Organizational Learning - Enabling Self-organized Knowledge Logistics for a Health Insurance Company

Peter Mambrey[1], Volkmar Pipek[3], Markus Rohde[2], Markus Won[3]

[1]Fraunhofer FIT.CSCW, [2]Agenda Consult, St. Augustin; [3]ProSEC, Univ. of Bonn; (Germany)
mambrey@gmd.de,{pipek, won}@cs.uni-bonn.de, markus.rohde@agenda-consult.de

ABSTRACT

CSCL at the workplace is subject to the special characteristics of a situation where learning is not the primary task of the learners. The gap between the goal to work efficiently and the need to increase qualification and skills is even wider in organizations which operate in knowledge-intensive markets and where responsibility and autonomy characterize the work style of geographically distributed workers ("Virtual Organizations"). Classical learning methods have to be complemented by a lightweight knowledge-sharing infrastructure ("knowledge logistics"). In this contribution we describe a method of introduction of knowledge logistics which reflects that gap and offers support for self-organized settings for learning at work. We present our approach by describing the case of the field service of a German health insurance company.

Keywords

CSCL, knowledge management, organizational learning, virtual organizations, self-organization

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Organizations (Mowshowitz 1997) have three characteristics which complicate its capability to change: Its actors are usually geographically distributed (less social interaction), have a higher degree of autonomy (diversity of cultures and ideas) and collaborate usually via an IT-Infrastructure. Here, learning at work always competes with other, more "productive" work tasks, and the higher degree of autonomy of the actors can disturb learning cooperation. By describing the case of a German health insurance company (GEHICO) we show our way to introduce what we call self-organized "knowledge logistics" into a virtual organization.

In our methods, we feel inspired by research from the fields of CSCW (esp. groupware introduction), organizational learning, and collaborative and self-organized learning. We tried to combine all that to answer our key question: How to introduce and maintain self-organized knowledge logistics in a virtual organization.

Organizational Learning Challenges for a Health Insurance Company

The German Health Insurance Company (GEHICO) is one of the top ten health insurance companies in Germany with a turnover of more than 800 million dollars. Within its field service, a group of around 100 persons, covering all regions of Germany, is specialized on the contact management with free health insurance agencies (agency field service - AFS). Most of them are experienced insurance agents and work with GEHICO as freelancers. Each AFS agent is responsible for one German region (in very populated areas several agents work in one region), which is why AFS agents rarely meet each other. The usual way for becoming an AFS agent is the participation in the corresponding training program after working several years as an "ordinary" insurance agent in the field service. The training is organized as a series of workshops with around five to eight participants. GEHICO has about 15 trainers responsible for the qualification of the field service. Besides training services for becoming an insurance agent or an AFS agent, they also offer free skill trainings like negotiation, rethorics, etc. Some of the trainers are employees, some are freelancers.

The described setting given, our measures to improve organizational learning (continuous, faster learning cycles) in the field service of GEHICO mainly aim at: First, complementing the classical learning measures and the associated communication patterns with decentralized, computer-based measures and communication. A shift away from workshop-focused concepts towards computer-based collaborative learning concepts is also intended. Second. shifting the learning practice from a "managed", prescriptive learning organization to a more self-organized, demand-oriented practice. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce tools and establish practices of continuous expertise sharing related to the trainings attended and the daily work practice, to reorganize roles with regard to a more continuous, practice-related qualification concept ("Teachers" become "Qualification Consultants"), and to collect experiences with collaboration via internet-based media. We developed a concept for the introduction of such self-organized knowledge logistics which we believe can also be applied to other introduction processes of CSCL concepts.

A CONCEPT TO INTRODUCE SELF-ORGANIZED KNOWLEDGE LOGISTICS

What we call self-organized knowledge logistics is a conglomerate of technical systems and organizational practices and conventions which allow for of a high degree of flexibility and easy ways of re-negotiating and reorganizing collaborative structures. For the technical system for *self-organized* knowledge logistics two points are of importance: it should be easy to connect to the system wherever the user is, and the content should be easily restructurable by users (including setting

appropriate access rights easily to build restricted or private areas). The technical system of our knowledge logistics was programmed on the basis of the web-based groupware BSCW.
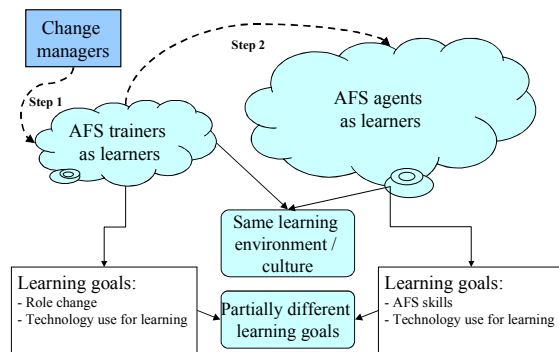

Figure 1: Introducing a knowledge logistics system

Our concept is also inspired by the work of Kafai (1991) and Pedersen (1930), who developed methods where higher-grade kids taught lower-grade kids. The interesting aspect for our context is that all "teachers" were "students" *in exactly the same learning setting* before. They do not only have the necessary knowledge with regard to the learning goal, but they also have experience in *how to learn in the setting given*. Therefore, they are also able to transmit a culture of learning. We adopted this idea by working first with a multiplier group, and then with our "real" target group.

Our approach can be best described by a process and an inner loop which is realized in steps 2 and 3 of the process. The process has the steps: Gathering the needs of the target group (here: AFS members), introducing "self-organized knowledge logistics" (system and practice) to a multiplier group (Choosing an appropriate multiplier group involves assessing them as sufficiently similar to the target group; we believe the trainers fulfill that requirement), and finally introducing the "self-organized knowledge logistics" to the target group. Figure 1 shows how this process works in the case of GEHICO. The learning goal of "technology use" is inherent to the method and dominates the other learning goals in the beginning. Learning goals are only weakly described, they mainly influence the material which is being put into the technical system. The inner procedure is the introduction itself which works according to the following pattern: Designing an initial system and presenting it within daily work scenarios, supporting users in system exploration, agreeing on learning goals with and for the users (including support for appropriate training; technology use is most likely always one of the first issues there), continuous evaluation and redesign (together with the users, shifting attention away from technology use to the core learning requirements of the user group).

We should stress that the existing training concept (mainly workshops) will be integrated in this method. We expect that it is necessary that there are opportunities to meet for a learning group which uses the knowledge logistics. The existing trainings will initiate as well as complement the online learning groups.

The most important question in this context is whether our concept works and if we can manage to change the learning in the way described above. It is also interesting for us to see how the role concept of the "classical" trainers will change during the process of becoming moderators of a new style of learning. At last we have to observe the use of our BSCW-based knowledge logistics system. Here the main question is how systems generally have to be designed to support self-organized continuing training processes. Due to this question we will conduct feedback workshops regularly which can be used to identify change requirements.

We believe that our method can at least serve as a first step to systematically deal with the introduction of CSCL systems into organizations and work setting.

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