Changes in contemporary organisations and interculturality: from orchestrated communication to confidence

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Abstract

The growing interdependency of markets (including the money markets), the development of the multinationals, the takeoff of standardised products and the emergence of international media, mean that the traditional borders of both a geographic and political nature between countries, and cultural divisions between nations, are directly influencing interpersonal relations at work. The rapid dissemination of Information and Communication Technologies significantly modifies the working relations between organisations or within businesses. The customer/supplier type relation becomes commonplace, gradually emerging as the single relational model for all collaborative work inter or intra enterprise, with the organisation itself breaking up into so many business units subject to competition and outsourced (or insourced) in line with the fluctuating strategies adopted by executives or the types of activity conducted. The ICTs foster this parcellisation, condoning interpersonal distance and relational instantaneousness, introducing simultaneity in a groups' creative activity (concurrent engineering). But this flexibility that is supposed to improve the business's productivity also appears to be a factor of fragility due to the multiple links of dependency it sets up between the players (individuals and partner organisations) likely to default, with tight flow pre-supposing perfection and temporal accuracy. In the present research, the authors take an interest in the major firms that over the last decade have been led little by little to concentrate their skills portfolios and develop beyond their initial geographic perimeter, albeit that this determination to go global runs up against the diversity of the local cultures of the players concerned. We specifically focus in this article on observation of professional practices in the departments of major tourism firms that maintain varied and changing relations of service with their partners.

Changes in organisation of work associated with globalisation and dissemination of the ICTs

This article will first address the changes in work associated with ICTs before going on to scrutinise notions of partnership and confidence that are ex ante inseparable, above all when individuals from different cultural backgrounds are brought to work together.

The introduction of the ICTs profoundly modifies working relationships as well as the individual activity in businesses. While their advantages in terms of data search, design assistance and ease of exchange of an often highly advanced nature appears incontrovertible, it is still relevant to assess their real contribution to organisational efficiency and the emergence of innovation.

From conventional wisdom to how the players really see things

Beyond the smooth talk on technological progress whereby the ICTs are synonymous with speed of execution, collaborative work and organisational rationality, relatively few works look into the real contribution of ICTs to collective work (Brousseau & Moatty, 2003). Some do, however, raise the issue of the drawbacks inherent in the ICTs such as data security problems (failures, espionage, piracy, sabotage, etc), blockages and losses of time due to network failures or viral infection. They also take an interest in costs, especially recurrent

ones that are often underestimated (updating expenses, adaptation, etc).

For the players involved, the ICTs, which are more often imposed rather than actually wanted, arouse mixed feelings both in terms of individual and collective activity. Among the designers and salespeople questioned during our study, many reckoned that the ICTs significantly change the organisational processes of their firms. The considerable growth in messaging services allows for faster and less formalised exchanges with broader dissemination than was previously the case. However while fostering interpersonal communication, this change does not systematically facilitate relationships between the players and even leads sometimes to perverse effects.

Email, straddling the barrier between written and oral communication[1], is often ambiguous and does not always respect the basic rules for civility: "There is a form of brutality in the messages we get. Through trying to get things done fast, you write badly, with mistakes … and of course you dispense with words of thanks or polite address" (Participant 1, big tourism firm). Furthermore, English is often preferred with the concomitant problems of using what for many is a foreign language.

As the consequence of the mantra on 'zero paper' or as the result of a real commodity on offer, injunctions previously sent by memo, letter or fax, thus increasingly make use of this uncertain channel. The same applies to technical memos, generally remaining unsigned, and whose often poorly managed configuration generates ambiguity as to the current version: "When there is a written memo that covers some tens of pages, the managers take the time to read it. The author signs it and you can get in touch with them if need be. It's not at all the same with email" (Participant 2, big tourism firm).

Moreover, new group work methods, offering to manage all communication exchanges, significantly modify decision-making procedures and control over the activities of all personnel, and also imperceptibly interpersonal and hierarchical relations. They can induce phenomena of rejection, especially if they are not tailored to the cultural specificities of the organisation or the individuals … who gradually lose any personally reserved domain. Thus, as a result they can either encourage innovation, by facilitating access to information, or hinder it by depriving each participant of a measure of autonomy.

Flexibility or collaboration?

However, while this way of getting members of personnel of varied backgrounds and culture to work together does indeed allow behavior patterns to be changed and can foster the emergence of new ideas, it does not always give the results expected from it. Indeed, daily activity is also a process for making decisions – and these do not always receive unanimous support! Such activity is an arena for confrontations and sometimes conflicts between specialists who move in a hierarchial world. In such a context, where the question of "articulation" becomes meaningful (Strauss, 1992), the change in the usual channels of communication leads to new interactions that contribute to defining new practices, or even new, more or less effective ways of thinking about work. While these methods are often useful in the early stages in making a choice between multiple solutions, their contribution appears more limited in lengthier stages of analysis. Furthermore, in breaking off from the simplicity of sequential processes, they can exacerbate the organisation's complexity, making tasks highly interdependent while also offering those involved a much less formalised vision of their interfaces. In such a work method, all the skills intervene, not sequentially but together throughout the duration of the project. The consequences of the decisions made by the various parties can be seen and individuals address questions as they arise. Solutions are not readymade but depend on

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[1] As for scientific exchanges and debates conducted on-line between researchers (Hert, 1997), analysis of the form of electronic writing, between engineers, through the Internet, allows it to be compared with verbal exchanges through practices of reformulation and contextualisation specific to orality.

how the problem is framed (Grosjean & Lacoste, 1999).

Whether conducted within the same firm or between multiple organisations, this way of collaborative work reinforces the bonds of dependency between partners all the more in so far as the timescale shrinks. All concerned are thus immediately affected by the possible failing of a partner and the search for new alliances as things move forward becomes problematic.

An ever remoter working relationship

Nothing now seems able to curb the movement to outsource services towards low-cost countries. This process started with work activities requiring a low level of qualification (call centres), then an average level (information technology services); we are now seeing an extension to activities with the highest level of qualification for which countries like India and China offer huge potential for innovation through the quality and quantity of people graduating each year from their universities.

This quest for brains at a low cost in distant lands that was made possible by the emergence of the ICTs can also lead to mixed results. As they convey the information needed to pursue work, the ICTs thus require the players to translate, as understood by Callon and Latour (Akrich, Callon & Latour, 1988). Thus, dissonant views can be heard from within the very companies that have already called on this cheap and qualified labour: "It is not always easy to make oneself understood at a distance, without actually seeing the products offered, without being able to compare with people who do not have the same quality criteria... Email is fine but nothing can substitute for a face-to-face explanation." (Participant 3, big tourism firm)

Now, the players concerned cannot work alone. They have to move forward in a group, understand each other and interact to reach an objective that remains hard to obtain, analysing the consequences of possible malfunctions that may arise during the entire tourism product life cycle. Against this background, information thus disseminated serves to enhance understanding of the situation, making for quality decisions and finally effective action.

Researchers working on the interpretative perspective even think that it is action that leads to understanding (Weick, 1995). As the environment remains a source of ambiguity, the organisation is considered to be a system of interpretation where the members share their interpretations of events and undergo apprenticeship through their discussions. Knowledge is not the fruit of an individual initiative, a concrete reality, an object that you accumulate and transmit, like a message you convey. Knowledge is a collective practice that develops as you take part in activities within a community that also forges the identity of its members. This concept of knowledge as social practice was strongly influenced by the works of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1987) for whom language is liable to transform both the individual and his environment. Indeed, the researcher considered that language occupies a central position in the formation of thought and consciousness. He gave special attention to the transformative capability of linguistic systems. Thus, apprenticeship is understood as a social phenomenon that emerges through experience in the world and through active participation in social practices; the process of change in skills fits in with a set of identity transformational processes through adhesion to the norms of a community of practitioners (Lave, 1991). The members of this project group learn not just to 'do', but also to 'be' (Sauquet, 2004). Their apprenticeship is then conceived of as a discursive practice, a process for exchange, negotiation and integration, ever under construction and in search of validation.

Continuity of the activity and relational distance thus sometimes appears contradictory, even if uniformity of organisations and cultures develops apace.

Trust, partnership and "organisational individualism"

While the dissemination of the ICTs thus creates an upheaval in the activity (tourism firms are a particularly good example), it also deeply modifies the relations that the

organisation maintains with its outside members and partners.

Trust, a prior condition for any collective activity

In the flexible structures of these new teams, in which the exchange of information and decision-making constitute the essential feature of an activity where there is constant pressure to reduce the time scale, trust becomes the means for coordination between the players. It constitutes a bond in reciprocal exchanges, even if the latter are not necessarily symmetrical in a world structured by hierarchies. As an element active in stabilising social representations (Bouzon, 2002), trust precludes the need for all those involved to systematically check the veracity of information received, or have a full understanding of evermore diversified forms of specialised knowledge. It also leads the players to more or less open out, revealing their own knowledge to take part in a complex co-construction that translates the collective interest, but also the individual concerns of all those involved.

In this context, while the ICTs foster the exchange of information and decision-making by allowing the constraints inherent in space and time (the results of globalisation) to be managed differently, they also contribute, through their technical characteristics, to transparency in the group's work, and above all the traceability of exchanges.

Partnership as a facade only

In an emerging context of unbridled competition, the work relation seems to play fast and loose with business perimeters as it does with borders between different states. We are witness to a form of relational 'zapping' both between customers and enterprises as between organisations and service providers, with each of them constantly seeking the partner offering the best deal in the immediate future. But this freedom of exchanges also entails risks for the organisation that the latter also tries to bring under control in various ways.

In the field of tourist product design, for example, the emerging concept of 'project risks' is now starting to be the subject of publications at professional colloquia addressing the issue of quality. Considered in their relation to the project and not the product, such risks are differentiated from the technical risks relating to reliability, availability or safety, but their consequences are no less harmful for the business. Thus, a host of methods for identification, evaluation and response are now on offer to limit deviations and excess costs that each of the elementary tasks in a project can lead to, including in particular those that would result from a partner defaulting.

In parallel with this type of analysis, lists of suppliers with assessments of their relative merits are constantly being updated. Their size is voluntarily limited to a reduced number of potential partners so as to know them better, to flatter them and guarantee them at least a minimum level of activity to ensure they allocate sufficient resources to serving the prime contractor ¬– while also providing a powerful lever to put pressure on prices. Promoted by various 'cost killers' in particular, this managerial practice, that has spread worldwide rapidly through emulation to all the major tourist operators, has obviously had a (disastrous) effect on the fabric of innovative SMEs on a more modest scale.

On the contractual level, specifications are becoming evermore precise and cover especially requirements for quality of service delivered or service level agreements (in terms of performance and availability) to which sometimes draconian insurance conditions are often associated. The automated management of evermore efficient databases applies much greater pressure, in an environment of increasingly fierce competition, on suppliers, who are promoted to the rank of partners, if not in reality then at least in the politically correct mantra.

Uncertain trust

Trust does not pre-empt control, especially with the framework of a sales activity between partners. But does this trust survive when the

pressure exerted on the players becomes extremely strong and the said players lose all leeway for manoeuvring?

The bond that in former times governed relationships between the major prime contractors and a fabric of privileged subcontractors has weakened. Success of the shared project, that then constituted the common priority goal, has gradually surrendered to the immediate financial interest and maintaining the conditions for survival of each firm in the preoccupations of their personnel. Members of personnel also feel a much weaker sense of attachment than in the past for the companies they work for—companies which in turn behave in the same manner as soon as difficulties arise or the financial objectives are not attained—and follow stakeholder strategies that are becoming more individualistic. This is even more pronounced when job security and salary improvements are no longer guaranteed, and no longer playing their role of material compensation (Floris, 1996).

While the big firms naturally tend to use their dominant position in dealing with their subcontractors, the latter have also changed their behaviour with respect to the said firms, especially in limiting the transparency that is moreover demanded of them. So, where trust still prevails, it is generally marked out by various confidentiality clauses drawn up by specialists in intellectual ownership.

Conclusion

Under pressure from vested interests that generally aim at the very short term, flexibility between and within firms is becoming a more common feature. In the present contribution, exploratory in nature, we have sought to highlight the changes caused by the new professional relations induced by globalisation, just as some of the logical approaches that determine the structure of the practices concerned. This was done through an analysis of the role of communication as instrumental in interpersonal relations at work, examining them from the standpoint of the relationship of trust binding the various players.

Organisations seem to be led to pursue contradictory objectives, the first being related to the need to harness the expertise of the players (individuals or firms) who in turn rely on local cultures, while the second hinges on the necessity of building effective collaboration between the multifarious agents involved, it being impossible to give priority to one at the expense of the other.

But this flexibility, so sought after by managers, also paradoxically infuses complexity and interdependency that can weaken the organisations concerned. As the fruit of a rich experience nurtured by human relations, the trust that bound an organisation to its network of subcontractors or the employee to their firm, for example, is now on its way out in favour of a world made up of 'individualised' players reflecting the human societies in which the said organisations operate. Such trust becomes fugitive, being based above all on a precise contractual framework that defines both one side's expectations and the penalties the other will incur in the event of that side defaulting.

Confronting these results derived from our empirical work with existing theoretical works seemed to us to be likely to stress the significance of cultural communication as an essential business function that has hitherto been neglected by researchers. The survey out in the field that underlies this research is, however, based on a necessarily limited number of observed cases that cannot represent all the scenarios actually experienced and are not free from bias related in particular to the methodology used and in gathering the data to be retained.

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