

IT-ENHANCED ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN A TRANSITIONAL ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The paper discusses IT application for interactive organizational communication in a transitional academic environment. The authors describe the role that the IT-enhanced organizational communication plays in promoting academic entrepreneurship in Volgograd State University and display the SWOT of portal e-communication.

Introduction

Since 2000 when the use of technology for interactive organizational communication was made a statutory requirement in Russian universities the impact of technology on the university bureaucracy under the conditions of commercialization of academic activities has been widely discussed in the academic community. However the role that the IT-based organizational communication plays in the transition to the entrepreneurial type of university has been underestimated.

In Volgograd State University, Russia, there is understanding that the intense use of IT speeds up the change. The technology-based organizational interaction is viewed as a handy tool for (a) interiorizing common entrepreneurial goals; b) proclaiming benefits of collective action; and (c) forming a faculty-administration alliance (Clark, 2003, p. 100; Sandgren, 2003, p. 30). Today the University administration acknowledges that the establishment of a technology-based organizational interaction in the entrepreneurial academic environment requires institution of basic values and norms, consolidated and shared among the faculty and staff.

Definitions

IT-enhanced organizational communication is understood in this paper as the “IT + human communication merger” (Gallant, Boone, & Almquist, 2004) and a holistic

process of using the Internet, Intranet and Web sites in real time for academic and administrative purposes.

Individuals communicate with each other using meaning rules that can be mediated through technological devices such as a university portal. However, in their interaction with institutions human activities require guided communication, i.e. formal and informal institutional rules. Besides, portal technology users must make sense of communication with restrictions built into technological devices.

The difficulty of defining the IT role in organizational communication may be explained by the fact that certain constraints are imposed by the combination of information processes and human communication at workplace. People do have qualities that are not attractive or praiseworthy and some individuals are likely to disguise information or deliberately distort data. Therefore organizations use particular rules and channels of communication that people learn and apply to accomplish various job tasks. However, while technology transfers data and information, people interpret them to their benefit and transact communication with the help of technology.

Achievements and Problems

In trying to understand how the required entrepreneurial academic configuration may be enhanced with the help of e-communication process we used John Kotter's model that focuses on the reasons of vertical (top-down, down-top and diagonal) miscommunication in the organization (Kotter, 1996). The analysis has revealed that while the dynamic organizational technology-based interactions promote acquisition of some entrepreneurial skills, the culture and ethics of using IT facilities in the University structural units and at the individual level leave much to be desired.

There have been a number of positive changes in the technology-based organizational communication that Volgograd State University is proud of. The three IT tools (e-learning platform, self-organizing portal, and intranet documentation management system) are now widely used to support a number of commercialization objectives outlined by the University top management more than 10 years ago.

In 2003 the e-learning software platform was designed and launched in cooperation with the University of Rousse, Bulgaria, with the purpose of storing and exploiting such Web-based assets as course abstracts, PPT lectures, faculty publications, timetables, messages and forums (Dudina, 2004). Two years later the e-learning portal began supporting an informative Web site on topics of mutual academic interest, providing pedagogical communication, community services and applications access for the target audience of Volgograd universities and dozens of high schools.

Initially the VolSU produced self-organizing portal¹ technology was employed for keeping balance among administrators, faculty and staff, since administrative information and news could be placed there by all the registered VolSU users. In 2007 another portal project for internal organizational communication and sharing extended syllabi resources, as well as academic data access was launched.²

Finally, the University Intranet documentation management system contributed considerably to the quality assessment and certification of its management system as a whole in accordance with the requirements of the ISO 9001: 2008 management system standards.³

However, over the past several years the contradiction between the need to share intellectual resources institutionally and regionally and lack of attention to social, ethic, legal and security issues (how the resources are introduced and who has access to and control over them) resulted in a credibility gap and hidden conflict over the intellectual property rights among the resource designers, owners and users.

On the one hand, it is a stated fact that today the IT-enhanced organizational communication is at the centre of all successful organizations (Hargie & Tourish, 2000). There is also understanding in the academic community that the process should meet the demands of internal and external customers of the academic products. On the other hand, unguided intellectual property relationships are not always addressed institutionally,⁴ and therefore are not dealt with pro-actively. As a result the transformation of intellectual e-resources into the University e-assets remains one of the main challenges.

Internal Effects of the IT-enhanced Organizational Communication

The major internal effect of the IT-enhanced organizational communication process is organizational change at all the levels of the university hierarchy, embraced by the growing uncertainty of the legal environment for sharing e- resources. The change is caused by:

¹ In compliance with the basic portal definition given by Gartner Group portal is a Web site targeted at a specific audience and providing content aggregation and delivery of information relevant to the audience (Gartner Group, 2004).

² Beginning with 2007.

³ In 2009 VolSU was certified by Bureau Veritas Certification, the International Certification body accredited by UCAS, GB and ANAB, US.

⁴ Though some intellectual property objects are now recognized as products, and thus as objects of commerce, the rights of their designers and recognition of the authors are not clearly stated. There is no legal or institutional framework for intellectual property objects that may be internationally competitive.

- design and application of self-organizing portal technology for interactive communication in the Web-based education process as shown in Figure 1;
- integration of research, educational and institutional Web resources into teaching, learning and administrating with the self-organizing university portal;
- adjustment of Web resources to specific organizational purposes.

The change required establishment of an institutional framework for rules, culture and ethics of web resources selection and application to balance faculty's and administration's goals.

The main reason why Russian academic bureaucracy has been so long putting barriers to university entrepreneurship has always been communicated clearly and distinctly: the corrupted academic process made it unnecessary to develop people's entrepreneurial abilities. Free, transparent and instantaneous exchange of information among the participants of the academic process was not desirable and the university organizational communication itself was strictly monitored and controlled.

However, understanding is growing that stimulating the innovative identical code of organizational communication that uses shared values, norms and rules at least against plagiarism will provide the "organizational glue" and thus contribute to the overall organizational efficiency.

Managing Organizational Change

In managing transitional change, the ongoing IT-enhanced organizational communication is critical to ensure faculty and staff involvement with the university management innovative intentions (Deetz, 1982; Myers & Myers, 1982).

In a modern IT-networked Russian academic environment the interpersonal and group communication modes under organizational change are permeated with uncertainty and may be characterized as discordant. This often leads to increased interpersonal and cross-unit conflict, decreased loyalty and resistance to change. It is here that the administration's attitude to self-organizing e-communication comes into play: it may be used as a tool for suppressing uncertainty or as a tool for embracing it (Clampit & Williams, 2004).

Depending on the age and size of the university, as well as the type of its corporate culture, the objectives of internal IT-enhanced communication may be (1) shifting the internal climate from the status quo to unsettling and vice versa; (2) assigning the change agents with the role of personalizing the implications of organizational uncertainty; and (3) encouraging university units to initiate positive organizational transformations. Technically, these objectives are translated into reality with the help of unit Web sites designed, filled out and formatted by faculty Web administrators. Realistically, individuals and groups never interact without value-driven and feedback-based messages of the management strategic choices to university units.

Since nowadays any academic community is as a rule a combination of the four well-known corporate culture types (hierarchy or bureaucratic; collegiate or clan; adhocracy and market oriented) (Cameron & Quinn, 1999), the IT-enhanced implementation of the management strategic choices should take into account the cultural environment of each unit.

Using a questionnaire we found out that 80% of individual and small group users of the self-organizing portal are more responsive to organizational change: for example, they use information about funding opportunities to get individual grants for doing research in countries of their choice. The schools and departments as functional units are more concerned with institutional and financial self-determination. Despite the need to respond pro-actively to the challenges of the national and international funding shortages, only 22% of them are willing to share information with each other. Their decision-making still lacks initiative and depends mainly on “what the rector thinks.”

The entrepreneurial universities that are considered to be successful in their endeavors (such as Tomsk State Polytechnic, Kazan State, Saint Petersburg State Electrotechnical Universities and some others) view their corporate IT network as a key choice, whose agents act as facilitators of organizational change. Their activity is guided by intellectual property rights, which are often impossible to apply to humanities schools in classical universities.

Using Portal Communication to Consolidate Organizational Change

The well-known entrepreneurial university concept, suggested by Clark (1998), reflects a powerful management center, new multichannel finance system, expanded periphery and a motivated academic core. The establishment of these is possible on condition that innovative preferences are widely spread and interiorized in the university community. To do so the university management may find it rewarding to apply a slightly modified Kotter eight-stage model to promote entrepreneurial preferences via e-communication (Kotter, 1996).

We believe that the self-organizing portal may be exploited for managing organizational change by communicating the idea of change urgency to the key audiences and providing immediate feedback from them. Using the vision of change as a powerful resource it will then deliver it to the university units. With the strong management team and collective action it will be possible to demonstrate short-term success and plan for the future. The success information will then contribute to change consolidation and provide institution of required rules, norms, preferences and constraints.

Kotter noted that each of the change management stages provokes the involvement of the university technological subsystems in the strategic top initiatives. In this framework all the channels of organizational communication are to be regarded as tools of the university management policy that exploits a diversity of e-communication contexts and noises to

promote its entrepreneurial goals. If this process is institutionally managed e-communication becomes an essential coordinating device both for the change initiators and their opponents.

Sharing Miller's point of view about the importance of the workers' rights (2006), especially copyright protection in organizational communication processes, we realize that it is critical that Russian universities not only develop e-communication systems to enhance organizational understanding, but frame and convey to the university community information security issues. It is also obvious that to develop these concrete collective action policies the role of individuals and groups as they encounter the organized intellectual effort should be clearly and legally defined.

Conclusion

IT-enhanced organizational communication has the potential to contribute to the favorable context for the university entrepreneurial activity and dissemination of common ethic values of using internal intellectual resources and assets. The self-organizing portal described in the paper is one of the examples of how academic management center may exploit technology to communicate the priority entrepreneurial change to their faculty and staff.

However, there is an urgency for a unified University intellectual property policy, providing significant recognition to the authors of intellectual property objects as well as a legal framework for matters relating to infringements of intellectual property rights.

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