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EXPLORING THE MICRO-DYNAMICS OF ADAPTABILITY: A SYMBOLIC- INTERPRETATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Much of the work in organizations is adaptive: it entails deviations from routines to adjust to the changing contexts. Despite this, the dynamics of adaptive work have been underexplored. Therefore, we explore adaptive work as a micro-dynamic of organizational adaptability through the focus on symbols individuals use in their work.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to adapt to continuously changing circumstances is critical for contemporary organizations (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Farjoun, 2010; Hamel, 2009; Miller, et al., 2012). However, adaptation is difficult - what we have known for a while is that organizations must build improvisational processes that embody both routine, efficient work and innovation via semistructuring (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997); generative properties (e.g., people, process, technology, and governance) (Garud, et al., 2006); or “entangling”—a dynamic relationship between formal, administrative forces focused on routine discharge of business, and informal adaptive forces focused on innovation and change (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2002; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). As a consequence, the main focus has been on how organizations embrace trade-offs between routine, efficient work and innovative work or somehow entangle them to achieve reliable performance (the “optimal adaptability”).

Yet, much of the work in contemporary organizations is not precisely routine or fully innovative, but occurs in the space between the two with innovations often emerging slowly and unexpectedly through it. This work is *adaptive* in that requires individuals to adjust to the new circumstances and ensure continuance of expected work performance when faced with obstacles or novelty. Building on the recent studies on organizational routines (Turner and Rindova, 2012; Dionysiou & Tsoukas 2013; Feldman & Pentland, 2003), optimal organizational adaptability (Garud, et al., 2006; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018), and our emergent findings, we define *adaptive work* as micro deviations individuals engage in to generate a response (such as workaround, solution, or a new routine) to an obstacle, unknown event, or influx of new information.

The purpose of this study is, thus, to explore dynamics of adaptive work by focusing on symbols individuals use in their daily interactions (Dandridge, et al., 1980; Feldman & March,

1981; Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001). Our specific focus in this study is how individuals in highly volatile and innovative technological context use different symbolic forms to structure adaptive work. Drawing from symbolic-interpretative research (Alvesson, 2011; Dandridge, et al., 1980; Smircich, 1983), we focused on symbols such as language, tools, and space that are infused by surplus of meaning. Given our focus on adaptive work and aligned with symbolic-interpretative research, we conducted ethnography of a rapidly growing tech firm located in the Midwest named for the purposes of this research, Digital100.

Our findings make three important contributions to the literature. First, we provide insight into dynamics of adaptive work. We show how individuals use different endogenous symbolic forms (tools, concepts, and language) in their work to infuse variably into their routines by both forming new connections (building shared understanding) and disrupting them (breaking the shared understanding). Second, our findings illustrate that adaptive work is difficult, permeated with conflicted tensions (i.e. inertia and routines that defy variability), and cannot occur in vacuum. Finally, we provide important insight into different symbolic forms that sustain adaptive work thus further illustrating the usefulness of symbols in understanding complex organizations. Our overarching contribution is insight into dynamics of adaptive work as central micro-dynamic of organizational adaptability.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Micro-Dynamics of Organizational Adaptability: The Role of Adaptive Work

The insight into micro adjustments occurring in individual work can be observed in recent research on organizational routines (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). For example, Turner and Rindova (2012) found that organizational members engage in multiple micro-adaptations in their enactment of routines that on the surface seem to deliver a relatively stable service to the customers but are highly dynamic within. In other words micro changes occurring in their practices are what sustain the stability of their end actions. Similarly, Salvato (2009) discovers how different experimental and adaptive activities on the micro level enable leaders to catch the variations and build new processes necessary for the organizational adaptability. Glaser (2017) also shows that individuals leverage different artifacts to influence routine dynamics, disrupting the status quo, and enabling organization to adapt.

Current Study: The Symbolic Interpretative Approach to Adaptive Work

The adaptability to changing circumstances is permeated with conflicting elements such as autonomy and constraint (Harrison & Rouse, 2014); disruption and order (Salvato, 2009; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018); improvisation and design (Garud et al., 2011) and diversity and brokering of conflicted elements (Garud et al., 2013; Latour, 1994; Lingo & O'Mahony, 2010). In this context, individuals have to enact their routines but also stay responsive to local circumstances and adjust accordingly (Garud, et al, 2013; Milosevic, et al., 2018; Tsoukas, 2008). However, the responsiveness to local circumstances difficult because it takes significant work to infuse variability into the routine work and overcome the inertia when faced with a new obstacle or a problem (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Bechky, 2003)

To explore how individuals adapt to changing circumstances and create workarounds – what we term adaptive work - we rely on symbolic interpretative research (Alvesson, 2011). In

symbolic interpretative research, symbols as a unit of analysis, are defined as “significations which embody and represent some wider pattern of meaning” (Morgan et al., 1983: 5). They are tools, words, actions, and stories that are infused by surplus of meanings and thus allow individuals to communicate richer messages and build shared understanding (Czarniawska, 1997; Pratt & Rafaeli 2001; Trice, 1984). Contemporary symbolic-interpretative research gives agency to individuals to not just interpret meanings around them, but to also construct them (Rindova, et al., 2010; Weber & Dacin, 2011). More specifically, it portrays individuals as cultural entrepreneurs who construct and utilize different cultural forms in a pragmatic manner and for a particular purpose (Baker & Nelson 2005; Lounsbury & Glynn 2001; Turner & Rindova, 2012).

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Context

Digital100 is a web technology organization that provides digital solutions for advertising, business development, and payment management in non-profit and print industries. In their first ten years, Digital100 experienced tremendous growth through innovative solutions emergence. However, during data collection, we learned that what makes the context particularly interesting is not the growth from innovation, but the struggles that growth creates. Within the first month of data collection we learned that much of the work individuals are engaging in this organization is not innovative – at least not as it was before or as it is described in the literature: intentional creation and application of new ideas (Janssen, 2000) that are considered novel and useful for the individual and organization (Amabile, 1983). More specifically, the firm was struggling with “growing pains” as they searched for new routines to ground innovative pursuits and limit failures. This entailed dealing with new obstacles and problems as individuals worked to preserve the “organic” innovative work but also embrace new routines. As a consequence, we observed that much of the work they engaged was adaptive in the sense that it embodied workarounds and adjustments in response to new obstacles. It is precisely this adaptive work that enabled them to optimize routines while maintaining adaptive space for innovative insights.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred across four months intensive immersion in the field and included a combination of observation of everyday practices, formal and informal interviews, and archival documentation of both publicly available (such as website and newspaper articles) as well as private documents provided by the firm (informal company timeline, meeting minutes, photographs of different events/meetings, and other company reports). We looked for (1) opportunities to generate insight into the history of the organization (the first author attended formal and informal meetings as well as engaged in observation of the general context); (2) different symbolic forms that held meaning for employees (by focusing on the messages held by those symbolic forms and how employees used them in the work); and (3) opportunities to observe the situations in which participants were in the process of adaptive work and inquire about those situations during the interviews. Participants were company employees who interacted with us in meetings, observation and interviews. We interviewed managers as well as employees who were active participants in adaptive work (e.g., software developers, content creators, quality engineers).

Data Analysis Procedures

We approach our data analysis inductively, building the themes from the bottom up (Creswell, 2013; Wolcott, 2008). Following Wolcott (1994, 2008), we began working on a preliminary analysis while fieldwork was still in progress. Formal data analysis procedure developed across four stages. In the first stage, we engaged in multiple readings of the observational, interview and archival data in order to “immerse in the details” and gain a holistic understanding of the organization (Agar, 1980). In the second stage, we engaged in the formal analysis of the data using MAXQDA software and coded observational, interview and archival data. In the initial coding we focused on three categories of codes: expected codes, surprising codes, and unusual codes (Creswell, 2013). In the third stage, we used the coding process to generate a description of the setting as well as identify emerging themes of the study. Finally we provided an interpretation of the findings and probe regarding “what is to be made of them” by bringing in the available literature and identifying aggregate themes that illustrate adaptive space (Wolcott, 1994: 36).

FINDINGS

In the symbolic-interpretative tradition, symbols encompass different tools, words, actions, and stories that carry surplus of meanings (i.e., meanings above and beyond their actual significations) thereby allowing individuals to build a richer understanding to navigate their complex realities (Alvesson, 2011; Czarniawska, 1997; Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001). For example, during one of our observation instances, a participant exclaimed: “That doesn’t suck!” in response to a proposed workaround. If taken without its symbolic meaning, this utterance might be interpreted as inappropriate. But precisely because of its symbolic value in the given context, this utterance symbolizes a success and communicates to others that they reached an important milestone in their adaptive work. In other words, it is this symbolic value of words, tools, and processes that enables meaningful action to take place in the context of adaptive space.

In this study, we discovered that individuals rely on, what we term endogenous symbols to introduce variability into the routines while building a common point of reference (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2011). According to Shotter and Tsoukas (2011: 345), symbols, “orient people toward their common situation in a like manner, namely they are joined together as co-participants in a situation, which they know, understand, and evaluate in the same way.” This is important as it provides individuals with the commonalities needed to continue deviating from routines and infusing variability within (Lingo & O’Mahony, 2010). However, we also discovered that these common reference points are frequently disrupted as individuals engage with the adaptive space. When this occurs, the understanding breaks facilitating opportunities for adaptive work.

For example, in dealing with a problem related to the online library for their clients, team members were struggling to connect for a period of time. They did not have a stable point of reference—a commonality they could build from—to engage in productive dialogue and generate an appropriate response. They understood, to an extent, what they are working on – the interface of the online library was not working properly - but could not understand how to fix it.” One member explained it as bouncing off ideas that did not stick (they were conflicting): “I just remember [name of the member]... (Laughs) we had been bouncing ideas off of each other for some time now.” In this situation the ambiguity (multiple interpretations) was still overpowering,

and preventing a productive dialogue. But, as she explained, everything “clicked” once a team member mentioned iTunes:

“...and he said ‘Well I have been looking at iTunes.’ And so we pulled it up and were looking at it, and all of us...I just remember [name of the participant] being just like ‘That’s it! Why didn’t we think of this? We are going to use that structure.’ It was just... it was easy for us to envision because we talked about all these things, so obviously we were all ... you could tell it just clicked for all of us. We were like ‘Oh ok, this is what we have been trying to get at but we didn’t have an example...we could not put it in an actual idea’ thing you can tell with all of us...”

This work was not innovative in the sense that it created a product or service that benefit the organization or the individual (Amabile, 1983; Janssen, 2000) but it was adaptive in that it enabled these individuals to adapt to the new circumstances (problems with library customer interface) and generate an appropriate response. It required them to disrupt their routine work via introduction of the external variability (iTunes) that connected their conflicted experiences with the problem to generate the adaptive response.

We also discovered the important role exogenous symbolic forms play in imposing external pressures that enable adaptive space by bounding variability into routines. Adaptive work requires considerable personal (time, effort, and learning) and organizational (time, human, and financial capital) resources. Furthermore, individuals are more likely to engage in routine work that is familiar, that worked in the past, and is widely considered as legitimate. For adaptive work to occur, urgency and importance are needed to push them to deviate from those routines and infuse new variability. Without this external pressure, there is little push for elements that are naturally conflicting to link up. Unlike endogenous symbolic forms, which are more fluid and dynamic, exogenous symbolic forms are relatively stable in order to contain adaptive space. For example, temporal artifacts motivated individuals to impose local constraints, albeit elastic ones, around the process to shorten time for discovery, and thereby heightened the involvement and focus. A participant illustrated these efforts at constraining the time available for the interactions thus increasing the urgency thus refocusing the adaptive work:

“So it made sense to try to constrict it a little bit to try to make them little more productive so they were not...I mean if you look at the clock and you have 40 minutes left and you have only one more thing to talk about then you are going to wonder a little bit. It is good I think to kind’a try to focus a little bit more on ‘oh we only have 5 more minutes we better talk about this right now!’”

DISCUSSION

By looking at adaptive work as a vehicle for organizational adaptability, we uncover how individuals use different symbols (such as tools, language, and actions) to infuse stability into the routine by connecting dispersed insights as well as disrupting those connections. In this way, we contribute to the organizational adaptability literature by moving away from focusing on a duality of opposing forces, and toward a view of adaptability as a complex dynamic process occurring through micro adjustments within the adaptive work. Indeed, our findings provide insight into how routine is continuously recreated via novel human action (Dionysiou & Tsoukas, 2013; Salvato, 2009; Turner & Rindova, 2012); as well as how routines sustain variability (Garud et al., 2013; Glaser, 2017). To this end, focusing on adaptive work as a microcosm of adaptability (Garud et al., 2011; Harrison & Rouse, 2014; Salvato, 2009; Uhl-Bien

& Arena, in press) allowed us to gain insight into the dynamics of “conflicting” and “disrupting” in adaptive work that are at the heart of organizational ability to adapt.

Our findings further show that adaptive work does not and cannot occur in vacuum. Appropriate space surrounding adaptive work is needed for variability to be considered as well as overcome the inertia of the current, legitimized routines. More specifically, routines resist change and adaptive work may not occur unless variability and routine are in relative proximity to each other. And although connecting with the adaptive work creates the needed tension for adaptive work, the space that bounds the tension is what creates optimal conditions for adaptive work to sustain. We empirically illustrate how temporal, interactive, and spatial symbols enclose adaptive work, creating an adaptive space: optimal conditions that sustain the adaptive work. To this end, we build a theoretical model that explicates adaptive work that embodies variability and routine as an interlocking complex dynamic, rather than as a competing or “paradoxical” force occurring within bounds of adaptive space (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010).

Finally, in using a symbolic-interpretative lens, we uncovered how endogenous and exogenous symbols act as connectors, disruptors, and pressures that sustain the adaptive work. Aligned with extant literature (Rindova et al., 2010; Strati, 1998; Turner & Rindova, 2012), our findings illustrate that endogenous symbols enable individuals to form new connections and infuse variability into routine. However, we also discover that they use these symbols to disrupt the established understanding, thus opening up new avenue of the inquiry. In addition, we illustrate how exogenous symbols create space for adaptive work in three different ways: elastic, anchoring, and static. Temporal artifacts are elastic in that they are imposed only temporarily, to a particular local circumstance, and thus provide an elastic envelopment around the adaptive space. Integrative tools anchor adaptive work within a particular time and space and thus are relatively more durable. Finally, spatial artifacts are fully static with the primary purpose of enabling continuous interaction via formal and informal spaces.

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