, and more generally, ideas, values, and beliefs that are exogenous to the organization. Isomorphic processes are social processes that could be the result of the dissemination of fashion “waves”, which induce organizations to adopt (sometimes only formally) specific practices to enhance their legitimation among customers and stakeholders.

Management fashion-setters propagate fashions, by which we mean transitory collective beliefs that certain management techniques are at the forefront of management progress. These fashion-setters—consulting firms, management gurus, mass-media business publications—do not simply leverage fashions onto gullible managers. Indeed, to sustain their images as fashion-setters, they must lead the race to anticipate the emergent collective preferences of managers for new management techniques; develop rhetoric that describe these techniques as the vanguard of management progress; and disseminate these rhetoric back to managers and organizational stakeholders ahead of other fashion-setters (Abrahamson, 1997, Barley & Kunda, 1992; Guillen, 1994).

In recent years, the development of managerial literature on the technology mediated employee-organization relationship has mainly focused on the technology impact on work flexibility (Brodt & Venburg, 2007). ICT working solutions are undoubtedly a managerial fashion.