ABSTRACT

The article analyzes sociotechnical action starting from the implementation of an intranet-based knowledge management system in a 100-staff British firm. Categories of “interpretative flexibility” and “inscription” are reviewed and used in this account. The objective is to show how interpretations performed by different actors can rise misunderstanding, failure, and innovation in processes of negotiation concerning a specific technology. The shaping role of rhetoric and public discourse about new technology is argued to be performative in framing expectations and courses of action in technology implementation and appropriation. Discursive practices are analyzed as constituting ambiguity and multiplicity of a knowledge management system. The article argues that the mutual constitution of the social and the technical emerges as interaction of socio-material and linguistic issues situated in specific organizational contexts.

Keywords: ethnographic study; intranet adoption; knowledge management; rhetoric; socio-technical program

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the strategies and dynamics enacted by multiple actors in building up an intranet-based knowledge management system (KMS) in a British company. By underlining constraints and problems actors experienced in such a process, the call for a sociotechnical approach based on concepts like interpretative flexibility (Bijker, 1995) and inscription (Akrich, 1992) will be supported.

To deconstruct the path of implementation and early appropriation of the KMS, the category of misunderstanding will be used. Misunderstanding is not only about understanding something wrongly, but also about disagreeing or having an argument. In this article such a twofold concept emphasizes the crucial role of communication and discourse in shaping materialities of what is defined as “new technology.” At the same time, the mutual constitution of the technical and the social in sociotechnical action manifests itself as linguistic and material device. The result of such a mutual constitution does not obey to any pre-planned aim, as many different worlds can be enacted through language (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). These worlds, some-
times contradictory to each other or in competition, are embedded and reflected in the current use and configuration of the technological system analyzed.

The concept of misunderstanding also emerges from the fieldwork. In fact, multiple misunderstandings characterized all the stages of construction of the enquired intranet system. The actors often labelled the results of their multiple negotiations as originating from “misunderstandings.” Ambiguity and different interpretations of the system fostered negotiations and conflicts among the actors: the company managers as official policy makers of the process, the clients as partners (at first) and then opponents to the use of an intranet by company consultants working at their sites, the software vendor that designed the system, the joint project team through which the whole project was managed, the system administrator, the office-based staff, and the company consultants. All these actors at their different levels (individuals, workgroups, other organizations) contributed to shape the construction of what was called KMS or, with the official name, “the Compass.”

The article is structured as follows. Literature and public discourses about benefits and characteristics of intranet as technology dedicated to corporate and business contexts will be presented in light of the concept of interpretative flexibility (Bijker, 1995). After summarizing the case study in question, an account of negotiations and misunderstandings centered on the KMS will be provided. The concept of knowledge management as supported or embedded in the intranet system enquired will be analyzed. Conclusive remarks concerning sociotechnical action and the mutual constitution of the technical and the social will be drawn.

**RHETORIC, PRACTICE, AND INTERPRETATIVE FLEXIBILITY**

A central issue in this article is how the rhetoric of “the Intranet” as reliable technology easy to implement is translated into practice and shaped by organizational contexts. Whereas public and popular discourses frame intranet as a coherent and unique technological array (“the Intranet”), empirical research about this technology and the KMS-Compass case study show how intranet is multiple, ambiguous, and how it emerges from misunderstandings.

The way to the sociotechnical drawn in this article points to organizational settings as contexts of use of an intranet. It follows that the company history, the attitude towards innovation, and the construction of an organizational identity impact on acceptance, performance, and use of an intranet. Rather than emphasizing how an intranet changed the organization, therefore, the stage at which this technology was analyzed in the case study calls for a closer analysis of how actors try to make sense of a system, fitting it in the current texture of taken-for-granted practices. This “operation” is bound with multiple constraints which might explain lack of performance and unexpected failures of some technologies and of the KMS-Compass itself.

A large amount of technical- and managerial-oriented literature tends to emphasize effectiveness and innovation carried by intranet technology as a strategic component of information management (Curry & Stancich, 2000), support to decision-making processes (Sridhar, 1998), and knowledge management, with particular emphasis on knowledge sharing and distributed environments (Stoddart, 2001; Lai & Mahapatra, 1998). At the same time, this
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