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Exploring Nature and Role of Voluntariness in the Roll-Out of Networked Workplace Technologies

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Abstract

In this abstract we elaborate on the changing role of voluntariness during the roll-out process of networked technologies by drawing on a case study of a medium-sized financial service company. We find that as voluntariness might act as a key enabler for adoption of technologies in the beginning, it can act as an inhibitor of full diffusion, and thus ultimate success of networked technologies.

Keywords: Voluntariness, adoption, diffusion, network technologies

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In this abstract we elaborate on the changing role of voluntariness during the roll-out process of networked technologies by drawing on a case study of a medium-sized financial service company.

Our case company has begun to roll out a new communication technology (IBM Lotus Sametime) in the company head office, with the aim to later add its various sales organisations. Due to its specific organisational culture as an employee-focused company with a strong workers' council, our case company, before beginning with the roll-out (we refer to this point in time as $t=0$), has not created any policies regarding adoption or use of the technology. Whether or not to use Sametime (and in which ways) was left to the employees. Line managers were advised not to exert pressure, which our interviewees have stressed was an essential precondition for people to start using the system.

At present (in $t=1$), Sametime is available to all head office employees and is mainly used on the team level, for presence signalling and team coordination. However, full diffusion has not been achieved. While some teams have established joint practices of using Sametime, teams with less than full diffusion rates report problems, as non-adopting members cannot be included. This is consistent with the literature; a general characteristic of networked technologies is that only after significant diffusion (preferably 100%) will they unfold their full usage potential, i.e. in terms of positive network externalities. (Markus 1990)

At the same time, both active users and team leaders stated that they wish for full adoption of the technology to reap the perceived benefits. Moreover, corporate management is keen to use the new technology as the basis for rolling out new company-wide business processes within and between the head office and the sales organizations. However, some team leaders report that they are hesitant to address the issue in their teams as they deem it inappropriate in light of the company culture. Rather, they would like to have top management assume a more explicit position.

Our case presents an interesting dilemma: From our findings, it becomes clear that while voluntariness was essential to getting the Sametime project off the ground in $t=0$, voluntariness in $t=1$ acts as a major inhibitor to full diffusion, as usage is at the discretion of each individual user. With this however the organisation risks that the diffusion process might stall and, due to network externalities not materialising, usage might ultimately falter and the project fail. The role of voluntariness thus changed over time from being a key enabler of the roll-out process to a key inhibitor of full diffusion and – maybe – project success.

The next step in our longitudinal study will look into the following questions: 1) How will/can management deal with the presented dilemma? Is it necessary for it to change its stance with regards to voluntariness and prescribe usage to ensure roll-out success? 2) How can the role of voluntariness in the adoption process of networked workplace technologies be conceptualised more generally?

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