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Keywords

workplace information, information management, information science, information technology, knowledge management

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Byström, K., Heinström, J., & Ruthven, I. (2019). *Information at work: Information management in the workplace*. Facet Publishing.

Information at Work: Information Management in the Workplace offers an expansive yet succinct series of essays exploring information and its entangled, complex interactions within the workplace. Edited by researchers Katriina Byström, Jannica Heinström, and Ian Ruthven, and co-authored by an additional seven information researchers, the work highlights the pivotal role information plays in the socio-cultural context of human labor, portraying its significance even beyond the domain of the knowledge worker. Katriina Byström is a Professor in Library and Information Science at the Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway, focusing on information flows within the work environment and how information tasks are executed. Jannica Heinström is an Associate Professor in the Library and Information Science at the Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. Heinström explores the psychological dimensions of information interaction such as how workers with different personalities use information. Ian Ruthven is a Professor of Information Seeking and Retrieval at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland, researching information seeking behaviors across diverse populations. Although the collection of essays could be more coherent, the reader will find prescient, relevant questions posed spanning a variety of topics, including workplace automation, the shaping of information cultures, information artifacts, and evolving workplace environments. Ultimately, the book argues that only by trying to understand the dynamic, sometimes elusive qualities and impacts of information can it be effectively managed for the benefit of the worker.

Deliberately multidisciplinary, *Information at Work* excels at presenting more abstract, philosophical considerations of information management while framed within specific industries and real-life scenarios. Fictitious characters who are employed as a cardiologist, a lawyer, and a journalist are used throughout the book to demonstrate how information is metabolized within the day-to-day activities of specific jobs. Information for a cardiologist, for example, materializes as health science journals, colleagues, the medical record, and, importantly, the patient. The authors reveal how workers' responsibilities are now commonly fragmented as they "spend less time at each task and switch tasks frequently" (Byström et al., p. 5) due to the evolving retrieval and dissemination of relevant information. They explore how information overload, artificial intelligence, personal information management, and the shifting hybridity of labor are contributing to new realities for modern workers. And despite their macro analysis of emerging trends in managing workplace information, they don't pretend to have the answers; instead, they offer specific examples of larger themes and ultimately concede that "there is no single framework or epistemological perspective that singlehandedly explains the entire phenomena of workplace information" (Byström et al., p. 24).

Two essays, "Information Activities and Tasks" and "Information Artefacts," are particularly eye-opening and successfully merge the conceptual and realistic. In "Information Activities and Tasks," the authors propose an analogy of a flowing stream to model the movement of information inside an organization. Vividly, Byström et al. write:

A stream meanders across the landscape until disturbed (or controlled) by stones and tree branches that divert the flow in different directions along distributaries. So too with respect to information flows within

organizations. Stones and tree branches are now the people and systems that become gatekeepers (Allen, 1996), controlling for security, compliance and confidentiality (Blumenthal et al., 2006), and/or hoarders who block access knowingly and unknowingly (Lin and Huang, 2010). (p. 49)

By providing the strong visual image of information percolating and redistributing like water, the reader is invited to more easily grasp the complex life of workplace information. Within this stream, they argue, workers themselves are now emerging as the central focus—rather than the information. Emphasizing the user as the focus (i.e. the worker) is now key to cultivating a productive, engaged work environment (Byström et al.). In chapter 5, “Information Artefacts,” Byström and Pharo effectively describe the elusive, complicated characteristics of information artifacts. These information proxies, which can manifest as countless forms such as objects, persons, and technologies, reshape our perspective of information in the workplace. A human body, for example, becomes an information artifact once it becomes a patient of medical care (Byström et al., p. 108). Through the lens of individual industries and workers within them, information artifacts show how perceiving everything and everyone on a spectrum of informationality empowers us to improve workplace processes through deeper understanding.

As a collection of essays, the work does at times fail to present as cohesive. Written for information professionals as well as students of information science, *Information at Work* may confuse other audiences as it bounces among perspectives from philosophy, history, sociology, psychology, business, and information science. Its readability is challenging at times and requires a minimum level of knowledge in its myriad subjects. And although each chapter offers pertinent inquiries of the contemporary workplace, it struggles to convey a consistent, actionable message. Business-minded individuals may not find the book exceptionally useful for delivering solutions. Only near the end of the book did I understand why the authors were asking their questions of the evolving nature of workplace information, the answer being for the ultimate benefit of the worker. Despite these shortcomings, the book is worthwhile due to its ability to prompt more profound awareness of information’s multitudinous, labyrinthine behavior at work.

Readers will find *Information at Work* topically similar to other recently published library and information science (LIS) works. In *Practical Knowledge and Information Management*, information professionals learn how to establish knowledge management practices and systems within their various workplaces (Schopflin & Walsh, 2019). *Information at Work*, in contrast and unsurprisingly, is less concerned with the applied methods of managing information and more so fostering the philosophical and sociological understanding of information’s weaving through the workplace. And in *The Internet of People, Things and Services* a techno-centered perspective guides readers through the hyper-relevant transformations taking place in communication and information devices (Simmers & Anandarajan, 2018).

Although not perfectly executed, *Information at Work* illuminates the ways information relates to and fundamentally structures workplace activities. Enriched by a variety of well-researched authorial viewpoints, the work compels readers to critically examine how information flows within the organization so we may be able to better design how we work. These conceptual takeaways are enmeshed with more pragmatic examples for enhanced comprehension. And while some

readers may be frustrated by the multidisciplinary, noncommittal approach to workplace information issues, the book's strength is not to provide reductionist commentary but instead to encourage critical examination.

References

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