ICS 132: Organizational Information Systems

Organizational Communication

overview

- communication and decision making
  - information systems support decision making
    - information access
    - information sharing
  - coordination
- communication and genre
- communication and organisational structures

mintzberg on managers

- managers don’t spend much of their time “making decisions”
- they spend their time talking to people:
  - to understand the problems they’re having
  - to get ideas from people
  - figure out if people are doing the right things
  - encouraging people to do good work
  - helping people sort out problems

what does communication do?

- various functions
  - sharing information - “all on the same page”
  - getting information from place to place
  - what’s happening over there?
  - remember, responsive to environment
  - building trust
- communication supports decision-making
  - three phases
    - preparation
    - informing
    - monitoring

communication in organizations

- the traditional view
  - communication and work are separate activities
  - communication transfers information so that work can be done
- the 132 view
  - communication and work are interwoven
    - sometimes, communicating IS the work
    - sometimes, the work is conducted THROUGH communication
  - communication isn’t just about information
    - it’s also the exercise of power and control
    - it’s also situated in a historical context

aspects of communication

- many different forms and styles
  - different technologies, different settings
  - from email to staff meetings
- characteristics
  - formality
  - directedness
  - temporality
  - richness
  - persistence
  - genre
### The Emergence of the Memo

- **The Form of the Memo**
  - "to", "from", "subject" headings
  - subheads and lists
  - formal language
  - no greeting or sign-off
- **The Memo wasn’t always around**
  - essentially invented between 1870 and 1920
  - why?

### Genres of Communication

- **Genre is a Social Construct**
  - it provides a set of expectations
  - it makes actions meaningful and sensible
  - a framework for interpreting what's going on
  - it supports coordination between participants
  - it emerges from interactions over time
- **Genre has Technical Components, Too**
  - it is tied to the medium of production
  - timeliness
  - distribution

### Using Genres

### Electronic Memos?

- **Email as a Medium for Electronic Memos**
  - email shares some properties with memos
  - the formal structure
  - enabling one-to-many communication
  - in the 80s, many organisations introduced email
  - automating vertical communication
  - distributing instructions, reporting results
  - the unexpected outcome...
- **The Lesson**
  - genres as **systems of practice**
  - not just the information, but the way that it's used
social networks

- Milgram's "small world" experiment
  - aka "six degrees of separation"
- "it's not what you know, it's who you know"
  - multiple, overlapping groups
  - remember the functional organisation structure?
- the spread of organisational information
  - how does information spread?

social networks

from Mackay, 1990

social networks

social networks

social networks

newer forms

- communication is always evolving
  - different technologies support different genres
- newer forms:
  - desktop videoconferencing
  - corporate intranet
  - enterprise information portal
  - workplace IM
videoconferencing

1970s videoconferencing failed spectacularly
- technical reasons
  - interacting with artifacts
  - resolution, field of view, etc
- cultural reasons
  - why won’t you come to meet me?
  - the formal and informal aspects of meetings

desktop videoconferencing

- desktop videoconferencing is quite different
  - 1990s: H.261 over ISDN
    - ISDN is 128kbps data + 16kbps signal
    - QCIF: 176 x 144, 5-10fps
  - 2000: Internet
    - Quicktime, RealPlayer, streaming video
- what factors make it more successful?
  - a different niche
  - less expensive makes it less formal
  - spontaneity
  - immediate control of technology
  - combined with other forms of communication

distance learning

- video for distance learning?
  - California Master Plan for Higher Education
  - opportunities
    - extending reach
    - accessing archives of material
  - problems
    - interaction – asking questions, getting answers
    - feedback – hard to gauge how material is going over

distance learning

This is from Sun... interesting work from Microsoft too...

e-mail

- transitions in genres
  - from memos to communication between peers
- a new set of communicational practices
  - e.g. undirected requests for help
- a new set of organizational concerns
  - communities of practice
  - knowledge management
- but still uneasy
  - the bandwidth wars and recreational email
### instant messaging

- increasing role of IM in organizations
  - supporting distant coordination
    - presence indicators as well as communicative content
- IM and other forms of communication
  - what does IM replace? telephone? email?
  - the question of "formality"
    - formality is an aspect of practice
  - not a substitute
    - supports informal interaction
    - doesn't support undirected communication

### continuum of communication

- communication media exist in a context
  - research suggests that media don't substitute
    - new media are additive; communication level increases
- both instrumental and symbolic value
  - the role of formality
  - presence in a business meeting
  - exchanging documents at the IMF
  - the medium is the message

### summary

- communication isn't just bits on the wire
  - communication achieves coordination
  - communication supports decision-making
- communication isn't just what's said
  - genres shape and structure our expectations
  - genres provide resources for interpretation
  - communicative forms as systems of meaning
  - instrumental and symbolic value