Virtually visible: Visualisation and knowledge sharing at the mobile workplace

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The advent of a new generation of mobile communication technologies and tools has initiated a renewed interest for more mobile ways of organizing and conducting work. Related to the development of an network society, Manuel Castells forecast the advent of the new "mobile workplace" for the networked enterprises (Castells 1996). Today, we can see that trends of mobility actually is taking hold in several business areas, most notably perhaps symbolised by the increasing replacement of fixed computers and telephone lines with mobile ones.

The new mobile workplace usually integrates technical, physical and organizational changes. The "mobile workplace", as it has been realized in several Nordic organizations, typically includes the use of portable and wireless technologies, open plan offices, flexible works schedules for the employees and a preference for working in project groups and teams. The "virtual organization" seems to merge with a new sense of mobility and individuality (Sennett 1998; Beck 2000; Urry 2000). This development, we argue, represent important challenges for organizations that wants to support the development of common knowledge through social interaction. The re-arrangement of the physical workplace combined with the introduction of virtual tools, have impacts on the employees possibilities of using visual information to guide and direct their daily routines at work and the informal interactions.

In this paper we will raise the question of visualisation and knowledge-sharing, based on a recent study of two Norwegian knowledge-intensive companies. We will focus on how traditional ways of "seeing others" is challenged by new settings for work, drawing on a social constructivist view on knowledge, trust and identity (Giddens 1984; Lave and Wenger 1991). We will the describe how the organizations in our studies tried to overcome this challenges by the use of physical rearrangements, implementation of new communications tools, and/or strategic decisions to enhance visibility. Finally we discuss how a renewed focus on visualisation can be instructive for the development of knowledge in organizations with mobile workplaces.

Literature

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