

Enabling cooperative behaviour through ICT in organisations

This paper addresses a new way of making sense of behaviour in organisations mediated by information and communication technology (ICT). By studying micro-level interactional processes and relating this to macro-level patterns of interaction, mutually influencing each other, I suggest the importance addressing these issues in projects with the intention of changing behaviour through the employment of ICT.

The empirical case studies are from the Norwegian hospital sector, where the electronic patient records (EPR) is employed in organisational change projects. The first case is a project of moving from oral face-to-face nursing hand-over to hand-over employing EPR for asynchronous communication. The second case is a project of introducing a module of EPR for nurses to document plans, actions and evaluations in their practical work. Both cases have been followed over a period of 10 months. During this time 42 semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders have been carried out. In addition participant observation of everyday practice and different meetings has been carried out comprising approximately 300 hours.

To conceptualize how one actor is interconnected with other actors in the complex social system of organisations, the theory of symbolic interaction and in particular the thoughts of Mead on the fundament of human interaction, is employed [1,2,3]. Behaviour of the individual is constructed taking into account other actors in a continuous and dynamic process. Using ICT, I argue that actors taken into account are distributed in the time and space dimensions. Hence, the interactional processes that are so strong in face-to-face interaction are not absent when it comes to interaction through ICT. This perspective needs empirical investigation, it is argued. From the cases, it is shown that when EPR is employed for nursing hand-over, actors reflect more on the needs of the next nurse reading it than before, therefore including more information, and spending more time documenting. Further, even if these micro-level interactional processes are characterized of local situatedness and unpredictability [4], patterns of interaction emerge that are orderly and random at the same time [5,6].

In ICT change projects behaviour is usually seen through lenses of system theory, controlled through system design, e.g. syntax or sequences for processing information. Here, the action of the individual is connected to other individuals from the perspective of designers and planners of the system. In contrast, in this paper it is argued that it should be realised that the action of the individual is not possible to control, nor is it desirable to do so. The interconnections of actors in complex systems is not something that designers or managers prescribe from the outside, but something that "exists" in the minds of the individual actors continually aligning their actions and interactions, as argued above. This cooperative behaviour is not locked to some definite system, but remains adaptive for further modifications in connection with other agents in the social system. Accordingly, change is seen as being enabled, as through the lenses of complexity theory [7,8,9].

Through the case studies I discuss and show how individual and cooperative behaviour can be understood based on the premise of 'taking others into account' and how the employment of ICT leads to changing patterns of interaction on an overall level working back on the micro level interaction. Further, I show how the failure of addressing these issues jeopardized the success of the projects.

References

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