The Flow of Information in Organizational Communication and Some Contemporary Issues

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Abstract— One of the major challenges in organizational communication is how to get information to all parts of an organization and also how to receive information from all parts of an organization. This process is concerned with the flow of information which is complex. This study states that efficiency may be dependent on information flow, but it is not the only consideration. Organizations rely on innovation and must be able to generate information from their members. In addition, the flow of information may help determine organizational climate and morale, which in turn impacts on flow of information

Index Terms— Communication Networks, Flow of Information, Innovation, Organizational Commitment, Information Technology, Organizational Climate, Organizational Efficiency.

1 INTRODUCTION

The flow of information is a dynamic process in which messages are created, displayed, and interpreted. The flow of information impacts on organizational efficiency, climate, adaptation, and innovation. This study examines some contemporary concerns about information flow including the impact of emergent social structures, technology, and determining organizational boundaries.

2 IMPACT OF EMERGENT SOCIAL STRUCTURES

What is the impact of communication networks in the organization? Monge and Miller (1983) examined the relationship between involvement in communication networks and organizational commitment. They concluded that for those who are not involved in their job, the communication network involvement has a strong effect on organizational commitment. The workers may be getting what they seek from the organization through the social interaction involved in their jobs.

How do emergent social structures shape organizational processes? Albrecht and Hall (1991) examined network communication patterns based on innovation in three organization subunits. They found elite groups characterized by dense linkages and high volumes of communication exchange. The innovation networks are dominated by elite groups rather than key individuals. Each network is anchored by a cluster of organizational members. These members receive considerable personal support by "outsiders," which in turn allows them to dominate interaction and manage uncertainty in the organization. Organization members tended to identify "idea persons" on the basis of their communication skills. Albrecht and Hall (1991) conclude that "the interpersonal behavior of elites, as well as their innovative behavior, thus creates an intriguing stronghold for sustained power and influence in the organization" (p. 557). In additional studies, Albrect and Hall (1991) examined the role of personal relationships in organizational innovation. They argue that communication about new ideas in organizations is greatest when there are strong personal ties. Multiplex relationships involving different types of work and social communication plays a central role in offering support and "face-saving" considerations. These researchers suggest that power differences, social distance, and a climate that highlights the personal risk of innovation influence the decision to suggest new ideas.

The influence of the organizational climate and structure on the flow of information is of central concern. Nilakanta and Scamell (1990) examined how different information sources (books, people, etc.) influence diffusion of innovation in an organization. One of the implications that they drew from their study is that management must create an environment conducive to the open exchange of information. Courtwright, Fairhurst, and Rogers (1989) examined the communication patterns in organic and mechanistic systems. They concluded that communicative forms are consultative in organic systems (characterized by dispersed control) and command-like in mechanistic systems (characterized by hierarchical control).

3 TECHNOLOGY

The new technology (electronic mail, voice mail, fax) has raised a number of questions about impact on information flow in the organization. Who will use it? Will it extend and diversify communication networks? What is the relationship among technology, information flow, and networks?

Rice and Aydin (1991) looked at how attitudes developed through social networks might influence individuals' views of new organizational technology. They concluded that social information processing can play no more than a small role in influencing attitudes toward a new information system. They state that "it is possible that the implementation of a new information system itself changes attitudes toward technology and use of that technology, in turn leading to changes in communication patterns, organizational structure, and working location" (p. 240).

According to Rice and Shook (1990) the use of intra-organizational media is one fundamental characteristic of different job categories and organizational levels. Use of media (meetings, memos, etc.) is highly correlated with organiza-

tional level. However, upper-level managers do not necessarily use e-mail less than do lower level workers (clerical).

4 COMMUNICATION PROCESSES AND ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES

The flow of information has been traditionally studied within a single organization, and network boundaries were not extended beyond organizational membership. Research on interorganizational networks (for example, Eisenberg et al., 1985) extends the traditional notion of boundaries. Cushman and King (1993) argue that the high-technology market has generated a new system of management (high-speed management) that is bringing about a revolution in organizational communication. A competitive and changing global economy demands that organizations use practices that ensure rapid need analysis, and rapid response/adaptation. Computers and telecommunications allow for new manufacturing, marketing, and management technologies. A major issue is how to respond to rapid changes in the environment. There must be timely, accurate environmental scanning of information and rapid adjustment and coordination of the system.

What is the impact of the new technologies on flow of information? Russell, Adams, and Boundy (1986) point out that, in the marketing area, Campbell Soup Company can scan the environment to discover the desire for a new soup. They can then model its contents, simulate production, and assess its cost/profit/sales potential. Through the development of an artificial intelligence system the company can control the rate and quality of production. Management can pretest its name, test shelf-placement, and the type and content of its advertising. The company can also run its test market. A management decision that once took years may now only take a couple of days.

High-speed management certainly offers significant implications for the role of communication in seeking competitive advantage. In terms of the study of the "flow of information," organizational boundaries must be expanded to include a larger environment. If an organization is conceptualized as networks of interdependent relationships, then information and communication technologies have changed what we typically think of as an organization.

5 CONCLUSION

This study indicates that the flow of information is not an orderly or predictable process, but more than that; what information means depends on context. To find meaning, it is necessary to look at the interrelationships that create the structure and pattern. These interrelationships are complex and illusive. This study suggests that an organization is made up of interactive influences, mutual constraints, multiple orders, and simultaneous interests. The complexities are obscured if one thinks in terms of simplistic order and patterns of communication.

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