

# **Unmanaged IT Access and the Marginalization of Corporate Workers**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The need for well managed IT resources and corporate-wide access to information increases as corporations displace resources from their ordinary channels of communication to electronic media and networks. The central point of this paper is that management continues to regard IT as an economic domain that is available only to the knowledge workers, despite the shift of this commodity to a socializing domain. Viewing IT as a social good necessarily requires that management purposefully govern IT training and access as an entitlement, a contractual right granted for all workers. Purposeful management of IT resources has become an ethical imperative for management because access to information resources increases the life chances of the workforce.

This paper establishes a case for empirical research in the area of assessing the impact of the information gap that exists within the corporate environment. More importantly, serious efforts must be mounted to improve the participation of those who have been historically underrepresented in the online community. In twenty years, perhaps, market forces will prevail and everyone will have equal access to network-based services. However, in the mean time, serious damage can be done.

## **TECHNOLOGY AS A SOCIAL GOOD**

The increasing prominence of IT in corporate, educational and social settings suggests that computer literacy and access to information are requisite skills for all workers. The central point of this paper is that management continues to manage IT as an economic domain that is available only to the knowledge workers, despite the shift of this commodity to a socializing domain. Whereas most Americans accept wide differentiation in luxurious items in the economic domain, equality is expected in socializing domain goods such as healthcare and education (Hochschild, 1981). Because many people consider IT part of the economic realm, proposals to provide universal access to network-based service often counter resistance.

Viewing IT as a social good necessarily requires that management purposefully govern IT training and access as an entitlement, a contractual right granted for all workers. To the extent that workers within the lower rungs of the corporate hierarchy are discriminated against, some group must benefit and that group often includes the managers and executives. This situation clearly leads to inequality in terms of access to training, vertical and horizontal mobility within the corporate hierarchy, power to make decisions, and, perhaps most importantly, life chances. Life chances form the most important opportunities, achievements and experiences in life such as physical and mental health, socially valued occupations and educational opportunities (Tumin, 1985).

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

This paper develops a subjective argument for a number of open research questions. These insights should make a valuable contribution as a foundation of theory development which can be subsequently tested by more rigorous means (Galliers, 1991). Conceptual approaches are appropriate for this topic because this is a breaking research area with little empirical support.

The paper begins with a discussion of the growing importance of workers participation on the corporate intranet and the global Internet. Next, the economic incentives for business leaders to grant universal access and training are presented. The third section presents a list of open research questions and the paper concludes with a discussion of the ethical implications for management.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF IT AS A CORPORATE RESOURCE**

The need for well managed IT resources and corporate-wide access to information increases as corporations displace resources from their ordinary channels of communication to electronic media and networks. This migration to electronic media profoundly impacts both the employee's work life and the personal life. Without access to the Internet and email systems, workers cannot fully participate in the democratic and economic process. White collar workers can use the intranet as a political lobbying tool to benefit not only their professional career, but also to support their personal interest. In addition, these privileged employees can search for employment opportunities, seek career advice, and retrieve industry reports that will help them to improve their job performance. Clearly, to the extent that the information poor are excluded from the participation on the network, they will also be excluded from the economic and political gains that such participation promises. Therefore, marginalized workers can't sustain civic engagements with management that can lead to improved outcomes.

Not only is access to information important, the formal knowledge required to effectively utilize computer-based tools is crucial. Bell (1973) argues that formal knowledge, not capital, is the central resource in society. Formal knowledge by definition is not part of everyday vocabulary and the importance of possessing this type of knowledge has grown enormously in advanced post-industrial societies. Thus formal knowledge is elite knowledge, and prestige and respect are given to the technocrats that possess formal knowledge (Feidson, 1986). As new technologies continue to proliferate in the corporation and in society, experience with technology is increasingly becoming essential for the professional and private lives of the non-managerial worker.

Moreover, what is often overlooked is the fact that providing IT access to white collar workers consequentially enables them to utilize technology for non-business purposes. White collar workers and technologists have access to more entertainment and play functions through their computers. Turkle (1995) describes how computer programmers participate in MUDS, multi-player online fantasy games, during the workday. Committed players will often put their characters to sleep so that they can remain logged onto the game for the duration of the day. In this way, the programmer can pursue their work activities and from time to time return to the game space. This allows them to break up the monotony of the work environment. As one expert so aptly put it, "The big

application for DVD ... will be desktop video playback, which will eliminate any remaining worker productivity that hasn't already been destroyed by Web surfing" (Hood, 1997). Although misuse of technology by employees should not be the case, the reality is that management is providing recreational use of IT to a privileged class of employees.

Finally, workers who lack access to network-based information often lack the awareness of the power and benefits derived from the use of IT. Noble (1984) views this lack of awareness as critically detrimental to the worker. He argues that technology is a tool to improve management's leverage in bargaining with workers. Technology increases centralized authority (Blau, 1976) and decreases union power (Thomas, 1994) to underwrite the workers' ability to demand technology access and training assistance. These marginalized workers are less vocal in demanding service and also lack basic information to exercise political leverage.

Furthermore, these workers are falling behind in skills needed for job market, and are less exposed to diverse range of facts and ideas. Thus the low skilled employees become further disassociated from the organization and are seen as dispensable. As a result, their work moves offshore unnecessarily or is totally relegated to machinery. The displaced workers are then left unemployed or underemployed, with little chance of upward social mobility. Moreover, the displaced workers are not in the position to communicate to management the benefits that they bring to the corporation. Surely without infrastructure, training and access to IT, the opportunity to fully capitalize on information resources will pass these people by.

### **ETHICAL IMPERATIVES FOR MANAGEMENT**

Typically, employers carefully select a core group of employees, invest in them, and take elaborate measures to reduce their turnover and maintain their attachment to the firm. Many of these same employers, however, also maintain a peripheral group of employees whom they would prefer to remain relatively detached and to whom they make few commitments. Retention of these employees is not important, even at the cost of high turnover (Hodson and Sullivan, 1995).

Managing a company comprised of dual tier employees who exist in parallel universes is not in the best interest of the firm or society. An organization marked by large disparity is inevitably an organization in which members are prevented from understanding and empathizing with each other's predicament. However, increased competition in a global economy will ultimately force labor and management to either cooperate because both parties perceive a necessity for technological innovation, or force management to reduce wages to remain competitive.

#### **Effects of Reduced Wages on Society**

Unfortunately, to remain competitive, the prevalent management choice has been to reduce wages. For example, between 1979 and 1995, real wages dropped 23% for people with less than a high school diploma and 12% for those with only a high school education, while wages grew 4% for college graduates and 12% for those with advanced degrees. However, in the long run, the option of reducing wages may be unrealistic for two reasons.

First, wages will drop so low that the time and cost for public transportation and daycare are too great. Thus, even though the desire to work is there, the reality is that public assistance or multiple jobs is the only feasible way to survive. Second, an increase the ranks of marginalized workers results in decreased buying power for a large segment of society. This, in turn, will limit demand for goods produced by other workers, thereby slowing down the whole economy. Chronic poverty, homelessness and joblessness will thus increase. Similarly discontent, subtle forms of noncompliance and even sabotage increase in environments where workers are not able to fully participate (Hodson & Sullivan, 1995).

### **Effects of Management and Labor Cooperation**

If management and labor choose to cooperate, one crucial item for the agenda is expanded worker training programs aimed at reducing marginal employment. The need for such programs is heightened by the exploding pace of technological diffusion. Fewer workers can expect to work at one job throughout their careers. Therefore, transferable skills are extremely important. A reduction of marginal employment positions would reduce welfare costs and facilitate the incorporation of all Americans in mainstream society. This is particularly important in the current environment of social program funding cutbacks and recently drafted welfare-to-work legislation.

As the government forces citizens to become self sufficient, access to information has become vital. The proliferation of IT in corporate, educational, home and social environments requires everyone to have basic computing literacy skills. Without these essential skills, life chances are diminished. This is especially problematic for the marginally employed who are teetering on the brink of poverty because life chances largely determine prospects for social mobility. Social mobility is a very powerful and deterministic social force. When there is the mechanism for mobility, people are able to break traditions. This results in increased individualism, innovation, acceptance of change, openness to new experiences, and curiosity amongst the workforce (Sorokin, 1987). Increased innovation and acceptance to change amongst the workers could lead to economic gains for the company.

### **Managerial Challenges**

The ethical challenge facing management is creating the IT policies that facilitate emancipation and the full engagement of the information poor workers. However, a major obstacle to positive outcomes is bureaucratic inertia of management. Weber discusses bureaucracy as being the "iron cage of the future; the fate of modern society". Technology has been employed as a tool to perpetuate the bureaucracies created to control political order (Bell, 1976) and this control and rigidity alienates members (Burrell, 1993). Workers ultimately become a function of the ideologies and mores created by others to control them (Foucault, 1979). The information-based organization power can become more comprehensive because technology can be used to monitor, optimize and control work processes. This decrease in worker power, real or perceived, is often the result of technology proliferation. Information systems can also be falsely but politically effective justification for the undemocratic exercise of power (Habermas, 1971). Thus political decisions are not subject to popular debate because they are positioned as the best technical solution.

However, this is just one possible outcome. Prior research on the effects of computing in organizations reveals that these effects are more complicated and diverse than has traditionally been assumed (Attewell & Rule, 1984). The heart of the matter is not the contradictory effects- upskilling versus deskilling, job displacement versus job creation. What is most important is that the introduction of technology in and of itself does not determine outcomes. Therefore, the onus is on management to provide basic computing services such as email and intranet access to entire workforce, and to purposefully manage these resources. In twenty years, perhaps, market forces will prevail and everyone will have equal access to network-based services. However, in the mean time, serious damage can be done.

## RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

This paper has argued for the need for empirical research in the area of assessing the impact of the information gap that exists within the corporate environment. The following are some initial questions that require research attention:

- Computer networking is so new that its full social role is still being defined. But studies of families who can't afford basic telephone service offer some interesting insights. For example, a Montana court decided that a lack of a telephone was a real barrier to gaining employment. There are also studies that families without telephone service are dangerously isolated in cases of emergency. These studies lead to the questions: In what ways does the lack of IT skills diminish life chances? What are the economic and social costs for failure to obtain basic IT skills and access?
- Important questions also exist regarding the design and delivery of education and training programs for the information poor worker. However, additional training is only one possible solution. The focus could be on reducing the need for skills by providing more accessible technologies and content.
- This paper presents an ethical argument for corporate-wide network access. However, empirical studies of the economic benefits gained from improved IT access and training are needed. Similarly, a set of indicators to represent corporate information activities, such as access, use and impact of information and IT, could be developed. This would enable researchers to compare the IT capabilities of individuals, firms, industries and countries.

These questions are examples of the larger need to assess the social and economic implications of IT on organizations and society in general. While this area lacks substantial empirical support, it does provide researchers with ample opportunities to employ multidisciplinary approaches to test and develop theories.

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