

About the Impact of Information Technologies on the Atmosphere at the Workplace

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1 ABSTRACT

Perhaps for cities in transition from old industry to modern economic activities, to create jobs is not enough. These jobs have to generate satisfaction among workers. Some unease which appeared in the cutting-edge firms (in general using Information Technologies) has been documented by sociologists. To analyse this phenomenon we propose three clues:

- lack of organic solidarity (in the Durkheim's words)
- narratives. In the case of workers, they should not show frustration.
- anomie. Anomie of some workers should be taken into account. Internal social networks and internal crowd sourcing are remedies.

2 INTRODUCTION

Let us start from Weberian sociology. At the time of large bureaucracies, workers liked them even if they were "cages in iron", according to Max Weber. It was the time of the exchange protection / obedience. Workers were loyal, liking when some personal initiative was required, even if the rules were ubiquitous (Sennett, 2008). In 1930, the sociologist Kracauer heralded the end of this loyalty (in "The salaried masses") because of the Great Depression generating millions of jobless people. However it lasted during decades. Today all this is changed. It is the time of the exchange reward / potential (Sennett, 2008). According to the American sociologist Richard Sennett, it is because the cutting-edge firms want a financial performance which is beneficial to shareholders, while Information Technologies allow a tighter control over workers executing the tasks which are ordered. For workers, the stake is less to have a job, and more professional skills fully employed.

Some unease inside cutting-edge firms has been well documented by sociologists, in particular Richard Sennett. What think of this phenomenon? How analyse it? Sociology provides two clues:

- a lack of organic solidarity. For the Durkheimian tradition in sociology, the remedy is to create enough organic solidarity thanks to rules.
- narratives and anomie. Here the idea is to study what is said by the actors themselves. One is aware that their sensitivities (in a sense which will be defined) matter, that they are diverse. Of course, anomie is possible among workers. Let us present some sensitivities which are possible among workers:¹

	Collective centred	Autonomous	Passionate
Doctrine	Values and norms structure the community	Self-organization	The market generates projects
Trends, personalities	Socialism, State capitalism, Weber	Free association, Castoriadis, Debord	Information Society, Innovation, Schumpeter

Given the diverse sensitivities one cannot choose a single model to organize teams. Locally, managers should be able to organize their teams as they want. In particular, performance indicators (which are calculated by computers) should not be the only means to manage teams.

3 THE LACK OF ORGANIC SOLIDARITY

According to Durkheim, Society evolves from mechanical solidarity (based on similarities) to organic solidarity (based on division of labour). But there is an anomic division of labour: industrial crisis, conflicts between workers and capitalists... It will end thanks to Progress, because all those contributing to production

¹ The list is not exhaustive. New sensitivities could appear, such as an ethical one or an environmental one.

are more and more in contact, to obtain coordination. This triggers agreement. On this topic, Durkheim was wrong (Friedmann, 1964). Taylorism appeared. In a society enthusiastic about discoveries such as mechanization, statistical methods, the economic importance of productivity ... this way to organize labour was invented. It was criticized as soon as the twenties. Taylorism moved back because of innovations like rotation and transfer of tasks, enlargement of tasks, enrichment of tasks, and finally the Deming's workgroups on quality. Today, Taylorism has disappeared, at least in industrialized countries. But our society is enthusiastic about other discoveries: diffusion processes (logistic curve, percolation...), Markov chains, computing ... Hence the temptation to organize work in industry producing services (like call centres) on the same principles than Taylorism: separation of conception and execution, timing (concerning tasks), individual incentives to increase productivity etc.

Again, there is a lack of organic solidarity. According to the proponents of Durkheim's ideas, recourse is Law.² Rules should prevent workers from work being too much exhausting, monotonous and tedious. They should guarantee that jobs provide the satisfaction that workers expect.

More generally, this is the problematic of "integration".

4 ABOUT INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES

Narratives interest people. Take the example of anthropological narratives: Sacagawea (the Indian woman who guided Clark and Lewis), Dersou Ouzala (the Siberian hunter), the poor whites in the South of United States whose life is described by James Agee in his book "Let us now praise famous men"... They move us because they cope with some bad luck and are on the way to their destiny. To speak as Kracauer in his book "The theory of the film", they are in the "flow of life". The workers' narratives show how individuals want to construct some "meaning of existence", and work is also concerned. Richard Sennett adds: a good understanding of the work which is done, in its evolution (there are breakthroughs and periods of stability), its characteristics, its stakes etc. Also, the narratives show a need for participation and autonomy. Narratives are a means to analyse the atmosphere at the workplace. They should not show that work is frustrating for workers.

5 ABOUT ANOMIE

We do not speak of anomie in the same sense as Durkheim. According to Durkheim, individuals are anomic when they are outside Society, for some reason. Thanks to Progress, it will disappear, even if some time is required. According to the French sociologist Duvignaud an individual is anomic when his (her) strong desire cannot be fulfilled in Society, now. There are many anomic individuals in a society in transition, changing (and it is obviously the case of the society, now). These anomic individuals experiment new sensitivities. Duvignaud give these examples: the Artist, the Prince, the Adventurer and the Lover. Obviously, workers can be influenced by anomic sensitivities. Again, it is the theme of the diversity of sensitivities.

According to the French philosopher Jean Marie Guyau, who used the word anomie for the first time when analysing Society, anomie is the attempt to experiment, explore a new intellectual and ethical option. In the best case, it will be accepted by all after a discussion. Therefore, discussion about ethical options chosen by anomic individuals is fertile.

Let us quote some famous names of anomic individuals who spoke of work. Paul Lafargue heralded the end of work and the era of leisure, an evolution that he praised. Jacques Duboin coined the term "abundancism". This theory heralds the end of capitalism because of the huge progress in mechanization: human work becomes useless... It lasts only because ... capitalists have some interest in slowing the replacement of human work by machines. Duboin was a proponent of shared work (but there was very little work to share, according to him). The whole discussion on work between the two World Wars was not in vain. As it is said by Guyau (in his book on ethics), thanks to our fathers who made mistakes, we are able to avoid the same mistakes today. Now, we know that jobs are indispensable, but they have to be satisfactory for workers.

According to Guyau, there are three kinds of associations: associations of abilities, of wills, of sensitivities. A cutting-edge firm cannot be an association of wills, only. It has also to be an association of sensitivities.

² In France, the sociologist Gurvitch thought that it was the remedy.



6 CONCLUSION

Is indifference to this unease in cutting-edge firms possible? It was the thought of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. He thought that today the society is a competitive one, requiring individuals to make efforts to succeed. They are very much motivated. It is unavoidable that those who fail feel frustration. In our opinion, this argument is not acceptable. Let us recall what has been said by Arthur Koestler in his book “The yogi and the commissar”. One cannot justify great hardships which are suffered by people in a country, even if a better society is built: it is because we have not the knowledge of ethics which would allow fixing an accurate “threshold” (below which the hardships would be justified).

For empirical reasons the top managers in cutting-edge firms are obliged to react. The image of the firm could be damaged, and the unease has bad economic consequences (absenteeism, serious illnesses...). The means they use are: to listen to workers, to give more power to those managing the teams locally, to slow the pace of professional and geographical mobility etc.

One can do more. We suggest three means to improve the atmosphere at the workplace: to analyse the failures (or “negative loops”) to make an intervention possible, to use Information Technologies to track the atmosphere at the workplace and its evolution or to favour original ideas and participation.

6.1 Analysing failures (or negative loops)

Researchers have applied the ideas of the psychologists of the Palo Alto school to the analysis of collective failures. In a group, interactions and feedbacks matter so much that the behaviour of every actor depends on the behaviour of the other ones. If the group is failing, it is difficult to analyse the reasons. One can change nothing. One can analyse this kind of “negative loop” thanks to a method involving several stages:

- to make an hypothesis and choose a focus (some way to consider the system of the relationships)
- to identify the recurrent, repetitive messages, which are clues to understand the situation
- to these messages one attributes “forms” (accusation, concealing, protection...)
- the interpretation of the messages thanks to “forms” reveals the roles of the actors. Since roles are mutually determined, one is clarified thanks to the other being clarified.
- when the hypothesis is confirmed, an intervention becomes possible (Muchielli, 2004).

Let us imagine two situations like that:

- in a cutting edge firm the catalogue (of the products and services which are sold) is complex because the sprawling offer triggers a “feeling of power” which delights the customer (according to Richard Sennett, the possibility of buying many kinds of products, even if it is impossible to achieve, makes the customer enthusiastic). Therefore one obliges the vendors in call centres to follow “scripts”. They do not like them, because they cannot understand the commercial policy of the firm and have initiatives to succeed in selling the firm’s products to particular customers. Complaints will be refused since there is the “pressure of the customers”. Etc.
- there are abuses of individual incentives. In a team, those with a good score cannot help those with a bad score since it would be to loose energy and time (to help a colleague does not improve the record). Without advices, they remain with a bad record. Any claim is useless, since the manager is obliged to consider some performance indicators only. Etc.

The interactions matter so much that there is a collective liability, only. However if after the causes of the failure of the group have been analysed, an intervention is possible, this should be chosen.

6.2 Tracking the atmosphere at the workplace

One can collect data on the atmosphere at the workplace and its evolution. These data are of two kinds: social (absenteeism, illnesses, strikes, complaints) or psychological (questionnaires are answered by workers). All this is facilitated by Internet. Such a tool allows measuring the improvement of the atmosphere at the workplace, in case a program is rolled out to obtain this.

6.3 Recourse to internal crowd sourcing and Social Networks Sites

One could paraphrase the Palo Alto school (“one cannot not communicate”) and say: one cannot not participate in “logical duels”. The “logical duel”, according to the sociologist Tarde, is a discussion or debate, to make the choice which is accepted by Society, in these fields: religion, ethics, Law, and even technology, since there is a theory on invention in the Tarde’s works.³ According to Guyau, individuals experiment options, and become anomic individuals since new, original options are at first discussed (challenged). Finally, these options are accepted or refused. It is good because progress of knowledge is always difficult, and any activity is in itself a pleasure for individuals (even if the personal option is refused, to support a choice is in itself a pleasure).

Studies have found that crowd sourcing inside large firms (that is to say, a site allowing the staff to propose new ideas to improve operations of all kinds in the firm) interest anomic people (Villaroel and Reis, 2010). Anomic individuals from the point of view of the rank and the geographic site are particularly active in this field. It is the Guyau’s idea that to take anomie into account is good.

Another means to trigger participation and let anomic individuals propose their personal options is Social Networks Sites, that is to say sites on Intranet allowing all kinds of small communities. Thanks to the means of social network, communities appear spontaneously, depending on tastes, opinions on what is at stake in the firm etc. It is useful to rebuild informal trust and “adaptive knowledge”,⁴ which are damaged by the “model” of cutting edge firms and its consequences on the workforce, according to Richard Sennett.

6.4 About some stakes for cities

Some cities are engaged in the replacement of jobs which are dirty, painful and dangerous and trigger pollution, by jobs which are creative, interesting and secure. The quality of life in cities is at stake. However, some objectives have to be achieved, if one wants that jobs created in headquarters, firms selling services or the high tech sector, allow the workers being as satisfied as they expect to be. In some cases, Information Technologies allow measures to improve the atmosphere in firms which concern the cities: one can promote teleworking, or maintain in activity some sites in small cities, if it corresponds to workers’ claims.

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³ According to Tarde, the result of a logical duel is accepted by all because of imitation.

⁴ It is the knowledge allowing the mutual adaptation of the workers in the firm.

