Information Seeking in Organizations: Epistemic Contexts and Contests

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Abstract

Organizations seek and use information to understand and enact their worlds. Information constitutes what the organization 'knows' about its environment and its tasks, and thus creates a basis for action. However, the link between information, knowledge, and action is problematic and not well understood. We consider three case studies that highlight different aspects of the interaction between information and knowledge in organizations. The first case compares information seeking and use in the due diligence processes of a government agency and a venture capital firm. The second case surfaces the epistemic properties of information seeking in the preparation of country studies by the staff of a German bank. The third case recollects the experience of large-scale information sharing among copier technicians of a multinational office products company. These case studies suggest that organizations behave as epistemic communities with distinct epistemic and information cultures that influence how information is sought and utilized, and how beliefs are formed and re-formed. To understand information behaviour in organizations is to understand how organizations are simultaneously information-seeking and belief-forming social systems, where information is shaped by epistemic practices as much as beliefs are the outcomes of information seeking and use.