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Literature Review The changing information-seeking behaviour of managers

Srikanth S

Indian Institute of Management Shillong

Abstract.

There has been a revolution in managers' information seeking conduct throughout the decades. This article examines the sources preferred by managers and the circumstances that have contributed to their choices. The examination exposes four main aspects used to analyze source preferences and finds common elements under each, including context, scenario, individual and cultural influences, and informational preferences. Information availability, information quality, information richness, and individual and organizational aspects all get significant attention in the literature. Data gathering methods in information requirements studies are also discussed.

Keywords: managers; information seeking behaviour; user needs

1. Introduction

Managers sit at the helm of a company, a position of influence and formal authority. Through the efforts of others, they play a pivotal role in driving change and enhancing organizational performance from the top down, the bottom up, and all around [1]. Managers, according to studies undertaken throughout the years, rely heavily on individuals as a source of information. However, numerous changes have occurred in the workplace in the previous two to three decades, necessitating paradigm alterations in management techniques. The widespread adoption and usage of ICT has been identified as one aspect that has had far-reaching effects on the modern workplace. Managers in today's increasingly digital workplace have access to a stimulating, interactive digital setting that allows for instantaneous and permanent connection via their networked personal computers. Thus, modern managers not only have access to a plethora of information sources and channels, but also to the notion of information anytime, anywhere. Although distance and time are no longer obstacles accessing knowledge, convenience does not always equate to the retrieval of useful data. In reality, the requirement to locate and choose the best information sources is substantially complicated by the abundance of options available. However, it is also well known [2, 3] that social relationships between coworkers tend to last over time. Organizations are consequently highly worried that serious investments in information technology have not generated the desired benefits [4]. Due to the dynamic nature of the situation, it is crucial for businesses to comprehend how managers utilize the information-rich environment at the workplace, as well as the subtleties that reflect managers' preference for information sources and channels in the digital environment, which in turn affects the costs and performance of the business.

2. Scope

The literature review reveals that, relative to the large number of studies available on other professionals such as engineers and scientists, the number investigating the information seeking behaviour of managers as a distinct group is relatively low [5]. Further, the number of studies focusing on source preferences offer very limited insights on managers and are mainly concentrated on engineers, social scientists, R & D personnel and other professionals. The objective of this review is to analyse relevant studies and trace how managers' choice of source preferences for acquiring information has been transformed over the years.

The review begins with a brief description of the nature of managers' work and their information behaviour to contextualize the setting. It includes writings dealing with managers' criteria of source preference identified over decades and traces the different themes that have evolved over the years. Findings are summarized in a table which presents common factors impacting source preference that are identified in the studies and a four-framed figure which outlines the four key dimensions considered to be the key elements influencing source preference. Data collection techniques used in these studies are also reviewed briefly. For the purposes of this review a manager is defined as a person in charge of a formal organization or its subunits [6]. Managers' information behaviour is defined as their behavioural approach to seeking and handling information at work.

3. Nature of managers' work

In a given day managers face immense workloads, diverse and complex tasks, fragmented work, time constraints, and the need to choose between alternatives based on cost, benefits and outcomes. Managers' tasks are generally open-ended, unstructured, varied, fragmented, and prone to interruptions. They prefer the more active and non-routine elements of their work – the live action leading to fast decision making – and dislike routine [6]. They organize and regulate face-to-face contact with peers and subordinates for reports, advice and discussion, and to give and receive instructions. Due to the complexity and constant overload of work, they are pressured to incessantly battle their ever-changing time-space context and rely on openings and opportunities rather than the luxury of extended contemplation to create change. The defining context of managerial work, therefore, is immediacy and the cultivation and use of soft skills that determine their behaviour. Mintzberg [6], who has written widely on the nature of managerial work, identifies three key managerial roles: the 'interpersonal', reflecting how managers obtain information; the 'informational' for monitoring and disseminating information; and the 'decisional', which justifies the managers' authority and power to access information. In more recent writings, Mintzberg

[7] identifies four managerial competencies, among which informational competency implies that information is a critical resource for the manager. These roles and competencies, and Mintzberg's comment that 'the processing of information is a key part of the manager's job' [8, p. 18], lead us to conclude that it is the manager's informational role that ties all managerial work together. Furthermore, managers hold strategic positions in the organizational hierarchy, which offers them a unique opportunity to have substantive exchanges with both the external and the internal environment and to disseminate and share information internally. Therefore managers are considered sources of external and internal information and are variously referred to as 'boundary spanners', gatekeepers of information, knowledge brokers, cognitive authorities, and 'information stars' [9–11]. Other key characteristics of managerial behaviour highlighted in the literature that relate to this review include: the need for managers to develop and maintain networks of contacts to achieve their agendas [12, 13]; reliance on communications and collaboration via informal networks to achieve results and identify information that will help innovative managers accumulate power [14, 15]; and recognizing communication and networking as two of the major activities of 'real managers' [16]. A recurring theme in these writings is how managers use information, communication, and network building both inside and outside the organization to achieve their goals. Originally referred to as invisible colleges, today these networks thrive as they exist on a voluntary basis, have no specific deliverables, persist regardless of where the individuals are employed or located, and contribute to organizational learning. In fact Nardie, Whittaker and Schwarz [17] suggest that today it is not what one knows that matters but who one knows. This recognition of the importance of personal contact, network building, social relations and reciprocity created through goodwill, mutual support and a sense of mutual obligation, has resulted in a body of literature signifying the value of social capital, social networks, social relations at work, and communities of practice [2, 18–24].

4. Information behaviour of managers

Managers' information behaviour reflects a relationship with their work settings and information environment that highlights a need to understand problem situations as a precursor to understanding how they seek and use information [29–36].

Literature reveals that managers require information at two levels – the immediate business or task environment to guide them in their operational decision making and the broader business environment for long-term strategic planning. The scope of the immediate business environment includes current competitors, existing technologies, and product markets. The broader external business environment includes the political, economic, social and technological (PEST) areas in which managers need to cope with perceived environmental uncertainty. Perceived environmental uncertainty is the absence of information and in such situations managers are required to do greater information processing to identify opportunities and threats and implement strategies. Organizations have an information advantage when managers have the ability to capture signals about environmental opportunities and problems that other organizations miss. However, it is also known that managers are yet to learn to take responsibility for information and few know how to identify what information they require, when, and from where [37].

- 1.1. The day-to-day information needs of managers range from a desire to solve a problem to overcoming a situation by making a decision or increasing understanding. Due to the nature of problems they often face, managers rely heavily on evaluated, aggregated data; operate on a good deal less than total information; seek options and alternatives rather than answers; and require different constructs of

information to make a decision. The availability of relevant information typically improves the accuracy of decisions, while irrelevant signals may make identification of relevant information more difficult and may decrease decision-making performance. What is implied here is that 'good' information leads to 'good' decision making. However, while some managers may seek information to make decisions and cope with crisis situations, others follow tightly constructed sets of beliefs in order to reduce the amount of information they require [38]. Other related behavioural characteristics include reliance on intuitive skills and decision-making styles. Managers who are fast decision makers maintain constant watch over real-time operating information while slow decision makers are bogged down by fruitless searches for information. The crucial point to note is that, given the rapid changes taking place in the external environment even as the short-term plans are being implemented, it is important that managers have the flexibility and the information to adapt to new situations as they evolve [39].

4.1 *Managers' preference for information sources*

Managers acquire information about work-related issues from their external and internal environments by using formal and/or informal sources which may be oral, printed, or electronic. Depending on the complexity or ambiguity of the task, they need to not only be skilful at making a choice of sources and channels for acquiring and sharing information, but also a critical receiver of information from multiple sources and channels to form opinions, and be conscious that the use of certain sources and channels may lead to establishing certain norms and traditions in the company.

Beginning with Aguilar's seminal work [40], managers' source preferences have not seen much change over the years and their primary source of information continues to be people sources and informal social networks [4, 5, 41–46]. Considering managers' complex work environment and task and environmental uncertainties, the tendency for them to use people sources frequently is attributed to many uses. These include the 'law of least effort', specifically relative accessibility and ease of use with a lack of attention to quality [47] and to keeping current as well as getting information on routine and unfamiliar matters [3]. Other reasons include an ability to directly receive a better picture and understanding to interpret unclear issues, a high level of perceived credibility and trustworthiness of the information source, perceived ease of accessibility, and the perception that the most relevant and content specific information has been received [45, 47–50]. Symbolic reasons include a desire for teamwork, to build trust and goodwill, convey informality or urgency, and show personal concern [51]. To summarize, the advantages of face-to-face communication are that they offer

- (1) accurate understanding, instant feedback and immediacy of reaction,
- (2) content rich information, i.e. information which is filtered, summarized, and personalized but has not been diluted or lost its meaning in transit, and the capability of providing multiple channels such as the audio and the visual which offer a variety of multiple information cues such as subtle signals sent by voice inflection and body language and the ability to detect weak signals.

The people sources preferred include both internal and external sources. In fact many companies, recognizing the value of casual conversations and networking, are adopting open concept office spaces in order to encourage information sharing internally. In comparison, use of readily accessible internal documentary sources is preferred only in conditions of low uncertainty where environmental events are discrete and analysable [52] or because of its importance to one's work. However, companies are now beginning to realize the value of internal documentary sources which form the organizational memory and are giving emphasis to building organizational knowledge banks.

Studies conducted during the decades of the 1980s and the 1990s reveal that the least used of the three source types are the electronic sources [41–43, 48]. For example, Hirsh [46] reveals that, though work may require individuals to interact intensively with information, less than half the respondents used the WWW to find information relating to their work, and when used, it is not to share information relating to the status of their current projects but to disseminate information about completed projects. This finding is attributed mainly to the fact that the respondents are probably unaware of the existence of the functionalities of the various databases offered via the intranet [43, 53, 54]. A more recent study, Detlor [55], also finds a rather low frequency of use of the company portal which is attributed to the relative newness of the application. Studies also highlight that the biggest information challenges managers face today are managing information overload, finding relevant filtered information, filling gaps in their knowledge base, and keeping current [39, 56, 57].

In comparison, some other studies [3, 58] reveal a high use of the internet/intranet for information gathering and suggest that the most popular uses of the web search engines are to seek information, read online news, and participate in discussion groups. The tendency of these users is to return to a handful of trusted and familiar sites as opposed to doing keyword searches and spending considerable time assessing the quality of information on unknown sites.

Though earlier there was a lack of consensus in the literature on the nature of the impact of information technology on the workplace and its employees [59], it is now accepted that ICTs have revolutionized the workplace during the last decade and present today's managers with ready access to a vast array of information sources and channels at the touch of a button via networked PCs at their desks. The wide choice of electronic sources and channels available range from e-mail to discussion lists, newswires, web logs, commercial online databases, in-house proprietary databases, corporate portals, company intranets, the internet, and web browsers to connect to the world wide web. Channels of communication such as SMS and wi-fi zones which facilitate the use of palm- and laptops offer computer mediated communication across time and space enabling information sharing. Video conferencing and telephones with pictures offer the ability to accumulate and transmit voluminous data, send and receive messages from large groups avoiding the delays faced with office memos, and have also spawned online social networks and the concept of information any time anywhere.

Regardless of whether it is a personal, documentary, or electronic information source, each information source displays characteristics that make it appropriate for some situations and not others and as a result today, the selection of appropriate information sources is a critical issue that managers are required to handle in the course of their work. The need to filter and select the most appropriate sources and manage information requirements effectively is compounded due to the exponential rate of growth of literature via the diverse media, the resulting information overload, and the lack of knowledge and skills on the part of managers to maximize the available resources.

4.2 Factors influencing managers' source preferences

In the ideal situation managers should acquire information from multiple sources and channels which complement each other to provide as broad a perspective as possible. However, reality deems otherwise and potential causes have been identified that demonstrate differences in managers' information behaviour and variations in choice of sources. Making choices between alternatives involves a complex interplay of multiple factors. These may range from users' perceptions and attitudes toward the characteristics of the information sources to criteria that may be economic, social, physical, psychological and technological. Therefore factors such as managers' thinking processes and emotional states, organizational dynamics, and situational constraints such as the time available to complete a task and the level of discretion that has to be exercised when performing a task, contextualize their work place, their knowledge of alternatives, and their ability to identify what are the actual possibilities of these alternatives and to determine a course of action. Therefore given the cognitive capacity of the extremely busy managers, they carry out a selection process based on their perceptions and attitudes to identify suitable sources of information. The study of how managers' information behaviour has transformed over the decades is, therefore, made more complex due to these diverse factors. This section begins with a brief introduction to the early studies and follows with a review of the literature categorized by decades in order to trace the different themes related to criteria of source preferences that have evolved over the years.

5. Conclusion

The review brings to notice a few themes related to managers' work-related information needs. Managers are required to perform diverse roles and tasks in their work and are subject to time pressures. They are often required to make decisions with insufficient relevant information, or where available, insufficient time to filter, aggregate, or interpret the information. Managers are also subject to a set of complex dimensions ranging from the personal to the environmental in the course of seeking and using information for their work. These issues are compounded by the proliferation of ICTs at the workplace. A few predominant trends emerge in the literature review on factors affecting source preferences. Beginning with the two models of the pre-1980s which demonstrate a cost-benefit relationship and the 'Law of Least Effort', the studies reviewed reveal a tendency to vacillate between the concepts of physical accessibility, information richness, information quality, and individual and institutional characteristics ranging from task complexity to the uncertainty of the task environment with a majority of studies citing accessibility as predominantly affecting source preference. However, these factors are given multiple interpretations in the divergent studies and the proliferation of ICTs has added to the complexity of defining the terminology. More recent studies highlight the idea that source preferences should not be studied in isolation, but need to be studied as a cohesive whole in the social context of their information use environment. The social context encompasses the corporate mission, goals and culture; the participants' work roles, goals and tasks, their perceptions and thoughts on their work environment, and the information resources and tools available to them

from within and outside their work environment. Recent studies also emphasize the need to be more conscious of the data collection techniques used as they have an impact on the generalization of studies for future application.

The research techniques used in the studies reveal a preponderance of questionnaire use at one extreme and the use of triangulation at the other extreme. Use of IT and web technology is gradually surfacing. Generalization of studies across settings is hindered due to minimal replication of data collection techniques, accuracy of recall, grouping of sources based on previous studies, and variations in the definition of terms.

The review reveals a gap in the literature on managers' information source preference, specifically in the context of the recent changes in the field of information and communication technologies. More in-depth studies on this aspect would be useful for information providers and professionals as it would enable them to customize products and services more effectively for the users; and would have a spill-over effect on managers who would be able to acquire information efficiently and skilfully from the most relevant sources and add value to their company.

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