Chapter 6
Why Do We Need to Share Information?
Analysis of Collaborative Task Management Meetings

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ABSTRACT

In order to study collaborative information behaviour (e.g. information search, creation, and sharing) in the work environment, it is important that we take into consideration its embedded nature in collaborative work, however not many studies have actually taken this into consideration. In conducting fieldwork, we studied group task management in the work of IT product hardware designers. The study shows how understanding the details of information activities embedded in task management allowed us to generate some ideas for transforming task management into a more collaborative activity, and for reembedding task management more thoroughly into their work practices together with the practitioners. The paper discusses how taking an ethnomethodological approach can be fruitful for researchers who want to gain a close understanding of actual collaborative information activities and their embedded nature in work, and how understandings of this kind can be important for developing ideas for transforming practice, both with or without the introduction of technology.

INTRODUCTION

When management introduces new policies for their personnel to carry out an activity where information sharing is involved, it is often assumed that it is a good thing to do so. However, members of personnel often do not know how they can actually make use of such occasions and some feel that will involve extra work for them. The policy of information sharing or visualisation itself may be treated as a goal until people come to realise
We conducted a fieldwork study of IT product designers of a large company in Japan. Our focus was mainly on a particular group; following members as they attended various meetings, worked with computers, and did other tasks. This chapter focuses on one kind of regular meeting introduced by the management for enhancing collaboration. They call this weekly task management meeting ‘Tanaoroshi-kai’, which literally means ‘stock taking meeting’. In this meeting, the team members were expected to share with each other what tasks they were planning to do. The management provided a task schedule format to be used for task management and the rest was up to the members regarding how they carried out task management in the meeting.

What we found was that the newly introduced meeting was not yet fully embedded in the team members’ daily work. The meeting was not yet ingrained in the ways of organising their work and thus, they were treating it as an extra task on top of what they already had to do. The meeting itself was not yet part of the rhythm of how their work was organised (Reddy & Dourish, 2002). Based on a detailed analysis of the meeting, we provided some ideas for redesigning activities related to the meeting, and implemented these ideas with the members.

This chapter first describes how a group of IT product designers actually try to carry out information sharing activities through the meeting. Through ethnomethodological analysis of ethnographic data including actual interactions, it will be demonstrated how members experience difficulties in getting engaged in the activity and in achieving what is supposed to be achieved. In other words, it will be shown how the new meeting was not actually embedded in their work (i.e., the members were making as little effort as possible for the new meeting as it meant ‘extra work’ to them). Further, sharing information in the meeting was carried out on an individual basis (between a member and the group leader), so it appeared to the members that this was an activity solely for the
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