

careers@communication¹

Digitalized Communication in Business – Career Hindrance or Career Chance for Women?²

Most employees work in today's western economies consists of the processing, rearranging and exchanging of information and knowledge – and therefore: communication. Communication means for a bigger and bigger extent the use of computer based technology, a world without technology based communication is out of imagination.

The application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is not everywhere the same. It may differ among branches and industries but it may differ although with hierarchical position of different employees. People in occupations with a formative nature – that's usually on a management level – may use computers as means of assistance. But the impact of technology is much bigger if an occupation is of a simple executive type. On a basic executive level work is in the main interaction with the computer and the job performance consists of an intermediation of the social with the technical sphere. That kind of performance tends to be taken for granted like a technical process. Such workings are often estimated as less challenging and less demanding than the workings of a managerial occupation.

This mode of 'working out of sight' has severe consequences for the positional competition among employees. Those who are at the lower end of the ladder of hierarchy have the lesser opportunities to get a grip on chances for promotion or career. In a time were careers don't happen anymore but have to be made this kind of consequences becomes even more severe.

The research project careers@communication asks for the impact of information and communication technology on career related communication. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected in big Austrian corporations. The main research question was how information and communication technology shapes the scope of action of employees and in which way the impact of those technologies influences organizational gender inequalities.

Change and stability

The results of the study reflect the changes accompanied by the Reorganisations of work and career arrangements within firms.

Planning a career is less possible today because of corporations continuous reorganization, so careers have to be constructed actively. Employees are aware of requirements of a stronger self-rationalization and adapt. Employees know that they are responsible for their job performance and the communication of their outputs in order to secure and promote there position. True to the motto "do good and talk about it" the communicative stage-management – that is the presentation and self-marketing of the individual – is of high significance.

Communication processes and workflow are underlying a technology driven change: Executive and routine work are based on technology. In the same time the density of communication is increasing in all segments of organizational hierarchy. It is no longer possible to separate work and communication many

¹ Funken, Ingenschay & Oloff 2008.

² The present text is a summary. The long version as well as the scientific long version are available as downloads on the w-fORTE website (www.w-fforte.at) in the domain "knowledge base".

employees in big Austrian corporation (as far as they are included in the survey) see work and communication as one and the same thing.

Given all that processes of changes and technology driven transformation in organizations results of the study show, that there is although a lot of inertia according to gender-segregated structures within corporations: men and women included in the sample communicate and act in the same way and follow the same career-related strategies but their paths of careers are different in a significant mode. The hierarchical mobility of men in the organizations under survey is much bigger than that of their female colleagues. They change positions more often and their mobility is an upward-mobility. They climb more often and they climb much faster than the women. This result is of some notice as the women included in the sample are better educated and communicate their career-ambitions more often than men.

Research, politics and business hold the following reasons as responsible for the outcome mentioned above: the (in-)compatibility of professional and family work as well as glass-ceiling-phenomena within business organizations and firms.

We ask if and how the implementation of Information and Communication Technology and the related changing forms of communication and workflow intersect with gender-specific segregation in organizations.

Technology-mediated communication and work

All corporations included in the survey use ICT. ICT mediated communication takes place in everyday working life and is taken for granted by the employees. Often it is combined and intertwined with traditional forms of communication. The technology used for communication purposes ranges from the phone on the desk via the e-mail up to centralized data-bases and data-management-systems.

The extent of use of ICT varies according to the position in the organizational hierarchy and according to the job-profile. These facts indicate that the potential of economization generated by ICT in organizations is limited, because the application of ICT is only useful for standardized workflows. The corporations included in the survey use ICT-solutions in pre-structured workflow-processes that are predominantly conducted by women. In this case, technology is a tool to work with and a mean of control of the *execution of work* at the same time. Managerial and creative work on the other side uses ICT as a mere mean of work, skilled employees in that field of work decide for themselves to use ICT or not. Here, corporate control and appreciation of performance are conducted by the benchmark of *work results*.

Technology-mediated careers?

If visibility of achievement and engagement is one of the most important requirements for appreciation and promotion, employees performing ICT-based standardized work have to face severe consequences as their career opportunities are limited. Most of these employees are women, as a consequence job and promotion-opportunities of many women are limited by the following factors.

Visibility: Job performances which are constituted by the translation of social processes into technical processes are not seen in an appropriate way, they are estimated as more simple and routine based as they really are. Above all, the social visibility of employees is decreasing to the same extent as communication is (due to occupational demands) mediated by ICT, because these people have lesser₂

chances to communicate face to face and to become known as competent, skilled or reliable.

Information policy: So called 'hot' information is often beyond reach of employees working and communicating mainly with ICT, as this kind of information is related to face to face communication. Their situation gets worse, as most of organizational relevant knowledge and information is part of a digitalized knowledge stock provided to the intra-organizational public by ICT-systems. As a result, knowledge and information are objectified, alienated from the knower and depersonalized and thereby less relevant for social, traditional organizational communication. This kind of information is no individual resource, as it is part of a knowledge which everybody could know if he wants to, it is not scarce. Only Information which is scarce can be used to promote individual means and ends. Data stocks and organizational knowledge management enhance the importance of individual knowledge as long it is scarce and interchangeable in face to face communication.

Knowledge as a resource: Informatization of working processes devaluates executive knowledge of employees, as it is related to standardized and technical mediated work and thereby seems to be interchangeable. As well as the mediation performance between social sphere and technical systems won't be recognizable, employees knowledge which is necessary to perform this kind of job is – unlike the knowledge of experts or specialists not appreciated and can't be activated as a career resource.

Gendered division of work

In the firms examined by this study, most technical-mediated work is performed by women. They use ICT for performing their work unequivocally more often than employees with other kind of workings or employees on the managerial level. As a consequence, they lack opportunities and chances which other actors have and which are very important when going in for a career.

- Their work performance is invisible;
- They have less opportunities to show their abilities, skills and competences;
- They are cut off from important information-flows;
- The resource "knowledge" can't be activated to promote careers.

The informatization of work is not just widening the gap between creative or managerial work on the one hand and executive, routine based work on the other hand, the two modes of work are gendered. The first kind of work is predominantly male and highly estimated, the other kind of work is often female and much less estimated. By implementation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) gendered structures become stabilized and prolonged into the future. Therefore, technology could be identified not as a carrier for gender equality but as a barrier.

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³ Formerly known as the federal ministry of economy and labour.