SUITABILITY AND USE OF EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL FLOW OF INFORMATION IN FINNISH COMPANIES

Manninen O, Talonen H

Business Research Centre (BRC), FIN-33014 University of Tampere, Finland

Abstract

This article compares the combined use and suitability of applications representing the new so-called information and communication technology (ICT) and conventional communications for the development of the work and production environment in enterprises. The comparisons are based on information from a total of 249 Pirkanmaa-based enterprises and working organizations representing five different sectors that had been collected with the postal questionnaire of the FourFive project in November-December of 2000.

The results of the analyses show that both managers and persons in positions of trust found conventional media such as the press, radio and television highly suitable external media in the development of work and production environments. The least suitable in their opinion were multimedia, information networks and video. For internal communications the enterprises of the five sectors considered personnel meetings by far the most suitable means of communication for implementing developments in the working community. By contrast, bulletin boards were found the most ineffective means of internal communication.

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Key words: Company development and training - Human resources - Information technology - Communication technology - Media - Knowledge management

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges we are facing both in Finland and other part of the world is how to support the development of small- and medium-sized enterprises. The qualitative development of small- and medium-sized enterprises is closely intertwined with the employees' fitness for work and issues related to the work and working and production environment. Special training needs arise from the experiences of and observations made in hundreds of small- and medium-sized enterprises in various countries of the European Community (Henry 1995, Manninen 1996). Due to the distortion of our population structure, the special training needs of small- and medium-sized enterprises will in near future be even more closely associated with job satisfaction and willingness to continue working. This issue is particularly topical and challenging because of the continuous growth of the relative share
of aging and old people, the decrease of available labour through retirement, and a threatening shortage of labour. Promoting and maintaining the fitness for work and working ability of skilled workers has become a key factor in the development of companies.

From the point of view of training and utilization of new information the situation poses many interesting challenges. For instance, according to the official communication model people in working communities should receive information concerning working ability, the development of work and labour protection mainly from the labour protection personnel of the workplace, the labour protection organization, occupational health service and shop stewards, but the model does not work in small working communities because they have no labour protection personnel, shop stewards or labour protection organization. The urgency of this issue is also verified by the finding that two out of three companies using various chemicals have no knowledge of the legislation on chemicals (Ogden 1998) and that micro-companies trust the information received from suppliers and their own experiences more than information received from labour protection authorities and unions (Topping et al 1998). This reflects the central problem with communication, namely how the information reaches its target. Indeed, it does not always reach the target for which it was meant, and even if it reaches the targeted department or work cell, it may still fail to reach the people who need it most (Hudspith and Hay 1998).

In small enterprises the responsibility of the manager for disseminating information, promoting communication, discussing with and listening to the employees is crucial (Manninen et al 1998). Managers of small enterprises are like gatekeepers of information because they decide whether to pass on information received via different channels or not (Shoemaker 1991).

Objectives of the research

DISTRIBUTING INFORMATION IS THE ONLY WAY TO MAKE ENTERPRISES AND WORKING COMMUNITIES MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE.

Knowledge drives the economy, and a company's greatest assets are often its employee's skills. Information and communication technologies can open the way to a continually stimulating working and learning environment (UNDP 2001, Vanbuel et al 2000). The key question that all managers face is how to apply and distribute knowledge. In other words how to manage it and make it work for you (Kluge et al 2001).

From the point of view of motivation, productivity and safety of work, it is crucial that we can provide such training and transmit such information and good examples and practices that the people at the workplaces will be able to
apply them to the development of their own work and the promotion of their mental and physical fitness.

The purpose of this work is, on the one hand, to examine how managers and people holding positions of trust in companies representing sectors under radical structural changes use external media for the development of the working and production environments of their companies, and, on the other hand, how suitable they consider different methods of collecting and distributing information to and from the members of the working community in order to implement development measures inside the company. Regarding the development of electronic communications a special objective was to obtain reference data to compare the suitability of applications representing the so-called new information and communication technology (ICT) and conventional media and communication methods in the development of companies.

Material and methods

The information was collected in connection with the questionnaire study of the regional FourFive project during November-December of 2000 (Manninen 2001). The questionnaire studies are a continuation of a similar questionnaire study to manufacturing enterprises of the textile and clothing industry (Manninen 2000). The target group of the questionnaire study consisted of companies representing five sectors under radical structural changes. These companies included Pirkanmaa-based manufacturing enterprises of the textile and clothing sector, shoe and leather sector, building sector, building services sector and public transportation sector. Information was also collected from major expert organizations.

Results

The questionnaire was addressed to company managers (n=825) and persons holding positions of trust in the same companies (n=189) in Tampere Region (Pirkanmaa). So the target group comprised a total of 1014 persons in 825 companies. After two calls for returning the questionnaire, 322 persons of the target group returned the form properly completed by the deadline. These persons represent altogether 249 companies and working organizations. The response rate was thus 31.8 %, which can be considered rather typical response rate of previous postal inquiries concerning working life.

The results are characterized by percentages according to sectors and in groups formed on the basis of company size, and based on individual responses of the managers and trusted persons.

Suitability of external media and methods of communication

In the shoe and leather sector the press, radio and television are assessed either as suitable or very suitable media. By contrast, opinions multimedia (60 %) and information networks (47 %) are not considered suitable at all (Figure
In the public transportation sector the press is seen as the most suitable media. About one out of two respondents thinks that no development measures can be implemented by using multimedia (60 %), information networks (50 %) or video (50 %) ([Figure 2]). The respondents representing the building sector find the press, radio and television as suitable external media. One out of three respondents thinks that multimedia (40 %), video (37 %) and information networks (35 %) are not suitable at all ([Figure 3]). Employees of enterprises of the building services sector find the press the most suitable media. More than a half (54 %) of the respondents thinks that multimedia is not at all suitable. Video and information networks are also seen almost as poorly suited for practical development work ([Figure 4]). The personnel of expert organizations are rather unanimous that the press and television are the most suitable media. Company visits and lectures are seen as the third and information networks as the fourth most suitable media for implementing development measures. The main difference from the working organizations of other sectors is that experts generally consider information networks as suitable media ([Figure 5]). In enterprises of the textile and clothing sector people find the most suitable media and communication methods to be the press, radio and company visits. In their opinion the most poorly suited media are multimedia, information networks and video (Manninen 2000).

**Suitability of internal media and communication methods**

In the opinion of the personnel working in the shoe and leather sector ([Figure 6]), public transportation sector ([Figure 7]), building sector ([Figure 8]), and building services sector ([Figure 9]) staff meeting is the most suitable communication method for the development of their working community. In expert organizations both staff meetings and staff inquiries are deemed as the most suitable communication methods ([Figure 10]).

The bulletin board was seen as the least suitable method of communication by the personnel of the companies representing the shoe and leather sector, the building sector, and expert organizations. In the public transportation sector, cell meetings and quality team were seen as the least suitable methods of communication. In the building services sector, management inspection was generally rated as the least suitable communication method.

**Suitability of media and methods of communication in companies of different sizes**

The possible significance of company size was studied more closely from the responses of the personnel of companies representing the building sector and building services sector.

The results revealed that there is some correlation between company size and people’s views on the suitability of individual external media and internal means of communication for development measures.
There is statistically significant evidence that the personnel of large companies of the building sector (of more than 19 employees) find company visits and lectures suitable method of communication more often than the personnel of smaller companies (1-19 employees; Figure 11, Figure 12). In the building services sector, there is no statistically significant difference in the responses of the personnel of small and big companies with regard to the suitability of any media (Figure 13, Figure 14). In the building sector, management inspection is significantly less popular in small companies (Figure 15) than in big ones (Figure 16). In big companies (more than 19 employees) representing the building services sector, people find staff inquiry a significantly more suitable method of communication and collection of information than do the personnel of smaller companies (1-19 employees) representing the same sector (Figure 17, Figure 18).

**Suitability of media and methods of communication based on responses of the managers and the trusted persons**

In the building sector, the managers find the press, radio and television as suitable external media (Figure 19). About 40 % of the managers think that multimedia and video is not at all suitable. In the same sector, the trusted persons think also that the press and television are the most suitable external media (Figure 20) whereas multimedia and information networks are poorly suited for practical development work.

Likewise in the building sector, the managers in the building services sector find the press, radio and television as the most suitable external media for implementing development measures (Figure 21). By contrast, more than a half (57.4 %) of the managers thinks that multimedia is not at all suitable. Company visits and lectures are assessed by the trusted persons as suitable or very suitable method of communication (Figure 22). The trusted persons in the building services sector also think that multimedia and video are poorly suited for practical development work. In the opinion of the managers in the building sector (Figure 23) staff meeting is the most suitable internal communication method. By contrast, the trusted persons in the building sector rated suggestion box, staff meeting and staff inquiry as the most suitable internal communication methods (Figure 24). Likewise in the building sector, the managers in the building services sector rate staff meeting as the most suitable internal method (Figure 25) and the trusted persons in the building services sector rate suggestion box and staff inquiry as the most suitable internal communication method (Figure 26).

**Discussion**

There is a lot of talk about the information superhighway and the overwhelming power of global network trade. The results of this study, however, prove that the reality and practice in small companies is something different: even today small companies shun information networks and modern ICT. They prefer to use the familiar conventional media in the acquisition of
Both managers and persons holding positions of trust assess the conventional media such as the press, radio and television as external media most suitable for the development of the working and production environments. To their mind, the least suitable media for development are multimedia, information networks and video.

Moreover, company people unanimously prefer traditional face-to-face staff meetings. They want to put questions and get answers to their questions without delay. They prefer personal conversations.

When we during our visits to workplaces asked the managers and entrepreneurs about their reasons for the minimal use information networks, the standard explanation was the excessive difficulty in finding the desired information, the fact that the information is scattered all over the network, it is mainly written in a foreign language, and people simply do not have the time to sit at the display terminal. One probable reason could also be the abundance and inconsistent nature of the information available in the network (Battison and Whitehand 1996). Surfing in information networks is evidently quite time-consuming, tedious and frustrating if you do not know exactly what to search for, and where and how it can be found. The use of information networks involves the same problem as institutional training: both methods to acquire information are considered too time-consuming.

The results of this study are largely similar to those obtained from Central-Finland based enterprises representing the metal industry, the building sector and car service stations (Manninen et al 1998) as well as the results from Häme-based enterprises of the textile and clothing sector (Manninen 2000). Managers usually (70 %) regarded information networks (such as the internet) as a good thing but did not find them particularly useful for the daily development work of companies. The results of the European DEUS research project are also mainly in line with the present results (DEUS 1997).

Our observations also reveal that people in companies with an open and effective communication atmosphere are also considerably more willing to receive new information and influences from various media than people in companies of the same size with an ineffective internal communication atmosphere. Many of these small companies with a good internal communication atmosphere are expanding their operations, engaged in exports or subcontractors to big companies. The willingness of small companies to maximize the benefits drawn from the use of media depends essentially on the manager’s favorable attitude towards the issue.

Besides the promotion of people's readiness and preconditions to get information from external media, it is also of central importance that inside working communities and companies, information, opinions and experiences can be exchanged and transmitted to other people without obstacles, distortion and delays. As our results show, common information and discussion events arranged for all staff members are the most suitable means to this end.
As a whole our results raise many questions. There is still much to be done in the future. For this reason, our central objective is to promote the utilization of the Internet and to train and inspire employees of companies to acquire useful information. It is our intention to investigate the possibilities of optimal in-house training and information distribution at workplaces in more detail, in order to promote people’s fitness for work and reduce various symptoms indicating that people are not quite happy with their work. The combined use of different media plays a key role in this work.

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Reference


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