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How an Intranet Provides Opportunities for Learning Organizational Culture

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Abstract: This paper discusses a qualitative case study that addressed how an intranet can provide opportunities for learning about an organization's culture. Four primary findings are discussed with the study concluding that cultural knowledge is conveyed and renewed through intranet in the learning process.

Adult learning in organizations moves beyond individual learning when it alters the systemic environment. Theorists suggest that an organization learns when individual learning becomes embedded or 'crystallized' into organizational structures (Watkins & Marsick, 1999). Experience is a cornerstone of adult learning theory. For example, Kolb's (1996) experiential learning model suggests that concrete experience is a necessary component of learning. Organizational culture (OC) is, in part, a product of individual and organizational learning because it must be experienced to be understood (Deal, 1986) and often incorporates solutions to problems repeatedly solved (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). Organizational use of web technology in the form of intranets, or private knowledge networks, is becoming ubiquitous yet little is known about how adults can learn and experience organizational culture through the technology. The purpose of this study was to understand how organizational culture and change are embedded into an organization's intranet. Specifically, this paper addresses the research question, How does the intranet provide an opportunity for learning about the organizational culture? To support this question, the culture of the case organization was also investigated.

Theoretical Frame

The primary theoretical frame for this study was organizational culture theory, which proposes that OC has multiple levels that range from explicit or surface forms of culture to tacit or deeply embedded forms (Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Schein, 1997, 1999). Tacit forms influence decisions and actions in an organizational environment even if members are unaware that this is occurring, particularly through corporate ideology. Traditional theories indicate that shared values and beliefs among members are central themes (Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Schein, 1997, 1999) and culture has content that can be managed (Sackmann, 1991). Organizations may use knowledge management systems such as intranets to manage culture as well as more discrete forms of information. There has been a growing interest in OC in hospitals. Research has found cultural pluralism among professional groups in medicine, including a strong demarcation of professional roles called tribalism (Bate, 2000; Brooks & Brown, 2002). Similarly, Sheridan, Proenca, White, and McGee (1993) studied six hospitals and found they varied by the degree to which different professional groups within each hospital shared common work values with other groups within the same hospital. In another hospital environment, Brooks and Brown (2002) found ceremonies of preservation and ceremonies of change in a hospital that was undergoing intense change. These studies

identify important suggest that there may be culturally based factors information sharing. Nonaka (1998) suggests tacit knowledge, insight, intuition, and ideals can be embodied into technologies through the use of images and symbols, indicating organizational culture may be embedded into an intranet in various forms and, therefore, could provide multiple ways for adults to learn about the culture. Symbols can be designed into intranets and tap into tacit cultural knowledge, and cultural knowledge can act as a filter through which organizational members determine relevance, meaning, and action when new information is received (Bennett, 2006).

Research Design

The research design was qualitative case study, which allowed for in-depth investigation of a phenomenon in a bounded system (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). There were two levels of sampling in this study. The first level was the case organization. Beacon Community Hospital (BCH) was selected because it met the criteria that included having an intranet strategic for fulfilling organizational mission that was in its sixth year of operation. The second level of sampling is within the case. A sampling matrix informed by Schein’s (1996) typical subcultures captured range and variation (see Table 1). Twelve people participated in the study.

Table One: Study Participants

| <i>Name</i> | <i>Age Range</i> | <i>Seniority</i> | <i>Gender</i> | <i>Race</i> | <i>Job Type</i> |
|-------------|------------------|------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| Amy | 35-49 | 14 | Female | White | Operative: Human Resources |
| Betty | 35-49 | 5 | Female | White | Clinical: Occupation Therapy |
| Bill | 35-49 | 15 | Male | White | Clinical: Critical Care Nursing |
| Courtney | 35-49 | 3 | Female | White | Management: Volunteers |
| James | 35-49 | 2.5 | Male | Black | Technical: Network Support |
| Jan | 35-49 | 13 | Female | White | Operative: Security Services |
| John | 35-49 | 8 | Male | White | Technical: Network Support |
| Max | 50+ | 7 | Male | White | Management: VP of HR |
| Paul | 21-34 | 7 | Male | White | Technical: Web Services |
| Priscilla | 50+ | 8 | Female | White | Operative: Biomedical Dept. |
| Star | 35-49 | 5 | Female | Black | Management: Housekeeping |
| Steve | 50+ | 17 | Male | White | Management: Info. Services |

Data were collected over five months. In-depth interviews were the primary source of data, supported by corporate documents and observations. Analysis was done using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998). An audit trail and member checks helped establish trustworthiness of the results.

Findings

Case Description and the Organizational Culture

Beacon Community Hospital (BCH) is a general and acute care medical center located in the Southeast of the United States. Approximately 3000 people employed by BCH. The intranet was instituted in 2000 and named “IAN”, which stands for “Information as Needed.” “IANpages” are accessible to all members of the corporation with some limitations based on department membership or job type. Employees can sign onto a personalized form of the intranet called “Your Intranet.” This allows them to view and alter their demographic data. Five primary cultural characteristics emerged. The

culture at BCH was found to be a) People-centered, which places a high value on respecting people, recognizing people through awards and ceremony, and protecting people, b) Highly Congruent with Values, which means the hospital believes espoused values should be lived daily through actions and decisions, c) Strategically Decentralized, which captures universal concerns such as legal, cultural, and financial issues handled by executive administration and decentralized empowerment that allows directors and employees latitude to determine their work environment, d) Data Driven, which reflects the pursuit of data for making decisions, and e) Organic in Nature, which reflects the diverse elements people bring to the organization. These characteristics are discussed threaded in greater detail in the findings.

Providing Opportunities for Learning Organizational Culture

Experiencing the wider organization. The first way in which the intranet provides an opportunity for learning organizational culture is through members *Experiencing the Wider Organization*. According to Max, “Culture is all about being in the middle of how employees interact, the experience of it.” The intranet is a vehicle for providing this cultural experience. Given the decentralized structure at BCH, it is reasonable that several interviewees mentioned feeling secluded from the mainstream of hospital activity. Specifically, James, Bill, and Courtney all said they felt isolated and they turned to IAN for information about the hospital community. The intranet is accessible by all corporate employees, including those off the main campus. IAN provides a communal knowledge resource that teaches employees what is important to the culture. The information provided through the intranet can be consumed in the moment but it is also used to build understanding of the culture by setting precedence. There are many new information postings each day and organizational members see repeated themes over time. One feature of the intranet commonly mentioned by participants to set precedence is the News Announcements section. News announcements are alerts published to the intranet by fellow staff and administrators. When employees see and experience similar themes occurring over time, they construct a larger understanding of the organization. For example, Courtney stated, “Several times a week I’ll read something of interest on IAN. Either something I can go to or blood drives. You can kind of tell what’s important. There’s that sense of community and family.” Steve commented that it is typical to see notes celebrating milestones like birthdays and retirements. Priscilla noted the intranet is used to encourage the community to support for grieving families when there is death occurs in the hospital community.

The intranet contains a classified advertisements section where employees can sell personal belongings or announce events. Although this feature is not directly business related it can help build community since members learn a little about colleague’s lives and is connected to the organic nature of the culture. The classifieds can spark social interaction and develop trust that ties the community together. For example, Betty has posted advertisements announcing her chorale concerts that have helped her meet colleagues with similar interests. She commented, “I’ve actually made friends with people [at BCH] that I never would have seen face-to-face before.” Star believes that there is a higher expectation of trust for what coworkers sell than in the local newspaper. If she did not tell the truth about an item she was selling, she would expect it to damage her professional reputation. The intranet is a space for community building and social interaction that draws employees closer to one another. They are not bound by time or

location, and IAN builds understanding of the organization through precedence and experience.

Recognizing and rewarding performance. The second way in which the intranet provides an opportunity for learning about the organizational culture is through *Recognizing and Rewarding Performance*. Recognizing people is a part of people-centrism at BCH that highlights the contributions that people have made to the hospital and the local community. There are several ways that employees are recognized and rewarded for performance through the intranet. These include awards and written expressions of gratitude published on IAN. One IANpage linked from the intranet home page is published by the Reward and Recognition Team. This team is composed of employees from a variety of departments and they help promote events for organizational members such as the annual employee talent show, which provides “an opportunity to build relationships and support amongst our co-workers.” News announcements are instrumental in recognizing and rewarding employees. An analysis of over two hundred news items over a six week period showed that recognition, awards, and expressions of thanks comprised 19.9% of all announcements, which was the largest category items posted to the intranet. Numerous announcements recognizing volunteers were posted to IAN in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, including an official proclamation from executive administration. This reflects core values important at BCH. Employees are recognized for exemplifying these values through a yearly awards ceremony. Betty commented that IAN is used to encourage employees to submit nominations for the value awards and to honor the winners each year.

Another way in which employees are recognized and rewarded through IAN is the electronic performance evaluation, which measures performance of job skills and how well employees lived out the core values at Beacon. Twenty-five percent of an employee’s performance evaluation is based on how well they enacted core values. James indicated he appreciates the electronic review process because it is easy to use and allows him to comment on his performance criteria. The measures themselves convey what performance is important to the hospital. Once the performance evaluation is completed and digitally signed by the employee, the results are transmitted to HR and employees then receive immediate feedback on their merit increase. The intranet’s ability to facilitate recognition and rewards for performance teaches employees what behaviors are valued at BCH. Valued performance is highlighted in news announcements in which contributions people make are published to the hospital community and through on-line performance evaluations that are directly connected to compensation.

Reinforcing organizational expectations. The third way in which the intranet provides an opportunity for learning about the organizational culture is by *Reinforcing Organizational Expectations*. The intranet at Beacon reinforces organizational expectations by continually highlighting what is important to the hospital. Reinforcement occurs by ingraining procedures through educational features and ensuring responsiveness by prompting employee action. An example of prompting occurs each quarter when employee’s sign onto their personal version of IAN called “Your Intranet” and they are required to update contact information. The system requires them to submit changes or confirm there are no changes before they can proceed any further. According to participants, this shows the hospital values current and accurate employee data. Another form of reinforcement occurs through what has become a cultural symbol on

IAN's homepage that reflects the hospital's concern for safety. It is a double-counter that tracks the number of days since an injury or serious exposure to illness and it was the one feature consistently mentioned by participants. James stated, "[It] is right there for everybody to see. If you've been exposed then those stats are publicized." Through its visibility, the symbol is able to reinforce organizational expectations by evoking a response from employees. That response can be pride if the counter stays high for many days. When a counter drops to zero there is a sense of shock that employees experience, even if they are not directly involved with the incident. Priscilla finds herself responding emotionally, stating, "I feel badly about that. I think [safety is] critically important to us as a culture, as a family." Seeing a counter drop makes Bill more mindful of following his nursing procedures exactly.

IAN reinforces expectations through education requirements and new procedures that need to be learned through updates. Bill stated, "I think [IAN] just reinforces what's expected of you by keeping you current." Intranet-based quizzes reinforce important concepts such as recognizing signs that indicate radioactive or poisonous substances. Many departments also have required reading that is downloaded and digitally signed to confirm the reading. The power of the intranet to reinforce organizational expectations comes from employees continually returning to and interacting with the intranet to meet requirements and expectations.

Modeling corporate communication style. The fourth way in which the intranet provides an opportunity for learning about the organizational culture is by *Modeling Corporate Communication Style*. This means that communication posted through IAN exemplifies acceptable forms and formats of communication within the corporation, including delineating urgent and important information. Modeling uses design features to show how corporate communication is to be accomplished and this helps employees learn about the organizational culture by example. One way in which IAN models corporate communication style is by the volume of information available to employees. Max said that IAN shows employees "we believe in open communications." According to Amy, there is an unwritten rule anything posted to IAN is "an open door to ask about it." Although communication at BCH is generally open it is not totally transparent. Financial information or other sensitive data is not published for general consumption. The placement content models corporate communication style by graphically showing what is most important to the hospital. Items positioned toward the top of the homepage are more visible than areas in which one must scroll to see. Other graphical elements are incorporated into IAN to call attention to urgent or important items, including upcoming deadlines. For example, the intranet displays a list of performance reviews that are coming due for managers starting at 90 days out from the due date. As the deadline approaches, the font will change to bolded black text and then bolded red text when the review is imminently due. The progression of textual cues makes it easy to see urgent deadlines. The design and content of IAN models corporate communication style by placing emphasis on what is important to Beacon. Members draw an understanding of the organization both by what is represented on IAN and also what is not there. For example, Priscilla believes that the removal of salary scales on job postings is meant to decrease the high number of internal job transfers. Graphical elements and placement of information are visual cues that support the conveyance of information to members.

Conclusion and Discussion

The findings show that organizational members learn culture through the intranet when they see patterns of precedence that help them make sense of their environment. The constant communication that occurs through IAN provides a concrete experience (see Kolb, 1996) through which members learn communication style and organizational values, which supports Deal's (1986) perspective understanding culture comes through experience. A primary conclusion of this study is that cultural knowledge is conveyed and renewed through the intranet. Culture is conveyed to organizational members as they read intranet messages and learn about what is important to the hospital. Symbols (see Nonaka, 1998) like the incident counter can tap into implicitly held values as well as explicit procedures. Renewal occurs as members learn new patterns of culture over time, which builds a larger understanding of the hospital's culture. It also suggests that culture could be shaped in negative ways if members experience punitive messages. There are multiple subcultures BCH consistent with other studies (Bate, 2000; Brooks & Brown, 2002; Sheridan et al., 1993). Unlike the tribalism found previously, however, BCH subcultures appear to be unified through the espoused values. Values are integrated into intranet content, especially news announcements. This is consistent with the centrality of shared values and beliefs in traditional organizational culture theories (Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Schein, 1997, 1999). The notion of "integrative culture" that is aligned along shared values as suggested by Sheridan et al. (1993) seems applicable to BCH. One unusual finding was that the organic nature that people contribute to the culture was a clear component of the intranet. The organic side of organizations is not well recognized in traditional OC theory. The effectiveness of cultural renewal is in the interaction members have with intranet content, which would include cultural content (Sackmann, 1991). This study suggests that there are ethical as well as practical issues when values are embedded into technology, and future research is needed to explore how adult learning and organizational effectiveness are affected over time.

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