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Collaboration platforms as enablers of new work - three case studies on organisational prerequisites for change

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Collaborative applications have the potential to support a new, networked and self-directed form of collaboration, currently propagated by many companies as “new work”. However, the deployment of new technologies does not automatically lead to new forms of work. There are a number of inhibiting or promoting factors to be considered. An important factor influencing the extent to which technological possibilities can be realised is the form companies organise work. The aim of this contribution is to analyse the interrelation between the use of technology and the ways of organising work, using three case studies on collaboration platforms as examples. We want to describe how the use of collaboration platforms affects organisational change and examine the conditions that promote or hinder a change to “new work”.

Theory: We argue on the basis of John Child's theory of organising (2015), which assumes a fundamental shift from conventional to newer forms of organising. It provides a framework for the empirical analysis of organisational practices.

Approach: This contribution presents findings from three qualitative case studies of medium-sized enterprises (special mechanical engineering, IT consulting, software development) with an advanced use of collaborative applications. The enterprises are located in various sites in Germany and abroad. Our research is based on a longitudinal mixed method and multi-methods approach. We have accompanied these enterprises over three years, implementing and testing an integrated “digital workplace”.

Findings: The case studies reveal that the main challenge of the adoption and use of collaboration platforms is not the command of the technology but rather the complex change in the ways of working and organising. We have found new forms of software-supported collaboration in all three cases, but to a varying degree. This is based on the design of the usage options and authorization concepts of the collaboration platform. It must be decided who is entitled to form groups with whom and who may share content with others and to what extent. Furthermore, the concept of control associated with the use of platforms plays a central role. In the context of an “imposed” design, more traditional ways of working are encouraged, while an “emergent” design of a collaboration platform encourages the development of “new work”. The case studies suggest that the full potential of software-supported collaboration can only be realised when traditional conceptions of control are overcome.

Originality/value: There is a growing range of literature on adoption challenges of enterprise collaboration systems, however, to date we do not know of any similar case studies on the interrelations of the use of collaborative applications and the forms of organising. Our case studies differ from other companies in their extensive use of collaborative applications.

Keywords

Collaboration platform, organising, work design, organisational change, new work

1 INTRODUCTION

New ways of working are currently high in demand. Numerous companies present themselves as “new work” companies with new forms of flexible work at any time any place. Simultaneously, collaboration platforms are increasingly being used (Schubert and Williams, 2015). They include tools for communication, task coordination and sharing knowledge and enable to work anywhere, anytime (Hardwig *et al.*, 2020); and they are designed to support teams and also to improve company-wide collaboration. Customers or other external parties can also be integrated.

One might suspect that the massive use of collaboration platforms will considerably promote the transformation away from hierarchical, bureaucratic organisations to “new work”. On the other hand, one should not overestimate the importance of technology. “(...) technologies alone do not suffice to apprehend the ascent of the ‘new world of work’. A plethora of other forces and factors at the meso, macro and micro levels have shaped how work practices have evolved (...)” (Aroles *et al.*, 2019, p. 287) Against this background, the following contribution will analyse the interrelation between the use of technology and the way work is organised, using three case studies of collaboration platforms as examples. The question is how the use of collaboration platforms affects organisational change. Under which conditions does it promote or hinder a change to “new work”?

2 NEW WORK AS NEW WAY OF ORGANISING

“New ways of work” in a narrow sense are defined as “place- and time-independent working” (Popma, 2013). Under the motto “Bricks, Bytes and Behaviour” propagates the “Smarter Working” movement (Lake, 2015) location-independent, networked forms of work. The slogan emphasises the necessity of a simultaneous interaction of the technologies used, the change of spatial conditions and the work culture (Clapperton and Vanhoutte, 2014). “New ways of working” are seen as part of a long-term trend of workspace differentiation and flexibilisation, which includes the flexible use of home workspaces, mobile working and the office space trends of shared desktops (Kingma, 2019). These new forms of work have seen a relevant increase over the last years (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017).

For the purpose of our analysis, we refer to Child (2015), who describes the historical change of organisations from conventional to new, networked forms. This change expresses itself in fundamental transformations that affect the three fundamental processes of organising: “*Integration is concerned with ensuring that there is adequate coordination between the different but complementary activities that create collective value.*” (...) “*Control involves setting goals, implementing them, and monitoring their attainment.*” (...) “*Reward is a process fundamental to engaging the motivation among members of a company to contribute positively to the achievement of its goals.*” (Child, 2015, p. 9). New forms of organising break with central principles of conventional forms of tayloristic or bureaucratically centralised organisations, following a “*different paradigm - a new way of thinking*” (Child, 2015, p. 74). They have been proven to be more suitable to dynamic market conditions. We understand “new work” as part of this change.

According to Child, the new way of *integration* relies on a horizontal coordination in decentralised units or teams with an increased collective responsibility. Instead of a hierarchical coordination with formal procedures and roles, activities are now coordinated using flexible and direct contacts on the team-level or via information technology inside the network. Bureaucratic *control* and output control are replaced by decentralised control strategies. The new rational is an internalised compliance instead of external constraints. Thus, control is exercised through negotiated objectives and shared cultural values and norms. Leadership by authority is replaced by leadership by guidance of more or less self-organised teams. *Reward*: In order to promote the motivation of the knowledge workers, the organisation of work relies on autonomy and self-organisation of teams, giving room for personal development. Rewards are based upon group performance instead of one's individual hierarchical level. The quality of work, the modernity of the workplace and the freedom to work anywhere and anytime play a central role. Herein lies the most visible part of "new work". Collaboration technology is a central enabling factor of the new network concept. "*With the aid of new technologies, companies can more readily strip out layers of management and shift the pattern of communications from a downward flow along prescribed, hierarchical routes to a more multidirectional and networked process.*" (Child, 2015, p. 96)

In order to take a closer look at the conditions under which collaboration platforms promote this development, we present in the following our empirical findings by describing the relationship between the use of the platform and the changes in the three dimensions of organising. Thanks to fortunate circumstances, all three companies have used the same product, MS Teams. Hence, we rely on three case studies: A special mechanical engineering company with 370 employees worldwide (M), an IT consulting firm with about 90 employees (C) and a company for software development (S) with 235 employees. We accompanied these enterprises over three years, implementing and testing an integrated "digital workplace". This contribution focuses entirely on the use of MS teams, leaving out many facets of the topic for reasons of focus. The case description is based on an initial analysis of 36 qualitative interviews held in the first year of the project and 42 interviews and 11 group discussions conducted in the third year. We interviewed employees and managers who used collaborative platforms and those responsible for work design.

3 THE INTERACTION BETWEEN ORGANISING AND COLLABORATION PLATFORMS IN THE CASE STUDIES

3.1 Case M: The global network of a special mechanical engineering company

The company M has grown strongly over the past ten years and recently established two new sites in Asia and South America. The collaboration platform was first implemented in order to support global teams and the forms of usage were developed with these teams under the personal direction of the CEO. There was no release for use by all employees. Instead, management determined who was allowed to form groups with MS Teams. This was based on processes and structures in the organisation. Tight authorisation concepts were defined for the access to content. The teams using MS teams established new forms of collaboration that were appreciated by those involved. For example, all documents of the team were stored in a central repository. They could be edited by all team members. Asynchron "conversations" in written form took place on the platform, in which the status of task completion was reported or questions could be discussed. In some cases, task planning was also used for joint task control. The platform was useful when developing concepts and storing or documenting knowledge in a structured way. Users also had

access to a central wiki system in which the essential information for plant planning was exchanged. Web conferencing was also operated via the platform. This form of collaboration went far beyond the previous phone and email communication and the new form of collaboration is therefore indispensable for the global teams, but it is also considered very advantageous for local collaboration.

As the benefits were recognised by the employees, there was strong criticism of the dominance of management and the limited opportunities to use the platform. There have been many efforts by employees and also by managers to use MS teams independently. Top management resisted and even made sure that IT shut down unofficial MS teams to avoid 'wild growth'. This caused much disappointment. A second point of criticism related to the expectations of transparency formulated by management. Ongoing status reports on the progress of work should be communicated on the platform, but here, the employees were a little reserved. This is expressed in the fact that problems are not named precisely to save face in order to avoid management intervention. It is also questioned by some whether it is relevant for the team to communicate "every little thing". These points touch on the control dimension of organising. Top management has made it quite clear that they want to use the collaboration platform to improve control. This is to be achieved through increased transparency in the status of task fulfilment. Teams should document better and report more strongly. The expectation that MS Teams should also serve to improve management control is made clear further by the expansion of the use of MS Teams for the weekly management round.

3.2 Case C: Collaboration in interdisciplinary customer projects teams

The IT consulting company offers customer-specific solutions for social intranet and digital workplaces. The company is very much characterised by spatially distributed work, which takes place across three locations, home offices and the customers' offices. It has been using collaborative applications for many years. The driving forces are the high dynamics and complexity of interdisciplinary cooperation in customer projects. The introduction of MS Teams took place before the background of shifts in the market for collaboration platforms. The company adapted its product portfolio to the market leader. This was taken as an opportunity to replace older solutions and to rely on MS Teams. The switch has not resulted in fundamentally new forms of collaboration because the new possibilities created by M had practically existed before. Nevertheless, the fundamental difference was that the employees had a far-reaching transparency of all content stored in the collaborative applications and the freedom to contribute to it. Company-wide collaboration thus differed from M in that employees were able to form communities and basically also had access to the content of other projects. MS Teams now offers a uniform platform on which the various functions are more closely integrated. The increase in user-friendliness leads to intensifying collaboration, for example, to a more intensive use of web meetings. Beyond that, management resolved closely-defined documentation processes or strict rules for cooperation and placed greater emphasis on the self-monitoring of employees and teams. For the employees, the network form of collaboration was facilitated by MS teams and has become a matter of everyday life. Criticism desiring more support and structure is sometimes voiced.

At no point is it apparent that top management is seeking greater management control by using the collaboration platform. Projects are controlled by project teams within the framework of target agreements, as was previously the case. The tool will give them better opportunities to