Document & Knowledge Reincarnation in a Bumblebee Organization

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Program Abstract

What happens when organizational knowledge is lost? Preliminary findings from an empirical study of the social use of documents for knowledge communication indicate that there are certain factors that allow the regeneration of some kinds of knowledge. These factors include organizational values, task purpose, experiential learning, and understanding functional dynamics.

Extended Abstract

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These are some of the findings from a study of knowledge communication practices that focused on the functional role documents play. A union for graduate student employees was selected as the research site because it has extremely high turnover, it has a strong emphasis on document creation and archiving, and the organization always seems on the brink of falling apart as knowledge of core skills and organizational memory are constantly being lost. Yet it manages to be extremely successful, not only in performing its core functions, but also in using the same strategies in response to the same issues with the same successful outcomes despite a 10 year gap in knowledge. We might call it a "bumble-bee organization": it seems like it should not be able to fly, yet it flies extremely well.[1]

The study involves participant observation, interviews, and document analysis as the three major forms of data collection. While the method is strongly inspired by ethnography and the multi-method approach it takes to data collection (Duneier 1999), the analysis technique is more inspired by design methods like design ethnography and

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[1] Thanks to Dr. Michael B. Twidale for this name.

rapid ethnography (Millen 2000). The purpose of the analysis is to understand *how* documents are used to communicate knowledge, especially when they are used socially.

To examine how lost knowledge is reincarnated, this poster focuses on documents that were recreated when there has been a discontinuity in organizational knowledge. Preliminary results indicate that there are a number of different ways in which knowledge is reincarnated in these documents.

One case is documents created to facilitate particular tasks, for example phone scripts for phonebanking. Designing these scripts requires striking a sophisticated balance between conveying information and keeping the phone contact quick and simple. This skill seems to be lost every three years in the lull between bargaining cycles, despite the fact that old scripts are kept in the union's archive. Instead, they are developed anew from people's experience phonebanking, and from the consistency of the goals: because a few members remember the goals of phonebanking, the rest of the activity can be re-created.

Another case is documents created for solidarity work. Certain kinds of solidarity activities consistently prove controversial, and are revisited by the Executive Committee (EC) about once a year. Yet though the EC has almost entirely different people each year, the discussions are surprisingly consistent, because they result out of a fundamental conflict in the guiding values of the organization. In fact, these discussions are one of the most important ways in which the organization's values are transmitted and remain consistent in spirit.

These cases are examples. They and others are explored more fully in the poster itself.

Works Cited

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Millen, D. R. (2000). Rapid ethnography: Time deepening strategies for hci field research. In Proceedings of the Designing Interactive Systems 2000 Conference. New York, NY, USA: ACM.