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INFORMATION SYSTEMS AND CREATIVITY MANAGEMENT IN THE MEDIA AND ADVERTISING INDUSTRIES: A CRITICAL VIEW

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Abstract

Recent literature points to the increasing importance of creativity in organizational context and a positive relationship with organizational performance. While there is ample literature on the use of information systems (IS) to support the management of other drivers of organizational performance, the relationship between IS and creativity management in organizational context has received little attention. At the same time, it appears that creative processes, which are central in such industries as media and advertising, are difficult to order and manage. What is the nature then of the relationship between IS and the management of creativity in organisations? The paper addresses this issue by critically examining Amabile's work on creativity management from an IS perspective – drawing on empirical findings from case studies in the media and advertising industries.

While Amabile's framework is found to provide a general creativity management framework applicable to the case of IS, it needs to be extended and refined. IS were found to support creativity, but also to undermine it if not managed carefully. The main organizational implications are: challenge, freedom, resources, work-group features, supervisory encouragement and organizational support are required, along with support for shared context and stimuli support, and caution against overemphasis of technological capabilities supporting creative production at the expense of creative ideation itself.

Keywords: Information Systems, Creativity Management, Media, Advertising, Organizational Creativity

1 INTRODUCTION

Recent literature points to the increasing importance of creativity in an organizational context. Creativity - defined as the production of novel, useful products, services, ideas, procedures, or processes (Woodman, et al. 1993, Amabile, et al. 1996) - is viewed as an important organizational capability (Amabile 1998, Hargadon and Sutton 2000, Mumford 2000). It is seen as a possible source of organizational effectiveness (Woodman, et al. 1993), and a source of competitive advantage (Leonard and Straus 1997, Lampel at al 2000).

The creative industries - "in which the product or service contains a substantial element of artistic or creative endeavor" (Caves 2000) – are industries that supply "goods and services that we broadly associated with cultural, artistic, or simply entertainment value". (Caves 2000). The media and advertising industries, in which creativity is seen as central (Lampel et al 2000, Goldenberg et al 1999), are considered to be creative industries.

There is ample literature on the relationship between IS and the management of organizational performance drivers, such as the management of organizations' knowledge (Bharadwaj 2000), production efficiency (e.g. Thatcher and Oliver 2001) and human resources (Broderick and Bounreau 1992). At the same time, there has been little IS research on creativity, in contrast to the ample literature on creativity in engineering, science, education, architecture, and psychology (Couger et al., 1993), and even less so in the organizational, managerial context.

In organizational and business settings where timely delivery is essential, some form of coordination and management of the creative processes seems to be required. However, creativity is often viewed as difficult to manage and order (Leonard and Straus 1997) and creative people are seen to be "notorious for resisting rigid, formulaic approaches" (Candy and Edmonds 2000). Moreover, it is argued that there are gaps in our understanding of the role creativity management of creativity in sectors such as the media industry (Banks et al. 2002).

Thus, the following questions emerge: What is the nature of the relationship between IS and creative process management? Can existing management research frameworks be useful? This paper addresses these questions by critically examining an existing creativity management framework from an IS perspective – drawing on empirical findings from case studies in the media and advertising industries.

The relationship between organizational creativity and IS becomes increasingly important as research highlights the need for collaboration and communication between people for creativity (e.g. Amabile et al. 1996, Leonard and Swap 1999). As organisations increasingly operate on a global basis, such interaction often requires the use of IT for communication – in which social interaction and infrastructure play an important role (Kelly and Jones 2001).

In order to better understand creativity in organisations, the use of a creativity management framework may be useful, and in this paper, Amabile's work on creativity in organizational context (1988, 1997, 1998) provides such a framework. Amabile's work is highly influential in the creativity and management literature, and addresses similar issues to those addressed in the analysis of IS in organizations, such as the role of organizational processes and management practices. Moreover, the need for tools to overcome the tension between control and creative freedom in an organizational context is discussed in Amabile's (1988, 1998) analysis of the practices that foster and "kill" creativity in organisations.

Amabile (1983,1996) maintains that task motivation, domain-relevant skills, and creativity-relevant processes are important components of individual creativity. At the organizational level, Amabile (1998) formulates a framework which includes six practices that support creativity in organisations:

Challenge involves matching people and assignment so that the stretch of the employee ability is "not so little that they feel bored but not so much that they feel overwhelmed and threatened by a loss of control".

Freedom involves giving employees autonomy around process, but only to the extent that there are clear and consistent goals.

Resources involves the decision on the allocation of time and money to a project or a team.

Work-Group Features involves creating teams that are comprised of people with "diversity of perspectives and backgrounds".

Supervisory Encouragement involves management recognition and acknowledgement of creative work before its impact is known.

Organizational Support involves support from the organization's leadership and acknowledgement of the top priority set on creative efforts.

The findings discussed in this paper are drawn from case studies in two creative industries – the media and advertising industries. Thus, they enable an empirical and critical examination of Amabile's framework. Consequently, the expected contribution of the paper is an insight into creativity management in the media and advertising industries, and more specifically, a better understanding of the role of IS in creativity management in these industries.

2 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

This paper draws on case studies carried out in the London and New York offices of two large international advertising companies and the New York office of an international TV news network.

The case studies included on-site observations of the development of creative projects (one project in each case study), from the briefing stage to the stage where creative work was presented to the client. The case studies provided an opportunity for deep immersion in the organizations. Access to premises, access to the internal computer network and emails distribution, together with office space in the agencies - close to the teams' space - were provided. Through this access, it has been possible to follow not only team meetings and internal presentations, but also day-to-day operation, and casual interactions and consultations between different team members. In addition, 67 semi-structured interviews were carried out with people in different roles in the companies, and internal documents and systems were examined. This way, data was collected from five out of the six sources recommended by Yin (1994) as sources of evidence in case study research: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, and physical artifacts.

The paper adopts an interpretative approach, focusing on *Why* and *How* questions rather than on *What* and *How Many* questions. A grounded theory analysis of the interview and observation data was used to identify key findings that were compared with the literature on creativity and IS, leading to further observations and interviews. For example some of the interviewees were approached again to elaborate a point or to verify possible connections between statements made in early interviews.

3 CASE DESCRIPTION: CREATIVE PROCESSES AND THE ROLE OF IS

3.1 Case description: from information to creative development

In a media case study, the process observed was a live, daily newscast. The process is initiated and controlled by the Producer of the program. The producer, with the help of an associate producer, was found to collect information and ideas to be used in the newscast from various sources: newspapers

on line and offline, TV programs, electronic newswires, dedicated new websites, and an internal newswire system. In addition, during the case study it was evident that in the working area in which the production and editorial team works, there were TV screens, many of which showing live news being broadcast by competing TV networks. Other sources of information include information from the network headquarters is sent on which filmed material is available for broadcast. Once information is available, information screening and distilling takes place - the producer decides which stories to use in the newscast. The producer consults with the Executive Producer, a person who has an overall responsibility for the program.

An advertising campaign typically begins with a client brief to the advertising agency's account management people (who are in charge of the day-to-day relationship with the client) and planning people (who have knowledge of the brand, the market and of consumer behavior). The planners often supplement the information provided by the client with other information such as the results of an analysis of consumer perception of the briefed brand or information obtained from independent market and consumer behavior research – sometimes using the services of the agency's "Knowledge Center", a department that collates information. Based on the information available, the planners transform the client brief, together with research insights into a creative brief, with which the creative team (often dubbed "the Creatives") can work. The written brief often consists of a one-page document containing a relatively small part of the information available to the planners and account managers. It conveys the essence of the strategy and issues to be tackled by the advertising, together with guidelines on issues such as style and tone, and the "personality" of the brand to be communicated (e.g. friendly). In addition, some key data chosen by a planner are provided, and sometimes "Thought Starters" - general ideas designed to suggest a direction and provide inspiration for the Creatives. At this stage, a briefing session takes place in the form of a meeting, enabling questions and informal interaction between planners, account management people and Creatives. In the briefing session, a Creative Director is often present: A Creative Director is often an experienced Creative with professional authority and credentials, who is in charge in overseeing creative work of the whole agency, or of a particular account. The Creative Director often reviews creative work before it is presented to other people in the agency, and his or her involvement in the process is both formal (reviews) and informal (casual meetings and consultations).

Information on media and TV viewing trends was also made available – for example, in one of the advertising companies a review of TV programs' performance and content was circulated on a weekly basis among employees to capture consumer trends as far as media goes.

3.2 Case description: Creative development

In a media case study, once the stories for the day's newscast have been determined, text for the anchor was written by either the producer, a segment producer (a person who is in charge of a specific segment, usually on a specific topic) or a news writer. Writers also write "Teasers" – very short items to appear before the commercial breaks indicating of news items to be broadcast at a later stage. Scripts for the segments were written by the producer and the segment producer. In addition, the structure of the program was determined by assigning each item a time slot (including the time and the length of the item) in the newscast sequence. The structure gets a detailed form called a "Rundown", where every second in the program is accounted for. Subsequently, writers and the graphic team prepare the graphic elements to be used in the newscast (e.g. diagrams of economic trends) along with the news stories. Specialized software is used to synchronize the graphic elements in the broadcast. The Director of the newscast then follows the Rundown structure and, if the need arises to (e.g. technical failures in transmission of reporters' reports, breaking news, etc) make slight variations on it as the program goes.

In advertising creative development, work is usually carried out by teams of two Creatives, consisting of a copywriter and an art-director, who often share an office space. Creatives' usually have knowledge of aesthetic conventions, and of what is current, "cool", and stylish. After the briefing

session, the Creatives are given anywhere between a few days to a few weeks to come up with creative ideas. In the case studies, informal interactions between account and planning people, and Creatives occurred during the work on the briefs. In such interactions, additional information pertinent to emerging ideas was provided, and sometimes the Creatives "bounced off" developing ideas to see if they were "on strategy". Use of dedicated IS allows planners to locate required information quickly and share it when it is needed. Creatives said that as their job is to come up with new, original ideas, they often seek stimuli and inspiration by browsing through both internet based and non-internet based sources such as trade and general publications, and dedicated sites on the Internet. Another function is Creative Services, which is more technical. Creative Services people monitor the process, and have a full picture of who is working on which project. The need for tight monitoring of work progress, and particularly of that of Creatives, is said by one Creative Services interviewee to be important because "most of them have no sense of time". The Creatives' delivery (which could be, for example, a TV script or a print advert) is then supervised and approved by the Creative Director, and later by account management and planning people, before it is presented to the client. Upon client approval, the advert is produced and then broadcast or printed.

In all, the findings suggest that the creative processes involve two major parts – preparation of information to be used in the creative development, and the development itself. Both parts require the use of IS.

3.3 Case description: The use of IS in the creative processes

IS were used in the case study companies to support a number of aspects of the creative processes:

Project Management and workflow: messaging and collaboration environments (e.g. Lotus Notes) and bespoke systems were used primarily by advertising creative services people in order to monitor progress of work and to allocate people for new projects. The media project involved archives of news footage and a reference to where tapes of material are available for broadcast.

Industry trends, market information, and consumer behavior analysis: data on market trends was an important element during both the TV producer and the advertising planners' idea generation. The data could be obtained from internal proprietary systems or external suppliers (e.g. Mintel, Datamonitor, Gartner, internet news websites).

Knowledge management and stimuli support: although all advertising companies observed had installed a variety of knowledge management systems such as shared drives, digital asset management (DAM) systems, online libraries, and intranet – which included information such as case studies, news, contacts - these were found to be hardly used, mainly because they were perceived by potential users to be out of date or irrelevant to their work.

Communication and expertise location: All organisations observed had communication tools such as email, instant messenger, and in some cases videoconferencing facilities. Expertise directories were available on the intranet, and information on available experts was also obtained by using email. For example, an email was circulated among agency people asking for people who worked in the past on a type of health products as part of pursuing a new account. Intranets, default entry screen on the desktop email software, and organization-wide circulated e-mails were used by management to announce internal awards given to teams that develop outstanding advertising work (as judged by an internal panel of executives), and to share and praise work that was covered by trade magazines. Emails were used in the media idea development as well, containing leads for potential stories

While IS were used in different parts of the process, creative management people claimed that advances in IT had made clients more demanding, expecting quick work and response. This, according to one creative manager, had "created a monster" as now there is less time to think through and perfect creative ideas. Moreover, when comparing today's technology-intensive processes with processes in the past, one manager claimed that while in the past the "magic" in the creative process was in

people's ideas, it now becomes more and more about technology performance and capabilities (e.g. in TV production). His conclusion was that technology had negatively changed the creative process.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A critical review of the findings in the context of Amabile's framework suggests that while the framework accommodate many of the phenomena observed, it requires some adjustment in order to be useful for the case of IS.

4.1 The role of IS in managerial practices supporting creativity:

Challenge: Amabile suggests that managers should challenge staff by matching people to assignments. IS assisted this in 2 ways: 1. Active matching: searching for people with experience and/or expertise in certain fields in ways such as organization-wide circulated email in the case description above; 2. Passive matching: having expert directories available on a company's intranet enables finding people with expertise and experience in certain fields and thus increases management ability to match people with assignments.

Freedom: According to Amabile, managers should provide autonomy around processes. IS supported this by enabling the flexible process and informal, on-demand information sharing about consumers, competition and market trends. This helps to give advertising Creatives and media writers autonomy around their development work once the strategic direction – or the general content of the item whose text they work on - is determined.

Resources: Amabile views allocation of time and money as affecting creativity. IS support allocation of these resources through project management and workflow systems used by creative services personnel. Judgment on how much time should be allocated to creative assignments was made by account and planning people, together with the creative director, given external constraints and the information provided by creative services people.

Work-Group Features: the need in creating teams that are diverse in terms of perspectives and backgrounds of members is viewed by Amabile as important to creativity, and is facilitated to some extent by locating experience and expertise (see Challenge section above). In addition, to apply the different perspectives once teams were assembled, IS enabled collaboration between team members through the use of collaboration and communication tools, such as email.

Supervisory Encouragement and Organizational Support: these managerial practices presented by Amabile were IS-supported by providing venues for organization-wide encouragement and support in the form of announcing internal awards, and praising and sharing outstanding advertising work.

Amabile's managerial practices, then, seem to all have supporting IS practices in a creative process context. However, Amabile's framework seems to neglect other organizational practices – with IS manifestation - that support creative processes, and thus may require a refinement. The following are such additional practices observed:

Shared context and stimuli support: as creative processes are difficult to order and formulate, there are indirect ways in which management can convey a sense of what constitutes good creative practices. These include the use of the company intranet, emails, default entry screens and TV screens featuring current creative products – used in both the media and advertising cases during creative development. Thus, common points of reference and standards of creative output are shared and used to stimulate the people involved in creative development (this is reflected in interviewees' statements that they seek stimuli in the form of exemplars of advertising or TV products). In addition, the information on media trends and TV content supports the understanding of current themes on TV, which may reflect prevailing themes in current popular culture. Shared standards and context may help in setting clear and consistent goals, thereby are to some extent a part of Amabile's Freedom practice.

However, it seems that in the context of creative processes they are more than just a step in the way to set the goals – they are also a step in the creative development: While goals set the scope of the problem to be solved through creative development, shared standards and context provide a shared sense of the scope and nature of a possible solution.

4.2 IS undermining creativity

As this paper focuses on the role of IS in creativity management, it is important to examine possible shortcomings of IS as far as creativity management goes, and incorporate them within an IS-focused framework. Amabile emphasizes the role of management in providing resources and encouragement to support creativity. However, management practices require careful attention as the following organizational practice observed suggests that IS can also *undermine* creativity:

Overemphasis of technological capabilities may reduce human creativity depth: The examples of Creatives' view that technology had negatively changed the creative process, or that it had "created a monster" by leading to clients and management expectations and demands for quicker work, and not allowing enough time to think ideas through, represent a danger of overemphasis on new technologies and speed of *production* at the expense of creative *ideation*, which is central to both the media and advertising industries.

The case studies demonstrate that while Amabile's framework provides useful tools in understanding the role of management and of IS in supporting creativity, it neglects other practices that have organizational implications. These require the refinement of the framework in order to better capture the role of IS in the organizational creativity. The main implications therefore are as follows: IS can support creativity, but can also suppress it organizational practices are not carefully handled. To increase the contribution of IS to creativity, careful attention is needed to providing challenge, freedom, resources, work-group features, supervisory encouragement and organizational support, but in addition, attention should be given to providing shared context and stimuli support - which can be supported by IS. On the other hand, since IS can also undermine creativity, careful attention is needed to avoiding overemphasis of technological capabilities at the expense of ideation. Future research may focus on developing mechanisms for balancing the positive and negative effects of IS use in the context of creative processes.

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