Chapter XVIII
Creativity and Control in IT Professionals’ Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents and discusses two factors – creativity and control – which correspond to every organizational reality. IT specialists’ professional communities are used as an example because of characteristic relationships between their members and their attitude to work. The chapter describes how combination of these two phenomena may build or destroy organizations. There is also an explanation of specific relations between IT professionals and beginning of further discussion based on these relationships, as well as analysis of consequences of inappropriate management practices. Creativity and control are presented as features of every common company with their special roles in organization. Also, main characteristics of well-organized practical communities are shown.

INTRODUCTION

The reason why IT specialists were chosen as the best example of the main topic of this article seems quite obvious. Every IT specialist – regardless of certain specialization – should present at least a bit of creativity in his work. IT specializations are based on scientific knowledge developed during processes of creating and innovating. Interviewees mentioned that their work may be compared to some kind of artistic activity with regard to a need of creating skills, open minded state and improvisation. However, IT professionals are ascribed in a certain reality – different organizations operating in various branches. They are embedded in complicated
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organizational networks which they developed themselves (Latour, 1987). The need of control is one of the network’s features. Especially in bigger, more complex organizations this demand is truly justified. Combination of these two factors would be the topic of this paper.

This chapter consists of few connected parts. The first one considers methodological notes and theoretical background (IT professionals’ communities, creativity and control). Then, selected field material is presented, where IT professionals are the main actors of the stories. After empirical part discussion follows.

**METHODOLOGY**

Data presented in this paper are the result of an ethnographic project conducted in Poland in 2002-2004. There were two levels of gathering field material. The first one was concentrated on exploration of a medium company producing business software “to the client’s needs” and took about half a year. The second stage was based on interviews with IT specialists working in several organizations. The research on this level embraced workers from bigger and smaller software companies, international corporations and IT departments in organizations from various branches.

The first step lasted about half a year and considered deep ethnographic inquiry of organizational reality, the second one was a continuation of plots revealed in the first part. The research method was based on open-ended, non-structured interviews, mainly ethnographic (unstructured and unstandardized) which allowed interlocutors to express thoughts freely. Other methods were 10 hours of non-participant observations on the first level and shadowing (2 working weekdays) on the second. Triangulation of data and methods was used to increase the richness of data, as well as to add other perspectives to the study (Konecki, 2000). Data triangulation was based on using data from different organizations (on the second level). Methodological triangulation was based on using several methods (interviews, observations, shadowing) for investigating one single issue.

All conversations were conducted in a form as open as possible, and often informally (during observations or shadowing). Interlocutors took up topics themselves, without or with only few general directions from the researcher. Thus, the gathered material reflects the topics and notions particularly important for workers, and is not meant to fit into any prior theoretical framework. All field material was analyzed and interpreted through categorizations, close to grounded theory manner. As a result, the categories, among which control and creativeness at work, emerged.

In order to keep being open to the field, stay within the “anthropological frame of mind” and to follow the social structures as perceived by the informants, researcher used both of the two typical methods of interviewees selection: “contact person” method helped in finding new interlocutors and in general reconnaissance of the organization, while “snowball” method was used to extend circles of interlocutors and deepen the topics.

The studied interviewees come from 13 companies, from various departments and represent many IT specializations (mostly programmers, but also designers, administrators, IT consultants and others). All, however, identified themselves with software engineering profession. In total, 34 interviews were conducted (18 at the first stage and 14 at the second). The research material includes over 400 pages of transcriptions and over 50 pages of field notes.

The research problem of the study concerned the systemization of organizational roles played by IT professionals in their job and the analysis of the social IT professionals’ reality. On the basis of the research results a model of the social construction of the IT profession was presented.
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