Technology and Social Work : a question of identities ?

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Abstract. Computers and technologies are now part of the daily work environment of numerous enterprises and organizations. Social organizations are also concerned about computerization and are frequently in contact with technologies, generally used in various fields like, for instance, communication with users, workers and organizations, human resources management, treatments of social documents, and accountancy. The integration of technologies in organizations raises many questions for the workers. Those questions concern the use, perception, trust and appropriation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Our paper will focus on a recent holistic and empirical research about computerization in Belgian Public Social Action Centers (CPAS) undertaken by the University of Namur. We will first describe the evolution and the universe of poverty, social work and Belgian Social Centers. Secondly, we will analyze the integration of technologies in those centers, according to the results we have collected about use and perception of ICT by workers. In a third part, we will confront the different dimensions of technology and social care, especially as far as social workers are concerned. How can technology affect professional identity? Can we assert the existence of a "cultural shock" between ICT and the daily work in CPAS? Using identity theories, structural approach of technology and empirical data, we will try to answer those central questions. Finally, we will conclude our paper with some recommendations for a successful adaptation between frameworks of ICT and Social Centers.

1   Acknowledgments

2   Research and identity perspective

2.1   Computerization in Belgian Public Action Center

Our paper focuses on a holistic and empirical research about computerization in Belgian Public Action Center (CPAS). Those centers exist are responsible of social help of citizens in each municipality (589 in Belgium). Each CPAS has an independent juridical statute, but must enforce everyday different decisions and laws coming from various levels of power (Belgian Federal State, regions, provinces, municipalities, …) [1].

Belgian Public Action Centers are really concerned about computerization. Indeed, those are frequently in contact with Information and Communication Technology, generally used in various fields like, for instance, communication with users, workers and organizations, human resources and management, secretarial work, treatments of users and of social documents, and accountancy. Computer firms, subsidiary powers and public authorities have developed the used applications. Since the 1st January 2006, Belgian Public Action Center have been constrained to use ICT, due to their obligation to be connected to a national computerized network of data-bank concerning users.

At the end of the year 2005, our research team was contacted by representatives of French-speaking CPAS to undertake a holistic survey about the new challenges of computerization in their sector (262 CPAS) [2]. Our group was composed of two sociologists, one psychologist and three jurists.

Using an interdisciplinary point of view, we have tried to answer to challenging questions concerning the relationship between computerization and social work. How are ICT used and perceived in CPAS? What is the impact of ICT on the work and identity of social workers? Are the users of social centers concerned by the *"digital divide"*? What can be the advantages of using ICT for people helped by social centers? What are the legal challenges concerning ICT?

Our research was made from October 2005 to May 2007. To collect our results, we have made several visits and interviews in CPAS. From February to March 2006, we have undertaken a big survey, sending a questionnaire to each person in charge of a CPAS [2]. We have worked in close relationship with workers. In conclusion of our research, we have written a book, presenting our results and practical recommendations for the social work sector, scientists and public authorities [3]. We will present, in this paper, the main results of this research following different steps.

2.2   Our identity perspective

Our paper also focuses on identity. This concept is wide and different frames of analysis can be adopted. Among those ones, we have chosen to adopt the theories of Henri Tajfel and John Turner about social identity. Following these authors, social identity will be understood as *"a part of individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership."* The description of a group include a range of between one to three components: *"a cognitive component in the sense of knowledge that one belongs to a group; an evaluative one, in the sense that the notion of the group and/or of one's membership of it may have a positive or a negative value connotation"*; and an emotional component *"in the sense that cognitive and evaluative aspects of the group and one's membership of it may be accompanied by emotions (such as love or hatred, like or dislike) directed towards one's own group and towards others which stand in certain relation to it."* [4] In our paper, the tree above mentioned dimensions (cognitive, evaluative and emotional) will be examined regarding to the group of social workers and analyzed according to the results We have collected in our research about the use and perception of ICT.

3   The universe of social work and its evolution

Having specified our research framework and our identity perspective, we are going to describe and to precise the universe around social work in order to focus on mutual interactions between frameworks of ICT and social action. Poverty, social work and Belgian Social Centers have evolved in accordance with their times. We can detail this evolution in four main points.

3.1   From social care to social action

After their creation, in the seventies, public social centers were practicing "social care", granting care and a minimal income to people in need. Nowadays, the situation has changed. This concept of "social care" has disappeared, leaving space to the concept of "social integration" (1990), and now, to the concept of "social action" (2002). In this new context, it is increasingly required from people to use their own abilities to benefit from social care and from help of CPAS. Users are given responsibilities to change their position in society.

3.2   A greater diversification of Social Care activities

A second transformation regarding CPAS is the greater diversification of social care activities since their creation. Indeed, due to the evolution of poverty and the changes in law, CPAS have been attributed additional and diversified missions: housing, debts mediation, management of old people's home, family services, minor's

protection, catering, … Those tasks are now added to the three basic missions of a CPAS: social assistance, medical care and social and medical activities.

3.3   A greater diversification of benefitors

A third trend is the greater diversification of benefitors of CPAS due to economic factors. A more diversified sample of people could, one day, be in need and then be confronted with social action Citizen being not in the conditions to receive financial help from CPAS can also benefit from their services, for example for information, old people's home or family services.

3.4   A bigger interconnection with other actors

To conclude, important actors surrounding social action are also more diversified. Indeed, those Centers are being increasingly interconnected with other actors of economic and social life like public authorities, associations, subsidiary powers, companies … Those are increasingly working in cooperation.

4   The identity of social workers

In such a context, methods and conceptions of social work have been extended. Sociologists Guy Bajoit and Abraham Franssen [6] (1997-1998) have created different identity models, related to different ways of conceiving social work. They have done a research with social workers concerning the ways of perceiving their own role. Monique Wautelet, a social assistant, has also worked on that subject and has created a fifth model (see the table below).

   The models waver between two axes. The first refers to the causes of marginality, perceived like being linked to individual causes or to structural causes. The second axis refers to the capacity of individuals to change their situation. A person can be seen like having a strong influence on his/her present condition (empowerment) or like having a weak influence on his/her own marginality.

5 conceptions of social work

(Bajoit and Franssen, Monique Wautelet)

WEAK SELF-INFLUENCE

INDIVIDUAL CAUSES

(1)
SOCIAL SUPERVISION
Pedagogical model
To socialise
To educate

(3)
GARANTOR OF RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS
Juridical model
Defending rights

(5)
HUMANITARIAN MODEL
To humanize and manage urgency

(4)
INSERTION
Management model
To dévelop insertion stratégies

(2)
ACTIVISM
Political model
To bring ressources to collective action
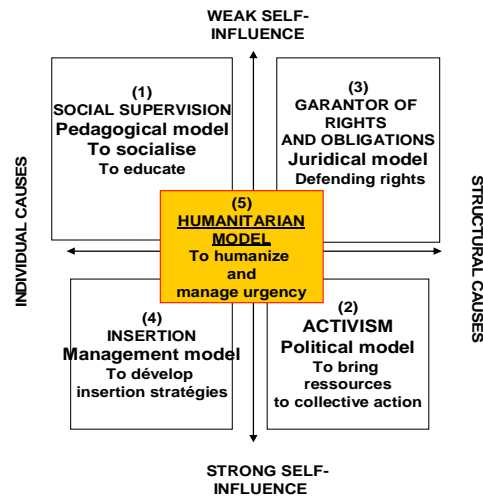
STRUCTURAL CAUSES

STRONG SELF-INFLUENCE

Fig 1. Five conceptions of social work

The identity of "social workers", through its cognitive and emotional components (what social workers know about their group and how they evaluate their work), is perceived in different ways by the workers. We have observed this reality in our survey and our discussion with workers of CPAS. Those five models are chronological but could be different ways of conceiving social actually work actually.

5 The place of technology in social work

Each CPAS has generally a good computer equipment (computers, Internet connections, servers, …). How are ICT integrated in public social centers? We are going to detail the tree above mentioned dimensions (cognitive, evaluative and emotional) related to technology, according to the results we've collected in our research about use and perception of technologies.

5.1 Cognitive component of ICT

The workers in Public Social Action Centers in Belgium have two spontaneous visions of computerisation. On one hand, computerization has been viewed as a tool, helpful for social action with different benefits: to gain time, increase speed in the treatment of documents, be more efficient, … On the other hand, computerization has been viewed as a barrier for social action. ICT are viewed as requirements,

needing to have special qualifications to use and to repair those, or time to manipulate this.

5.2   Evaluative component of ICT

The opinion of CPAS's workers over computerization is positive but stay restrained. [2]

The efficiency of ICT has been mainly underlined. 96% of CPAS agree or totally agree with the fact that computerization makes their work more efficient. 73% have the same position on the fact that computerization improves the internal communication and facilitates the exchanges of information. 74% of CPAS agree or completely agree with the fact that technologies accelerate the treatment of documents and 84% of CPAS think that ICT increases the capacity of action and resolution of problems by a better access of each worker to information.

Risks related to computerization are more understated by CPAS. Indeed, only 22% of those ones agree or completely agree with the fact that ICT implies a better control of the work of employees. 15% of CPAS adopt the same position on the fact that computerization diminishes the importance of knowing legislations, administrative procedures,… 36% of CPAS agree or totally agree with the fact that data processing burdens social work. Indeed, computer applications are often complex, difficult to use. Periods of adaptation and qualified employees are needed. There are many diversified applications, and this can sometimes require to key in (the same data several times. Finally, for 26% of CPAS, technologies decrease the freedom of the employees for the treatment of documents concerning social assistance.

Meanwhile, some fears about ICT have been underlined by CPAS. Indeed, nearly 50% of CPAS agree or completely agree with the fact that use of computer decreases the work of proximity for a clerical work. 74% of CPAS have the same position concerning the fact that data processing doesn't improve the relation between social workers and people being given social care. Finally, the affirmation *"data processing could be a barrier for the social workers"* has different perceptions. 45% of CPAS do not agree or not agree at all with this sentence, 52% of CPAS agree or completely agree with this assertion and 3% had no opinion.

To conclude, the norm of computerization seems to be accepted in CPAS… 82% agree or completely agree with the fact that, in our era of E-government, circulars or law related to them could reach them via Internet.

5.3   Emotional component of ICT

Despite all their investments and equipments, CPAS perceive computerization and ICT rather as an obligation than as a negotiated decision. Indeed, computerization of CPAS is strongly influenced by the imposed constraints of political authorities and computer firms. Belgian public social action center also lack computer scientist and of financial means. The 126 CPAS having responded to our survey only count 46 computer scientists ! This is less than one data specialist by CPAS. Computerization

is also not really controlled by CPAS. Indeed, only 48% of the centers have defined objectives or policies about computerization [2].

5.4   A contrasted computerization

Those empirical results illustrate a contrasted computerization in CPAS. On one side, those have invested finance and time in their equipment and appreciate the efficiency of technologies. One the other side, CPAS, by their lack of definition of policies and objectives and their constraints, are not yet completely adapted to this tool. For all these reasons, nothing currently enables us to say that computerization reduces work in CPAS.

Not all CPAS are on the same level in their use and perception of technologies. On the contrary, computerization seems to better match with certain identity models describing social work that we presented above.

Computerization seems to correspond rather well to two models that actually prevail. The model of social management (4), having goals of rationalization and of efficiency, and the humanitarian model (5), is confronted to the social urgencies for which it is necessary to react with speed and effectiveness. In these two cases, computerization seems to be *"the tool of the situation"*, facilitating a more rational management and helping to react quickly to social emergencies.

On the contrary, technologies seems to be less in accordance with models like the pedagogical model (1) and the militant model (2), based upon elaborate work with users, personalized care or defense of excluded people.

6   Two opposed framework

Our collected empirical data are not so surprising. If we operate a confrontation between frameworks of ICT and social work, those two components have some totally opposed properties or dimensions (see the table below).

Computerization	Social work
Standardization – rationalization of social care with the use of formatted programs or applications	Personalization of practices – case by case work
Information sharing due to computer servors, Internet, e-mail, …	Confidential work Each social worker has his own way of working
Written tradition - Bureaucratization	Oral and proximity tradition
Speed - Efficience	Slow work with users
Quantitative judgments and global approach of reality (statistics)	Qualitative judgments (more individualized approach)

Table 1. Comparison between frameworks of ICT and of social work

For those reasons, we can realize that a cultural shock could exist between those two universes and could have effects on social workers, and, largely, on workers of CPAS. In the conclusion of our survey we have observed this situation.

Crossing the two frameworks, introduction of computerization in organizations can introduce new stakes in companies and for the workers. It can promote networking with employees and external organisations. It can require more complex skills to adapt to the universe of computerization. It can implement new power games around ICT, between employees using and knowing ICT, or not using and unfamiliar with the universe of ICT. Computerization could also influence a new distribution of tasks in an organisation. Social workers could make more administrative work, or it could exist a gap between administrative workers, knowing good ICT and social workers having fewer abilities in using computers. We have observed the second and the third stake in the CPAS we have visited.

7   A limited cultural shock?

The mutual opposition of technology and Social Centers is limited. Our epistemological approach refuses to adopt a strictly determinist position, considering technology "*as an objective external force that would have (relatively) deterministic impacts on organizational properties such as structure.*" [8]. On the contrary, we advocate for "*a structurational model of technology*" [8]. Our model of reference is Giddens'theory of structuration [9]: "*The theory of structuration recognizes that human actions are enabled and constrained by structures, yet that these structures are the result of previous actions*" [8]. Computerization can be part of structures, having influences and being influenced by human workers or human actions.

The introduction of technology in an organisation is not sufficient in itself to change professional practices. It is necessary for workers to adapt themselves, to be ready to use ICT and to integrate it in their everyday practices. This appropriation of technology has two conditions. It *"requires not only that the receiving ground has the necessary means to assimilate and use the object, but also a need of the object to answer questions or a difficulty which arises, even implicitly"* [10].

Workers can also manifest strategic behaviours of resistance. Generally, professionals of a sector cannot be completely constrained by a technology. They always have the freedom and the possibility of playing with the rules.

Eventually, computerization has its limits. It is, therefore, far from being extended to all the features of work in CPAS, and largely, of social works. Indeed, most of those workers use daily relational, listening and empathy qualities with their users. Technology is definitely not sufficient to replace the practices of social workers by machines….

8   Conclusion and recommendations

Technologies can affect by different ways the identities of employees working in CPAS. Globally, Belgian Public Social Action Centers rather perceive

computerization as an obligation than as a real project. The fast rhythm imposed by public authorities for their computerization has not given them time to adapt themselves to ICT, nor has it provided them with a direction in their daily practice or time to appropriate ICT to their identity. Meanwhile, our analysis shows that these difficulties are unequally perceived by CPAS, according to their means and their resources, but especially according to their perception of social action.

However, technologies could be chances for CPAS, giving them new opportunities. Many adjustments and dialogues are possible to avoid *"a marriage of convenience"* between those two parts and to facilitate the appropriation of ICT by those centers. We conclude our paper with a proposal of three recommendations for a more successful adaptation between frameworks of ICT and of Social Centers.

- Our first recommendation would be to create a regional platform, federating CPAS. It would be an intermediary between CPAS, public authorities and computer companies. It could help social center to negotiate computer applications, and the development of their computerization.
- A second recommendation is to implement communities of practices for CPAS. Those communities would bring further solidarity between social centers. CPAS could share their experience, computer perceptions and resources. Those communities could also allow CPAS to define common computer policy and could teach the employees the new challenges of computerization (use and maintenance of ICT, ethical and legal perspectives, …)
- Our third recommendation would be to create an external observatory about computerization of CPAS. This observatory could report to public authorities the problems and lacks of means of CPAS concerning their computerization process. Public authorities could adapt their policy accordingly.

Computers and technologies are evolving and increasing in social professions. The central message of this paper is that their deployment is not a fate. Human workers always have the possibility to be actors of their computerization. Therefore, our contribution could also be interesting for other kinds of organizations.

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