Chapter VII

E-communication of Interdepartmental Knowledge: An Action Research Study of Process Improvement Groups

Ned Kock  
Temple University, USA

Robert J. McQueen  
University of Waikato, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a review of the organizational learning literature that points to process improvement (PI) groups as an appropriate tool for organizational knowledge communication. Based on this review, the impact of support provided by a class of e-communication systems, email conferencing (EC), on knowledge dissemination in organizations is examined in the context of PI groups. Data was collected through an action research project, where the researcher facilitated seven PI groups in two organizations with the support of an EC system implemented with Novell Groupwise, and using a group methodology for PI called MetaProi. The study suggests that, overall, EC support seems to have a positive impact on knowledge dissemination in organizations when used in combination with a group methodology for PI. EC support effects on PI groups can be summarized as: (a) a
reduction of the influence of distance and other physical obstacles to the participation of members from different departments in PI groups, and of the disruption that group discussions are likely to cause for individual group members, particularly when these members are from different departments; (b) a reduction of interdepartmental conflict obstacles to the formation of PI groups; and (c) an increase or decrease in individual learning in PI groups, depending on the complexity of the issues being discussed and the clarity of electronic contributions by members. Organizational implications of these research findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations generate and deliver goods, information, or services (or a mix of these) to fulfill the needs of their customers. This is accomplished by means of business processes (often referred to simply as “processes”). Although there is some controversy over what a “process” is (Harrison, 1995), the most generally accepted definition is that of a sequence of interrelated activities carried out by organizational functions (performed by staff) with the use of tools (Davenport & Short, 1990; Harrington, 1991; Ould, 1995). Some organizational processes may be undertaken exclusively within one organizational unit (hereinafter referred to as departments), although more frequently, the participation of two or more departments in the process is required. Therefore, it is desirable that process improvement (PI) efforts targeted at processes with broad organizational importance be performed by groups comprised of staff from several departments.

The term “process improvement” has been widely used since the early 1990s, particularly due to the business process re-engineering movement (Hammer, 1990; Hammer and Stanton, 1997), to describe voluntary and purposeful organizational efforts aimed at redesigning business processes. The goal of these efforts is usually an increase in process efficiency or in the satisfaction of customers (internal or external to the organization) who use or consume process outputs. However, the idea of process-focused improvement has been long since propounded and practiced (Earl, 1994), notably in Japan since after World War II and in the US since the early 1980s, with the total quality management movement (De Cock and Hipkin, 1997; Juran, 1989; Walton, 1989).

Most PI efforts seem to share some characteristics, whether their goal is small or large-scale change. One of these is that PI is usually carried out by groups that are typically small, usually having from three to twenty members (Kock and McQueen, 1995, 1997). Two typical instances of PI groups that illustrate these common characteristics are quality circles, widely used in total quality management movement in Japan (Hutchins, 1985; Robson, 1988), and business process re-engineering groups (Hammer and Stanton, 1995).
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