Chapter VI

Professional Dimension of IT Specialists’ Social Role

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ABSTRACT

This chapter gives the opportunity to describe and analyze how IT specialists construct their professional reality and how they perform their roles. Nowadays companies (or top management) influence its employees in multiple aspects. Thus, professional relations should be investigated in the terms of mutual interactions within the organization, which is the main topic of the chapter. Often, top management tries to conclusively define (consciously or unconsciously) what the organization is. It means that workers of lower levels in such companies are manipulated by their higher-level colleagues. Sometimes this influence, albeit both hierarchical and controlling, leaves some space for the development of more equal bonds. In other organizations, manipulation is not a part of the standard work climate. The relations between the employees are, in such organizations, based on rituals and direct communication. The most important detail of this construction is to take care of every interaction between all organization’s actors. In this chapter, I intend to describe work relations and other aspects of everyday work life of IT professionals. Empirical material is derived from the field research conducted during 2002-2004 in two stages with different intensity of data gathering. The first stage of the research concerned a software company creating customized business software “to meet the requirements of clients.” The second stage was based on interviews with IT professionals from different organizations including software companies, international corporations, and also IT departments within companies operating in different business branches. Complete analysis of gathered material is presented in a doctoral thesis (Postuła, 2007). Therefore, in case of some discontinuity of considerations in this chapter I would refer to the full text.
SOCIAL ROLE OF IT PROFESSIONALS

Modern humans are involved in organizations qua roles, rather than qua persons (Kallinikos, 2003, p. 595).

In classic sociological concept, IT professionals play different social roles (Goffman, 1959/1990). Social actors play roles connected to specific everyday activity and in reference to the audience. IT professionals take their roles in project teams or other groups (like information technology departments). By the term “social role,” the author means:

the pre-established pattern of action, which is unfolded during a performance (playing the role) […] Defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one or more parts and that each of these parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audience or to an audience of the same persons. (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 27)

There are two social groups involved in playing social roles. In this case, it would be IT specialists who take roles and play them and observers who watch IT specialists’ performance and evaluate it (Goffman, 1959/1990). My aim is to show how Polish IT professionals play their roles in different organizations: if they are happy with these roles, how they feel about their professional creations, and what are the implications of constructing roles for management processes.

IT professionals act according to scripts, which means procedures and regulations existing in his or her organization as well as cultural norms and values.

Taking up a job imposes duties, liability (responsibility), and obligations, which (who) is related with professional role, which (who) catches on (Bowie & Duska, 1990, cited in Kostera, 1996, p. 124).

Expectations of the actor’s performance could be expressed in two ways: in the written form and as the unwritten rule accepted by a culture (Kostera, 1996). Each society and organization has its own principles and procedures concerning detail activities and workers’ behavior. They are different on low level of generality. On the higher level, these rules are much more similar between societies (i.e., attitude of young people toward older).

Formal organizations emphasize written rules. It facilitates executing regulations, as well as introduces order. Thus, each worker knows all the scripts of a role, which he or she is taking at the moment (each person can play different roles simultaneously), and can behave according to observers’ expectations. A set of rules could also be an instrument for motivating employees as well as an effective way of creating a good atmosphere at work (i.e., culture of efficiency). However, under one condition, the roles of one actor and his or her position in the organization cannot be mutually exclusive. In other case, it can evoke social conflicts.

Many authors (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/1983; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Kostera, 1996 and others) stand that:

social roles are cultural phenomena, network of interpersonal communication, and structuration of meanings. They are also a link in a process of constructing sense, element of social process of culture. (Kostera, 1996, p. 126)

IT professionals’ roles are being defined repeatedly in the process of constructing organizational and social reality. Everyday actions allow new interpretations of principles, behavior, and workplace processes. Constructing relations, the actors build indissoluble network of meanings, which defines them as a professional group attributed with specific features. Each role consists of three elements. Kostera (1996) enumerates dimensions of manager’s social role, which could be transmit-