

The Challenge of Distance

A few points of discussion
suggested by Philip Anastasiadis
SPIN talk 16th November 2011

Overview of my Context

- Doing a Masters in Information and Knowledge Management- interested in Organisational Knowledge Creation (Nonaka) and Organisational Sensemaking (Weick)
- Communication important to both theories – no organisation without communication
- Developed an interest in the challenge of effective communication across distance

Contextual Elements in Organisations

- Socialization – level of induction into the norms and mores of the organisation
- Culture - both of the organisation and other surrounding factors such as nationality or profession
- Trust – preparedness to take risks and allow experimentation
- Combination of these factors results in organisational context.

Defining Distance

- Any distance that causes majority of communication (formal or informal) to occur via technologically mediated channels means you are working in a dispersed organisation
- Defining nearness – collocation vs. mere proximity
- Sharing context means that in terms of everyday working reality, someone on the next floor could be more distant than someone in a different city

Media Choice

- Concept of channel capacity / media richness theory – some misunderstandings about this, it's all about the contexts of the people who are in communication
- Some media more or less appropriate depending on context – with dispersed people this can only be adjusted up to a point
- Idea of channel narrowing – people out of context can have communication breakdown even when face-to-face, though worse via lean channel media

Case Studies from Scrum

- *‘from the trenches’* approach to dispersed team – “you are out of luck” (though some pointers given later in Chapter 16)
- SirsiDyrix example – first ‘proof of concept’ of dispersed hyperproductivity from Jeff Sutherland, later seen as successful productivity, unsuccessful project
- Xebia OneTeam examples – further examples of dispersed hyperproductivity

Improving communication in dispersed interactions: some ideas

- Assemble a team that shares an established context—but watch out for institutional isomorphism / groupthink
- Awareness of distance – ‘near’ distance can be deceptive
- Seek best match between context and media – and be aware of possible breakdowns in sensemaking (channel narrowing)
- Importance of established rituals of communication – but facilitate informal communication, very important for building contextual awareness

Thank You