

Brokering Organizational Learning

Working abstract

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Introduction

One of the most important ways which organizational learning occurs is through implementation of technology. Implementing new technologies forces users to adapt their work processes and routines (Daghfous, 2004; Edmondson et al., 2001; Leonard-Barton, 1988; Tyre & von Hippel, 1997). The adaptation process that happens during and after technology implementation is significant because it creates alignment between the technology and the environment it is being introduced into (Iansiti, 1995). Alignment between the designers and users of technology is therefore important to find the optimal fit and provide the best results for the organization (Leonard-Barton, 1988; Tyre & Orlikowski, 1994). At the same time, new, analytical technologies increasingly impact work processes and decision-making (Anthony, 2021; Kellogg et al., 2020), and the tight integration between organization processes and technology make alignment even more important.

It is important that teams coordinate efforts and knowledge across organizational functions to achieve organizational learning and innovation (Marrone, 2010). Innovation such as new technology development requires efforts to create a shared understanding of different perspectives (Dougherty, 1992). Product development teams need information, resources and support from other parts of the organization as they deliver products and services (Ancona & Caldwell, 1988). Different practices across units make coordination more difficult and it is harder to establish shared, standardized systems (DeSanctis & Jackson, 1994). Standardized forms and methods make it easier to solve issues across boundaries as they provide a shared format (Carlile, 2002). If there are no shared or standardized routines, that makes it harder to cross boundaries.

While teams need to engage in boundary spanning activities, they also have to balance their boundary spanning role with maintaining productive internal dynamics (Marrone, 2010). As opposed to boundary spanners who interface between their unit and the environment around it (Haas, 2015), knowledge brokers are an external party facilitating the creation, sharing, and user of knowledge between two groups (Meyer, 2010; Waardenburg et al., 2022). According to Wenger (1999), knowledge brokering “involves processes of translation, coordination, and alignment between perspectives”. These are useful qualities in technology implementation.

Previous studies have looked into the role of IT professionals as boundary spanners (Pawlowski & Robey, 2004) and technical specialists as knowledge brokers (Barley, 1996; Waardenburg et al., 2022). The purpose of this paper is to explore how knowledge brokers can support organizational learning in large scale organizations. We look closer at a unit designed to broker between IT developers and users of the technology.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper looks at a case study of an internal contact center in a Norwegian public service organization where the contact center team function as a knowledge broker between IT developers and users within the organization. Data is collected through interviews, observations, and internal documents.

Findings

We found that the contact center team can serve as a knowledge broker by translating and filtering knowledge between different groups of developers and users within the organization. By retaining an overview of the technologies and routines in the organization, the team facilitates the transfer of knowledge to the right place at the right time. This contributes to the development of the technical systems and adaption of work routines.

Research limitations/implications

In large, complex organizations additional links can be beneficial to organizational learning. The use of knowledge brokers does not have to be the sole provider of knowledge transfer but ensures continuous and wide connections which can make the learning process more efficient and effective.

Practical implications

Knowledge brokers can be a tool to get specialized units to work together. It is an alternative way of thinking about organizational design compared to known theories, such as lean and agile, which may contribute to organizational learning.

Originality/value

This paper is a contribution to how we think about organizational learning in large scale organizations, considering size and complexity and how that impacts organizational learning processes.

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