

Information, communication and the use of humour: Creating flexibility in changing organisations

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INTRODUCTION

The past decades' flexibility debate has primarily focused on structural means for adapting organisations to different kinds of changes, i.e. ideas based on Atkinson's model of 'the flexible firm' (1984, Atkinson & Meager 1986). This has been elaborated by other scholars who suggest flexibility as a matter of adaptation of the production organisation to meet demand with regard to volume and composition; the adaptiveness of the labour force to carry out different tasks (multiskilling); and the mobility of the labour force with respect to work and working hours or alignment of salaries (cf. van den Berg, Furåker & Johansson 1997, Skorstad 2006). In addition, Eldridge and Nisar (2006) point out that flexibility in work organisations is dependent on factors that stress workforce participation, collaborative working and multifaceted skills development. These are aspects reliant on a workforce that is willing to adapt to and comply with such work conditions, i.e. an organisation with employees that are being flexible.

In this paper, the relationship between flexibility, communication and control is examined. It utilizes results from two separate studies on flexibility. One of the studies investigates how organisational transformation influences the working conditions of employees, and the other study is concerned with the relationship between flexibilisation and worker resistance. The discussion, combining both studies, focuses on information sharing, communication and the use of humour, which in this paper are regarded as mechanisms essential for developing flexibility in organisations. These mechanisms are not usually focused in studying flexibility, but as we argue, are crucial for the creation of flexible working environments

THEORETICAL STARTING POINTS

The main interest of this paper is the relationship between flexibility, communication and job control. Flexibility can be defined as "the propensity of an actor or a system to exhibit variation in activities or states which is correlated with some other variation and desirable in view of this variation" (Jonsson 2007:31). This can be exemplified by how working hours may vary as a response to changes in production volume. These are activities initiated by management (the organisation) and therefore desired by the same in order to keep down costs. On the other hand, flexible organisational systems require flexible employees (Granberg 2004), i.e. employees willing to adapt. According to Hård af Segerstad (1982) there are three main criteria for people's adaptation to their environment: the ability to stay informed about the external world; planning interaction between themselves and the external world; controlling the outcome of their actions. The environment in this case concerns work and work organisation, and for employees to be flexible these criteria must be fulfilled. Thus, the criteria are conditions for flexibility.

What is more, it has been suggested that it is necessary to supply relevant and sufficient information to achieve flexibility in an organisation. In other words, employees need to be informed about what is happening in the organisation, or what is referred to by Hård af

Segerstad (1982) as the external world. This may take place through regular workplace meetings or through the creation of other interfaces between groups of employees. Interaction between employees and the external world, i.e. possibilities to communicate, is another important part of the creation of flexibility according to Hård af Segerstad (1982). If there are opportunities for continuous social interaction with colleagues and management, there will also be social support between them. According to Karasek and Theorell (1990), social support at work has important functions: directly through satisfying the fundamental need for social interaction, group feeling, identification, the sharing of experiences and knowledge, and indirectly through acting as a buffer between the demands of work and the available individual and/or organisational resources for dealing with these demands. Spatial separation of different units may be experienced as a barrier to coordination and may create certain communication problems. It is important, therefore, that interfaces are created between groups of employees even though purely physical contact may not remain. Jacobsen & Thorsvik (2002) point out that communication is necessary for a workplace to be flexible and efficient.

Control, the second part of the discussed relationship, can be regarded as a continually recurrent feature in organisations, both managerial control over employees and the employees' control over their jobs. Edwards (1979), for instance, presents three strategies on organisational control. The first strategy, the 'simple control' or the direct, authoritarian control of work and workers is executed by the owner of the company or by direct managers. The next control strategy emerges from the organisation's physical technology, i.e. assembly lines, computers etc., and is called 'technical control'. The third strategy is the 'bureaucratic control' where control is derived from the social relations within the organisational hierarchy, and the accompanying system of rules that reward compliance and punish non-compliance. Friedman (1977) suggests 'responsible autonomy' as a contrast to the close supervision of 'direct control'. Here employers try to harness the adaptability of labour power not only by giving employees some amount of freedom, but also by encouraging them to adapt in ways beneficial to the organisation. However, and as Friedman acknowledges, responsible autonomy may increase employee commitment but does not guarantee a managerial compliant behaviour among employees. For that reason, it can be assumed that worker behaviour might express both resistance as well as conformity towards managerial initiatives. This is what Hodson (1991) refers to as 'conditional effort' (flexibility opportunities) and 'enthusiastic compliance' (pride in doing quality work).

DATA AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The results presented in this paper are based on a number of case studies. The three public sector organisations in question are municipal social welfare services from municipalities of different sizes. In all three cases reorganisations were implemented in order to adapt operations to keep within reduced economic frameworks. Clarity, pure work assignments, quality and efficiency became important concepts for development and positive change within the social services. Development was to take place by elucidating decisions and actions, by focusing on quality work, by changing financial management and concentrating more on normalisation, integration and independence for the users who were not affected negatively by the changes.

The fourth organisation taking part of this study is a co-operative society owned Swedish company within the food industry. The findings are based on data collected from two of its food producing subsidiaries which together employ 245 people in the region. During the time of data collection the organisation experienced major changes in the production. Work processes were changed and adjusted to fit the newly implemented business systems, new process steps generated new work routines, and to some extent, new roles; and work schedules were adjusted to fit the 'leaner' way of operating the production.

Several methods for data collection were used to investigate these four organisations: Over 50 qualitative interviews, several shorter group interviews combined with approximately 200 hours of observations, field notes, brief group interviews together with document analysis of company policies and guidelines. The qualitative data analyses, the process of word and context interpretation, were completed using a combination of techniques suitable for analysing interviews and field notes (Strauss and Corbin 1998, Miles and Huberman 1994). Analyzing data from multiple data sources, and using a variety of analysing techniques, provided a vantage point for exploring how flexibility is created in social services and on a busy and noisy shop floor.

In the following section we will argue how flexibility can be created in organisations and how this flexibility can be expressed.

ADAPTING TO THE ENVIRONMENT

In all organisations, tasks are divided between people who work there. The work that people carry out must also be coordinated in order to achieve the goals that the organisation sets for its activities. Division of labour thus involves differentiation and specialisation of a number of different functions, occupations and tasks – horizontal work division – but at the same time collaboration between different control, coordination and monitoring functions – vertical work division (Sayer & Walker 1992). Work division is thus one of the most inherent characteristics in organisations.

In the organisations studied, changes were carried out that resulted in groups of people being split and new constellations being created. This split was partially horizontal in the organisation when new units were made to cooperate, and partly vertical, particularly when new managers were appointed. When this type of change is made it often involves being moved physically, which has great significance and influence on human behaviour. Employees need to be informed about what is happening in the organisation, or what is referred to by Hård af Segerstad (1982) as the external world. This may take place through regular workplace meetings or through the creation of other interfaces between groups of employees. Not everybody needs to know everything however; information should be useful such as information about work redistribution in the own department or in departments that one works with as well as relevant information between management and employees. Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2002) point out that communication between different levels of a hierarchy creates understanding among the different groups of personnel.

Competence Distribution

'New' vocational groups introduce different perspectives, knowledge and experience to each other. Specialising through different categories of employees having different duties is in contrast to what usually is advocated in flexibility research, namely, functional flexibility. For example, Eldridge and Nisar (2006) argue that manufacturing systems based on traditional hierarchic control have had to give place to customer-oriented types of companies that emphasise employees' versatility of skills and control of work. Based on studies of organisations in the private sector, they believe that flexibility in organisations is dependent on applications that emphasise the participation of the workforce, cooperation and the development of versatile skills.

Functional flexibility means that employees must have sufficient competence to master many different tasks (see for example Atkinson 1984, 1985, 1987; Atkinson & Meager 1986, Eldridge and Nisar (2006). This provides increased variation of work, opportunities for development, more involvement, responsibility and power over the working life situation. Work is expected to be more varied and interesting and systems of reward more flexible. In organisations discussed here, changes were made more related to organisational

differentiation and specialisation than making employees more versatile. It becomes clear that the creation of conditions to promote flexibility are not about mastering each other's tasks (functional flexibility) but rather the knowledge and understanding of each other's competence to carry out tasks, i.e. competence distribution. Competence distribution has to do with sharing information, understanding and being up to date with others work tasks, not about being able to perform them (multiskilling). Competence distribution may take place horizontally or vertically in an organisation.

The step-by-step transfer of clients that now takes place in one of the public sector organisations requires cooperation of people with different areas of competence when they work together on shared issues. Employees with different skills must try to find total solutions for a client's situation. This work or task area had previously been the responsibility of perhaps only one of them. As one of the employees expressed it, this task area was called "the social workers' market". In other words, there are employees with other areas of competence than social workers that are now involved in the work, such as economists, which makes the situation unfamiliar to those affected. When new professional groups introduce their perspective in finding solutions to situations, cooperation requires understanding of the others' perspective and competence for carrying out their tasks.

When people are in interaction situations, there is a tendency for them to work alongside each other instead of working with each other, or cooperating. Cooperation reflects a relationship in which two people's interaction results in an interplay that works well – a convergence of labour on the condition of understanding of each others' presumptions of reality. There is no interplay when people merely work alongside each other. There is no convergence (integration) of labour. Interaction consists of two parallel flows on the condition of ignorance of each others' presumptions of reality (Bergqvist 2004). People have a tendency to systematically misinterpret, misunderstand and talk at cross-purposes, and often perceive the same wording in different ways (Jakobsen & Karlsson 1993, Bergqvist 2004). People with different competencies may have different frames of reference and linguistic habits, and may interpret situations in different ways. In a work situation it is important to explain what you do and why you do it so that situations can be interpreted and understood in the right way. The problem remains that people are often unaware of these differences, and the distribution of competence may partially alleviate this.

There is a lateral distribution of competence when "new" professional groups bring with them new perspectives, knowledge and experience, which are important for development. Thus, it is not functional flexibility that is demanded in these organisations. What is demanded is that employees inform each other about their roles and functions from their own perspectives. The point is not to have knowledge in order to perform each other's jobs, but to know what the others can do and why. The horizontal spreading of competence compares well with work rotation as an approach to increasing flexibility in an organisation. Work rotation between different jobs may bring about new ways of thinking in workgroups and result in a continuous supply of new knowledge. Through contact with other employees and organisations, perspectives may be widened and new experiences obtained (Lind & Skärvad 2004). Eldridge and Nisar (2006) also underline the importance in flexible organisations of not only appreciating the individual skills of employees in production processes, but also that group cooperation is promoted when performing a series of tasks. Planning, as one part of people's adaptation, is about being able to combine information received and coordinating various events between oneself and one's environment (Hård af Segerstad 1982) and in this way to improve conditions for contributing to processes that one is involved in.

The distribution of competence and knowledge of the organisational context in which each person works, reinforces the processing and interpretation of tasks in a wider perspective. This means that people are able to plan their future tasks and gain a sense of security. It has

become quite evident that competence distribution can operate as a mechanism for flexibility. We shall now argue how the use of humour can create flexibility.

Humour

Humour is an essential part of organisational life. It arises in virtually all social situations occurring at workplaces; it rarely leaves anyone immune, and considers anyone or anything as potential targets for ridicule. Researchers have in fact suggested that jokes, wits and the general use of humour play an important role in how workers adjust to workplace conditions (Collinson 1992, Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap 1990). One early example is given by Roy (1958) who concludes that joking and banter between workers expel 'the beast of boredom', bring meaning and structure to work and reinforce group relations. The empirical observations discussed in this paper revealed abundant evidence of employees engaging in joking practices. As the following section shows, this helped them to deal with the complex and sometimes paradoxical realities of work.

Similar to a great deal of contemporary literature on humour within organisations, we discovered evidence of humour among employees which may be associated with 'presumed positive managerial and organizational outcomes' (Westwood and Rhodes 2007:3). From this point of view, humour is considered to contribute towards harmony and successful co-operation within the organization. However, employees' engagement in humorous activities may also be regarded as actions of flexibility. As an illustration, laughter and spontaneous joke-telling reduced tensions and stress (also Lyttle 2007) and humorous comments facilitated communication (also Barsoux 1993, Holmes 2000). What is more, employees engaging in group specific rituals, teasing, and situational jokes contributed to the communication process and created opportunities for spontaneous interaction. In other words, when employees contribute to positive outcomes and when they use humour to express willingness to adapt and adjust to the existing circumstances, they are being flexible.

In addition, employees also engaged in humorous activities that may be regarded as 'a satirical and distanced evaluation of the activities of managers' (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999:63). This suggests a more subversive character of humour and a more subtle, sarcastic use of joking practices rather than having a positive effect on the organisational outcomes (Mulkey 1988, Linstead 1985, Collinson 1992, chapter 4, Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). The use of ironical remarks, coded jokes and nicknaming of managers allowed employees to escape boredom, to deal with their monotonous work or the experience of managerial surveillance. Moreover, the lack of equipment and unsatisfactory working conditions, i.e. technical control, resulted in ironical and satirical comments or engagement in joking practices with of more physical character (tickles, pokes and nudges). All of these activities may be regarded as examples of how employees adapt to their environment, i.e. actions of flexibility. However, the very same activities may be considered as expressions of employees' unwillingness to adapt the environment. In these cases, humour and joking practices can be seen as expression of oppositional behaviour and resistance to managerial control of their work and working conditions.

To conclude, our study highlights that engagement in joking practices and humorous activities are expressions of both employees' adaptation to as well as their unwillingness to adapt to their environment.

Control

Control is usually associated with bureaucratic organisations that are administrated using the top-down principle; i.e. that the management plans what must be done and how it is done. The management then formulates rules, policies and procedures with the aim of achieving this. Control of how work is carried out is important and this form of administration is characterised by a low degree of freedom for the employees (Granberg 2004). Eldridge &

Nisar (2006) claim that many of these traits that are characteristic for control-based organisations are declining in modern flexible organisations. Examples from the case study, however, indicate that different forms of control can also create flexibility. Various control systems are a way of providing employees with knowledge that is relevant to their work, the work of others and to the whole of the organisation/department/service, or what may be relevant knowledge for adaptation.

Financial control is continuous and described as a form of internal control in our study especially within the organisations of social services. There is now more follow-up and a great deal of focus on finance. This is not necessarily felt as obtrusive or an expression of mistrust towards employees. There are now clear rules to follow and there are personnel whose task it is to support others if anything should be unclear. It is clear that the control of employees has increased their understanding of the context of how their own decisions can influence other factors/other decisions. Many of the employees that were interviewed feel that they do a better job now than previously because they have a better understanding of the organizational context.

Control of clients also takes place continuously through feedback, and is stricter and harder than before the change. This specification of tasks and control of clients means that the contents of tasks are now characterised by written reports in some form for many of the employees. The interesting thing is that there seems to be a conviction among the employees that the quality of the service has not decreased even though some cutbacks have been introduced to manage the budget. The raising of efficiency has resulted in employees learning to be better investigators. Funds are controlled better, as are measures. There is an increased awareness of costs and the fact that the most costly measures are not always best. There is no longer space for "routine" decisions. Work has changed in character. Financial planning and follow-up has increased the awareness of costs among the service's employees and contributed to a sense of control for employees. This feeling of having more control over their work helps employees to make their own decisions, learn new things at work and makes the work feel more varied. Employees are given the opportunity of using their knowledge in daily practice.

So even though there is a much harsher climate today than previously, there are many positive spin-offs of adaptations that contribute to the maintenance of balance between the demands of work and the opportunities of making own decisions. This in turn leads to employees having control of their own work (Karasek & Theorell 1990). The situation at the organisation in question may be seen as an example of organisation and control now relating more to the development of employees' understanding of their tasks and how they can handle various situations in a more independent fashion (Sandberg & Targama 1998; Ghoshal & Barlett 1997) even though they are guided by rules and procedures in their work.

Johansson (1992) claims that grass-roots bureaucrats' work (as in this case) is generally characterised by the individual application of general rules and directives in contact with clients. This means that they often operate in situations that are far too complex and dynamic to be reduced to formal rules and common sense. Work situations often include human dimensions that demand a capacity to make judgements that is impossible to codify in the form of rules. Employees must have a certain amount of "freedom to fix" on their own discretion, or freedom of action. This involves the freedom to make own judgments on the final form of measures as well as the freedom of judging and if necessary questioning and redefining clients' demands and/or problem formulation. Johansson claims that it is necessary to have access to knowledge of the organisational possibilities that are available. Expressed in another way, this means that it is necessary to have control in one's work.

The paradox in this is that control has created control and, by extension, flexibility is also created. The advent of different types of control systems that currently exist in the

organisations and that have noticeably increased the systematic monitoring of what takes place within the organisations has also increased the employees' understanding of what they do and created space for freedom of action. Through information/knowledge of the surrounding world, conditions have been created which enable planning of interaction with the surrounding world which in turn creates control – the opportunity for employees to control the outcome/results of their actions and thus, also, the possibility of adaptation.

MECHANISMS THAT CREATE FLEXIBILITY

The first thing that can be stated about the above reasoning is that the need for knowledge to stay informed of the external world, interaction with that world and control of one's own actions is nothing new. However, these matters are seldom focused on the context of flexibility. It is also rare that control of employees is discussed as being something constructive for those being controlled. Our study shows that control of employees may create control for employees. The above reasoning is based on employees in an organisation being provided with information or being able to obtain information about their organisation. Through knowledge and understanding of each others' competence, conditions are created that promote flexibility. The distribution of competence and knowledge of the organisational context in which each person works reinforces the processing and interpretation of tasks in a wider perspective. This means that people are able to plan their future tasks and gain a sense of security. Furthermore, the use of humour within workgroups facilitates dealing with the complex realities of work, as well as getting opportunities to control the outcome of work tasks. These are conditions that enhance the employees' ability to adapt. Our results show that competence distribution, the use of humour and control may function as mechanisms for creating flexibility in organisations.

Organisational flexibility is, as Skorstad (2006) claims, a very complex matter. Despite our findings, we cannot disregard the fact that some mechanisms assume a certain presence of harmony and consensus among people in the organization, where as others assume the presence of conflicts and antagonism. The above reasoning assumes that one focuses more on harmony and accord than on conflict and differences – desirables instead of non-desirables. As we have focused on mechanisms for flexibility, we have left out a discussion of both the effects and consequences of what these mechanisms might have in relation to resistance. The mechanisms we have found in our study, may increase a managerial opposed behavior as well a compliant one. For example, the freedom employees are able to achieve by control, may as well result in resistance or create space for resistance, as well as it creates flexibility. Focusing only on flexibility, we haven't taken into consideration that worker behaviour might express both resistance as well as conformity towards managerial initiatives as Friedman (1977) points out.

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