
Preface

This volume represents a collection of articles on the interplay between two rather independent fields of research: information technology and social capital. With this fine collection, the book contributes to a need to incorporate a relational perspective within the field of applied computer science research.

The idea for this book goes back to summer 2001, when we met in the Boston area as visiting researchers: Marleen Huysman at Harvard Business School and Volker Wulf at MIT. The intellectual environment along with the fortunate lack of daily work routines inspired us to think about the value of social networks and relationships in the research on information technology and, in particular, knowledge management. At the time, Wulf was finishing a coedited book on expertise management. That work argues that the currently accepted approach to the concept of knowledge management is largely driven by technological and managerial concerns, and as a result, it overlooks the importance of informal social relationships. On the other side of the Charles River, Huysman was completing a book on knowledge sharing in practice. In it, she discusses the traps of current approaches to knowledge management. Although we come from two different backgrounds—Huysman is a sociologist by training, and Wulf is a computer scientist—we felt the need to incorporate within the present discourse on knowledge management a focus on the more relational aspects that motivate (and hinder) knowledge sharing.

During our stay in the Boston area, we had the pleasure of meeting with various scholars, thinkers, and writers in related fields of research. Among them, Larry Prusak, the director of the IBM Institute for

Knowledge Management, was pivotal. The inspiring discussions convinced us more and more to include the concept of social capital into the research agenda for technology-supported knowledge sharing.

At the end of our respective visits to the United States, we finally met each other. We realized that although we had taken different paths, we had reached a similar state of mind: more effort is needed to explore the potentials of the concept of social capital for future research on topics such as technology-enhanced knowledge sharing. Whereas the concept of social capital was already introduced and appropriated in various disciplines, it was time for researchers to also think about its potential for entering a new area of technology-supported knowledge sharing. In order to give our ideas more body as well as to garner support for them, we decided to organize a lunch meeting at the European Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work (ECSCW) conference in September in Bonn. The purpose of the meeting was to see whether there was an opportunity to build a “community” with researchers sharing similar interests. The group of about twenty like-minded scholars who came encouraged us to start a networking process among researchers in the field of social capital and information technology.

On 21–22 May 2002, we invited an international group of thirty-five researchers to a workshop in Amsterdam to present papers, debate various controversies within this field, and become part of this emerging research community. Given the novelty of the field, the topics of discussion were extremely diverse. Also, the absolute lack of closure in the field created a tolerant and positive atmosphere. At the end of the workshop, we offered to coedit a book on the topic. In order to guarantee a high-quality volume, all workshop papers were peer reviewed, and about half of the papers were selected for publication in the book.

A first volume on social capital and information technology needs to cover as broad a range of topics as possible. The Amsterdam workshop was overly biased toward knowledge management, while the concept of social capital originated from broader societal issues such as development concerns and civic engagement. Consequently, in addition to the selected workshop papers, authors who had conducted societal-related research on social capital and information technology were also asked

to submit. These papers went through a thorough reviewing process as well.

The present book is the result of this journey. Although we especially owe a lot to each other—and thanks to e-mail, we were able to keep each other enthused during the whole journey—we could not have done it without the help of so many others. We thank all those with whom we had the pleasure to meet during our stays in the Boston area and who inspired us to persevere in introducing the concept of social capital into the fields of information systems, knowledge management, and computer-supported cooperative work. In particular we wish to thank: Larry Prusak, Dorothy Leonard, Mark Ackerman, Eric von Hippel, Mitchel Resnick, Wanda Orlikowski, Keneth P. Morse, Eric Lesser, David Millen, Brian Lacey, and Ralf Klamma. We also offer our gratitude to all the participants of the workshop Social Capital and Information Technology for the fruitful discussion of the issues addressed in this book. A special thanks goes to Etienne Wenger for his helpful comments and the insights that he shared with us during the two workshop days in Amsterdam.

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