Schwerpunkte: Informationsmanagement und Instandhaltung

Inhalt

Impressum

The Virtual Communication Department VCD

New potential for computer-mediated collaborative work of mobile journalists?

A 'Virtual Communication Department (VCD)' is being described and evaluated in a three-year-study carried out at the University of South Australia and running until the end of 2006 in order to determine the VCD's potential for computer-mediated collaborative work of journalists and communication specialists. The test case is the Research Institute for Operations Management (FIR) at Aachen University of Technology (RWTH) in Germany. The idea was to design and gradually integrate the new virtual work circumstance into day-to-day operations so as to remove needless complexities, reduce labour intensity, and create a single virtual access point to regulate and control all publishing processes, whilst ensuring or enhancing quality management. In the end, the VCD is to act as spotter for Research and Development, as well as for Industry Commissioned Research, if need be. By implementing in publishing processes the whole potential of current (relatively low cost) Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the foundation is to be developed into a practical framework that can be rapidly applied in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), research institutions, and government departments alike. This paper aims to give an insight into initial research results on the VCD in terms of its role in publishing a specialist journal on a regular basis – one of the most important traditional publication processes of the FIR's former PR Unit. The results are suprising.

Introduction. In the past decade, a significant amount of research on virtual organisations, virtual departments, and virtual teams has been conducted, but no major connection to the work of journalists and communication specialists has been drawn to date. This is so despite the fact that the status of internal communications policies is rapidly rising in enterprises. Moreover, given the greater demands for information and new technological potential, efficient company communication that is frequent, fast, free of contradiction, and target group specific, has become a strategic success factor, especially in e-business. In fact, efficient company communication is now a task that requires central control, management, and continuity, as well as regular monitoring, adjustment/further development or revision.

Following processes of greater differentiation and specialisation of the communications industry, measures of Strategic Public Relations and Integrated (Marketing) Communications were characterised and discussed in the past decade. For example, the concept of Integrated Communication seeks the analysis, planning, organisation, and implementation of the organisation's internal and external communication, with the aim of conveying a consistent image of the organisation's object of reference to groups targeted by the communication [1]. Despite its high claim to being of textbook status, Integrated Communication gained little recognition from managers for its practical applicability. Only recently, the notion of the 'Communication Scorecard' was introduced [2]. This concept takes up the 'Balanced Scorecard' [3]. Communication is to become central to management and serve improved business efficiency. The potential of organisational communication for value creation should be put to efficient and effective use in value-oriented management. However, these rather complex concepts share two limitations: first, they ignore new virtual ways of working, for which they have no instructions, and, second, their implementation is lengthy and expensive, which leads them to be largely disregarded by

management, especially in times of crisis, or even to be judged unsuited for the quick handling of crisis events.

Taking account of rapid technological development, there is a clear need to catch up when it comes to the consistent enforcement of networked and mobile communication (technologies) in order to take full advantage of synergies [4; 5]. This is as relevant for press and public relations work as it is for internal and external communication, which is now seen as a strategic marketing tool by communication specialists in the boardrooms too [6]. If the overall development is put in relation to the interests of workers wishing to carry out their work activities at home [7], new concepts in the work organisation of this success factor are needed. In addition, major research work still needs to be done on the practical suitability of virtual forms of organisation.

This is where the framework concept of the 'Virtual Communication Department (VCD)' comes in.

Research questions. Because of its structure combining a small unit and the high professionalism of networked performers, the VCD should be capable of reacting to crisis events in a flexible manner. However, the number of staff employed with a VCD as such does not say much about its productivity or success, as the VCD's decisive success factor lies in the abilities of its performers.

The questions to be investigated in this ongoing research are: Is it possible to have a virtual counterpart of a real-life department of public relations, or, can a real-life department of public relations be transformed into a virtual one? Is it possible to keep to a minimum the degree of complexity of a virtual communication depart-

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Figure 1 (middle page)
Managing publishing processes in the VCD.

Figure 2 (bottom page)
Future virtual support in the VCD.

ment? Can such a VCD be as efficient as a real-life department? Is a VCD possibly capable of offering solutions to new tasks? In order to perform, does the VCD require team members to meet face-to-face, as does the real-life department?

Methods. Assembling job holders from different areas of the enterprise in a virtual communication department to work as a team means that these job holders put their tasks into effect in the context of a clearly defined area of responsibility regulated at the level of one authority. The detailed virtual team is therefore institutionalised. The advan-
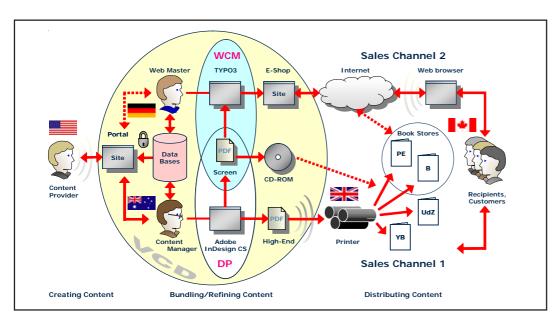
tages of team orientation are, in organisational terms, the higher degree of creative initiative of individuals, and in technical terms, the improved ability to make full use of inter-organisational potential.
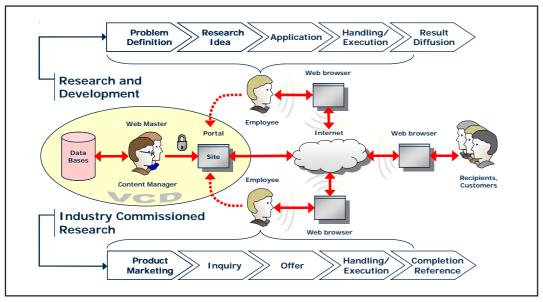
Participants. The test case of the research project is the Research Institute for Operations Management (FIR). In order to communicate new research results, concepts, and procedures, the FIR publishes as part of its transfer function and on a quarterly basis the specialist journal 'UdZ – Unternehmen der Zukunft' ('Enterprise of the Future'). In its book series 'Praxis Edition', the Re-

search Institute also summarises research themes, and, in its 'Yearbook', it provides a collection of the entire research work conducted at the Research Institute. The FIR also publishes context-related book projects, mainly anthologies, and there are web-sites on-line, one for each of its stakeholder groups. Until 2004, these publication processes were delivered by the PR Unit.

At the end of 2003 and the beginning of 2004, the tight budgetary situation, a decrease in funds, and an increase in the pressure of costs forced the FIR into staff and economy measures. These lead, among other things, to the dissolution of the PR Unit which had been going for 25 years. Twelve staff in the work areas Documentation, Reference Library (with 20,000 volumes), and Public Relations were abruptly let go: eight ancillary academics, one academic assistant, and one non-academic employee, including the internal printing-works. In addition, the employment of four non-academic staff was scaled down. At the same time, the partnering external large-scale printing house became insolvent. The effect of this on internal and external communication was a brain drain, and a lack of staff transfer and introduction. What was left was a variety of internal application islands, each of a different make-up, and due to inefficient data utilisation, the vagabond life of redundant and unstructured content, as well as on-line portals that were difficult to maintain.

Just as the former PR Unit did, the VCD should now master all publication processes. (See figures 1 and 2.) The idea would be to strive for a maximum of digitalisation and networking of all media. On top of that, the VCD would also need to help reorganise the intranet so that it would become the new platform for internal communications. Thus, this study would contribute to an understanding when and in which way virtual teams are appropriate. The focus would be on maximising their

performance, thereby extending the research perspective to journalistic outcomes.

Procedures. At the beginning of the research project, the continuing publishing processes at the FIR in the areas of print, off-line, and on-line were categorised and prioritised. Given the dissolution of the PR Unit in 2004, the publication of the UdZ took top priority. This specialist quarterly had been one of the most important publication processes of the FIR's former real-life department. The aim of virtualisation was to move print media from the E-Publishing option to the more cost-saving Database Publishing (DP) solution. Similarly, electronic media was to be moved from the neglected web-publishing option through the introduction of an affordable Content Management System (CMS) to the less costly Web Content Management (WCM) solution. The reconfiguration of the workflow proceeded in accordance with the normalisation, standardisation, and modularisation of the content in databases. In the end, there will be no more distinction between publication products because the mobile VCD would be publishing media-neutral as a matter of principle. The transformation process would be complete with the virtual running of the WCM solution.

For each of the publishing processes, rationalising measures were determined using the set pattern of the ideal departmental structure of a publishing house, that is, management, editing, production, advertising, and sales. Preliminary results are available for the publication process of the specialist journal UdZ.

First Results. The 'UdZ – Unternehmen der Zukunft' is a FIR+IAW specialist journal in the area of the management of organisation and work in production and services, and it aims at providing managers with specialist help for the creation of solutions in relation to questions of operations management. Authors contributing to the UdZ include staff from the

institutional cooperation of FIR and IAW, as well as external writers.

The transfer of this publication process into virtual space took place in 2004 in terms of a four-step-implementation: original situation, target situation/operative target to become a VCD, implementation/organisational measures (setting framework and processes), and effectiveness control (evaluation of the transfer to a VCD). Analysis of the original situation revealed that two editors and one designer took 247 hours to produce a twenty-four-page edition. The old publication process was characterised by unclear editorial management, lay

use of the DTP programme, and high complexity of the setting files' type area. In addition, quality processes were poorly controlled. The operative target was to rectify the situation. The required organisational measures were put into effect in terms of three (conceptual) areas of responsibility in a publishing house: editorial, production, and sales.
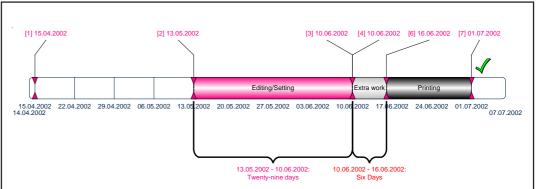
The measures were implemented at the FIR at the time of editing and setting the Edition 2004-01 published in March 2004. Preliminary evaluation of the effectiveness of the VCD process revealed that after only seven weeks of virtualisation, success came in the

Figure 3
Comparison of
UdZ 2002-03 (Real-life Dept.,
14.04.2002–07.07.2002) and
UdZ 2005-01 (Virtual Space,
10.02.2005–05.05.2005).

Quick summary: 2 editors, 1 designer; 30,000 Euro salary per year; 247 working hours per edition.

Basic information
(UdZ 2002-03/UdZ 2005-01)
- Number of pages: 24/44
- Sections (fixed): 8/6
- Number of articles: 13/12
- Advertisements/Supplements: 6/2
- Number of authors: 20/28
- Process duration (weeks): 11/8
- Editing/Setting (days): 29/9
- Extra work (days): 6/9
- Number of working hours (set-up time not included): **246,6/77**

Planning
[1] Invitation to register a contribution
[2] Deadline for editing and advertisement
[3] Galley proof to authors
[4] Final galley to publisher (Release for print)
[5] On-line files to web master*
[6] Setting-files to printer (printing house)
[7] Delivery of the print medium
[8] Final dispatch*

Special moments*
[A] Editing: receipt of first article
[B] Setting: receipt of an author's final request for alterations
[C] Setting: receipt of publisher's proof-corrections
[D] On-line medium: extra work (none)
[E] Print medium: delivery and first dispatch

* UdZ 2002-03: no information

Quick summary: 1 virtual editor; 7,200 Euro salary per year; 60–90 working hours per edition.

case example of the core process of publication of the Institute's own specialist journal. The subsequent two editions, published in June and September 2004 respectively, confirmed the initial results. Since the Edition 2004-04, published in December 2004, editing and setting the UdZ has been taking place in South Australia without face-to-face communication. The following Edition 2005-01 was published in March 2005 using only a tablet PC, and, despite a doubling of the number of pages, the Edition could be issued with fewer hours required (77 hours) and significantly less expenditure than the editions brought out by the real-life department. (See figure 3, page 39.) Thus, comparing Edition 2002-03, published in September 2002, and Edition 2005-01 reveals that issuing an edition today requires up to 160 working hours less, which amounts to monthly savings to the tune of 1,900 Euro – this figure is based on salary hours. (See figure 4.) What is more, the multiple usage of the UdZ on-line is achieved with little additional expenditure.

To be sure, the introduction of a new work organisation met with recalcitrance of some involved. Initially, tardy authors or late re-working by authors or editors after the deadline for editing and advertisements had passed meant additional expenditure. The factors that were little influenced by virtualisation remained the internal dispatch of the print medium as well as the time for printing required by the printing house. All things considered, virtualising this publication process presents the possibility of the UdZ being published monthly.

Discussion. Initial research results suggest a virtual counterpart of a real-life department of public relations is possible. The VCD can be set up fairly quickly, which is helpful, especially in times of crisis. It seems possible to keep to a minimum the degree of complexity of a VCD through organisational redesign. In the core process of publishing the FIR's own specialist journal, the VCD can be more efficient than the former real-life PR Unit.

Preliminary findings of the research on the FIR test case also show that transferring the publication process of the specialist journal UdZ into virtual space achieved, apart from considerable economies in working time and resource use, an increase in user benefits as indicated by log files of reader downloads. At first, some content providers were stretched by virtualisation in their efforts to adjust in a meaningful way (i.e. keeping dates or meeting deadlines, explanations on software applications, use of PDF documents, etc.). In order to secure a smooth behavioural transition, guidance was required occasionally, which placed an extra burden on the time budget of the content manager. However, slowly but surely, all of the content providers (writers, researchers) developed trust and on-line ways to communicate via e-mail, looking up instructions and faqs on a webpage or downloading templates or other data from it. Even new members of staff appear to get their bearings in this new work environment. Today, neither management, nor authors feel the need to meet the virtualised editor face-to-face for routine work any more.

Further research on the remaining publishing processes is needed to determine whether virtualisation can be extended, and, if so, which other solutions the VCD could offer to new tasks. The study might give fresh impetus to the discussion about the future world of work and the workplace of mobile journalists.

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Figure 4
UdZ 2002 and UdZ 2005 compared.

Real-life Public Relations Unit vs. Virtual Communication Dept.

2 editors, 1 designer at their office

1 virtual editor mobile, virtually anywhere

Desktop publishing

Mobile/Database publishing (+ Web content management)

Unclear editing management
Unstructured content
Complex setting
Setting-files to printing house

Binding project management
Content in data bases
Simplified setting
PDF documents to printing house

247 working hours per edition
30,000 Euro salary per year

60-90 working hours per edition
7,200 Euro salary per year

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**Saving up to
160 working hours/edition,
1,900 Euro/month = 22,800 Euro/year**