The definition of work roles within organisations

Peter Larkin & Edward Gould
Edward_Gould@uow.edu.au
Department of Business Systems
University of Wollongong

Abstract

This paper looks at the relationship between work roles, the supporting information systems and the use of profiling as a means of matching a particular person to a role. Activity theory is used to help define the role to enable the use of profiling. In particular it looks at the problem of mismatches between the proposed role and the actual role of a person chosen to fill it. We suggest that the activity theory framework can be used as a tool to develop a profiling instrument to better match the appropriate person to the work role defined by the position.

Keywords: Work roles, activity theory, profiling

BRT Keywords: UF, DB04, DC

Introduction

The introduction of computer based information systems as management work tools within organisations can have a profound effect on the work roles of the employees that are associated with them. This is particularly relevant in the decision making level of management where an Executive Information System (EIS) is tailored to the decision making approach and style of the individual executive. When an executive leaves the organisation or moves to a different position the EIS developed for them will become a legacy system if a replacement executive is chosen who is incompatible with it and unable to adapt.

A work role within the organisation will usually be made up of many activities each of which will have outcomes that are defined by the managers of the role. In an ideal situation these desired outcomes would be specified without a particular individual in mind and a process of advertising and interviewing used to fill it. Before this can happen a process would therefore have to take place which first defined the desired outcomes for the activities performed by the role description and secondly specified the desired qualities of the ideal individual to fill the role. We contend that this is by no means a simple procedure and given the adverse effects of engaging unsuitable employees a framework for ensuring that due consideration is given to all the details is imperative.

Activity Theory as a Basis for Analysing Work Roles

Activity Theory is able to conceptualise humans in their context and positions tools as the means of mediating work activities and developmental processes. Using an Activity Theory approach means that activity is the core point of departure for any kind of human research. It provides a "bottom line" from which to start analysing any type of human enterprise. This centralised approach in research ensures a uniform understanding and approach to the problem as well as a ensuring consistent outcomes.

Activity Theory, however, is not a monolithic "theory", but more a frame to be filled out and a set of insights to be utilised - a set of basic principles evolved from a dialectic materialistic approach to an understanding of human life. All the principles that have been delimited in Activity Theory are no more than premises that determine the general direction of development of contemporary psychology (Asmolov 1987).

Employees, particularly at higher levels of management are often very goal oriented in their work on a specific task and rely on sets of intuitive procedures which are known to have worked previously. This relates well to an Activity Theory approach as outlined in Boedker (1991) where she maintains that all activity is bound to a goal and/or an object and the characteristics of the goal or object partially determine and structure the activity. The goals or objects of activity, undertaken by executives in their day-to-day tasks, vary making them difficult to anticipate. The relationship of goals, objects and activities, as found in Activity Theory, provides a framework on which new development methodologies can be created for the defining of work roles. The approach taken in this paper is from the work of Yrjo Engestrom (1987).

The Structure of Human Activity

Engstrom draws on the cultural historical theory of activity initiated by Vygotsky (1978) and Leontiev (1978, 1981) and uses a socially distributed activity system as the unit of analysis. An activity system comprises the individual, colleagues and co-workers of the workplace community, the conceptual and practical tools and the shared objects as a unified whole as shown in figure 1.

The subject and the object, or the actor and the environment are mediated by instruments including symbols and representations of various kinds. As Engstrom (1991) points out:

> "The triangle is but the tip of an iceberg. The less visible social mediators of activity – rules, community and division of labour - are depicted at the bottom of the model. Between the components of the system there are continuous transformations. The activity system incessantly reconstructs itself."

He goes on to say that

> "An activity system does not exist in a vacuum. It interacts with a network of other activity systems. For example it receives rules and instruments form certain activity systems (e.g. management) and produces outcomes for certain other activity systems"

Applying Activity Theory to the workplace context involves ane examination of the relationships between Tools, Rules and Division of Labour and the identification, classification and implementation of controls for roles within the organisation. In particular, it can be used as a conceptual framework for defining a work role within an organisation, which needs to be filled and produce outcomes for the activity system

relating to the choosing of a suitable person to fill it. This will be explored in the next section.
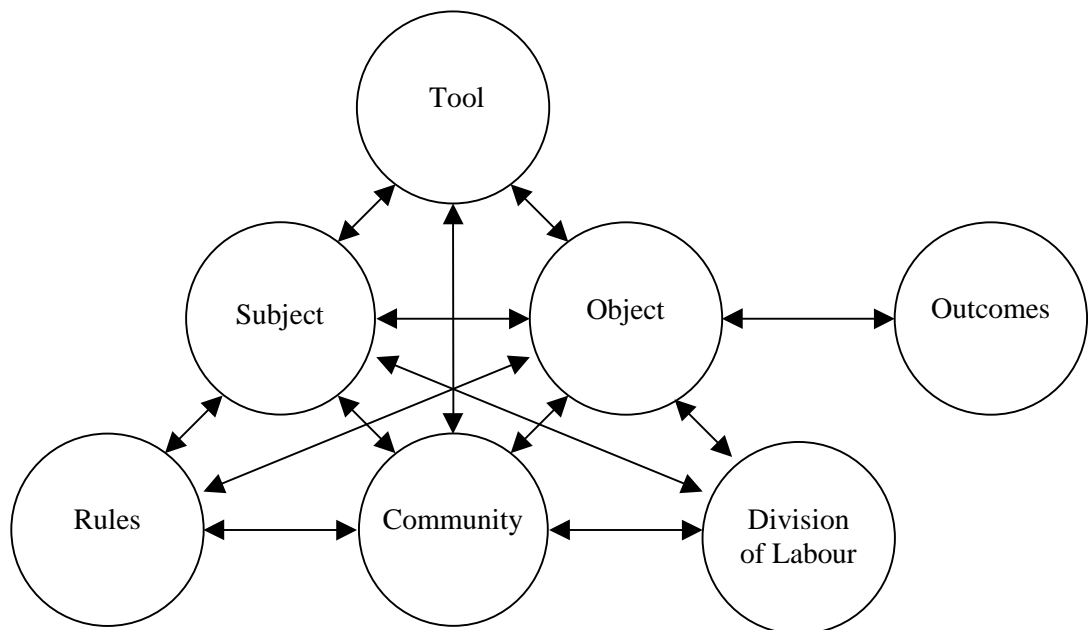

Figure 1: The structure of human activity (Engeström, 1987, p. 78)

Work Position Descriptions

Huckvale and Ould (1995) define a role as "a set of activities that are generally carried out by an individual or group with some organisationally relevant responsibility." This set of activities is related to a corresponding set of desired qualities such as experience, qualifications and personality traits possessed by the individual needed to fill the role. These can be further related to the Activity Theory framework outlined above. For example: the desired individual may need to be experienced in a particular information system (Tool) or managerial role (Division of Labour); there may be particular qualifications required such as the possession of an accountancy certificate (Community) for legal reasons (Rule); the individual may need good communication skills due to the nature of the tasks to be completed (Tool) and so on. This allows us to specify a number of factors which must be specified in defining a vacant position or a new work role:

- the role's place within the organisational hierarchy (authority / responsibilities - Division of labour),
- the resources (Tool) required to achieve the desired outcomes,
- external requirements and internal policies (Rules) which impact on the role,
- general organisational work environment (Community).

This process alone however, is not enough to guarantee that a person who fits the defined roles will be successful in the position. It is often the case that after an individual is appointed to a role they become familiar with the processes they perform within the role and as Activity Theory notes the activities become actions and the actions become operations. Here the person may actually begin changing the nature of the activities thus

changing the role as initially defined. This leads to outcomes different to those originally desired by management. Therefore, to overcome this problem we suggest a further step in this process, the development of a psychological profile of the "ideal" person to fulfil the role. This would take into account the underlying personality, values, intuitions, etc which give some indication as to the way an employee is going to function once they become familiar with the role. Here the Activity Theory framework is used to produce the technical work role description and it is used as to describe an "Ideal Profile Instrument". The whole process is seen a beginning by listing desired outcomes for the role then using these to specify the Object of each activity. After this the Tools required to enable the Subject to achieve the Object of the activity can be specified. Also the Subjects place within the organisation (Division of Labour) can be specified along with any professional qualifications, policies etc. The outcome of this process will be an. Ideal Profile Instrument, a Tool used by management in the activity of choosing the ideal person for the work role. This is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The Work Role Description Activity Theory Model
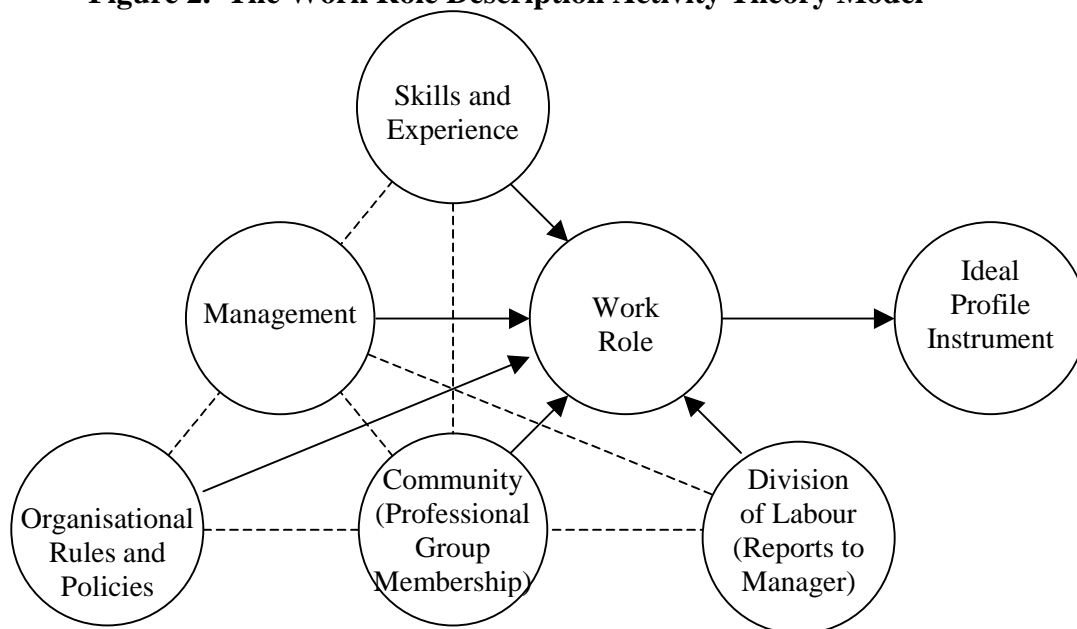
Psychological Profiling

Psychological profiles are currently used extensively in organisations for providing management with information about the future potential of employees (Church et al, 1994, Cole, 1996, Henderson, et al, 1995). The most common form of administering this profiling is by a video taped interview with a professional psychologist. The tape is then viewed and responses by the subject transferred to profile data which is input to a statistical package for analysis. The design of the structured interview questions is usually determined by close consideration of company policy and desired characteristics of future executives.

Profiling Decision Making Styles

Decision making by executives is one area where considerable development in this area has taken place no doubt due to the disastrous effects of executives who are mismatched to the role relating to their position. Decision making is one of the most important roles of an executive and is based to some extent to the personalities and values acquired by them during their life (Leidner et al, 1994). Obviously a big determinant of a persons ability to fill a work role is personality. Harrison (1987) has suggested that personality encompasses the characteristic traits and patterns of adjustment of the person in their interrelationships with others in their environment. It may be viewed as a pattern or organisation of various responses made by individuals in the presence of general or specific stimuli. In other words personality is what gives order and consistency to all the different kinds of behaviour in which the individual engages. Rowe & Boulgarides (1992) provide guidelines for assessing different styles in terms of decision making. Church et al (1994) present a technique based on a Myer Briggs framework for gathering profiles of past judgements of managers. Profiling has also been used in the areas human resource management (Sherriton & Stern, 1997, Korem, 1997, Ulrich ,1993, Dixon, 1994, Cole, 1996), education (Henderson et al, 1995, Pashiardis, 1993), law enforcement (Hodson, 1993), sales and marketing (Durvasula et al, 1993), medicine (Grandinetti, 1997) and executive information systems (Gould, 1997)

These techniques are readily adaptable to the analysis of role requirements for new user work positions. Factors to consider in this profile would be to determine whether the employee focussed on key issues and preferred to skip details, whether they were able to make decisions in the absence of real data and what are their reactions to being forced to make a decision under pressure.

If we return to the previous illustration and apply the Activity Theory framework it can be seen that when management define the desired qualities of an individual to fill a new user role or vacant position they will specify particular qualities. For example experience in a particular information system (Tool) or managerial role (Division of Labour) or may need particular qualification such as being a Certified Practising Accountant (Community) so as to comply with requirements placed on the organisation (Rules). The Activity Theory framework can be used to specify the desired outcomes of a role's activities. These desired outcomes would be in the form of an Ideal Profile Instrument. See Figure 2.

Once the Profile Instrument has been produced it can be used as a Tool by management in the activity of interviewing to fill the vacant position as depicted in figure 3.

Figure 3: Using the Profile Instrument as a Tool
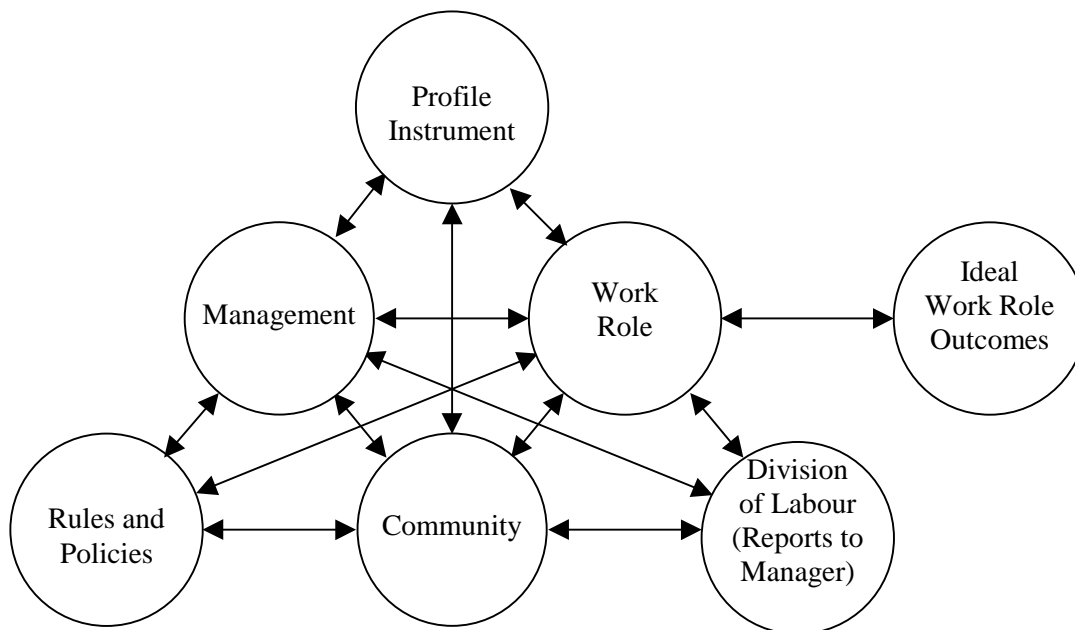
Conclusion and Future Research

When management define the desired qualities of an individual they are to some extent unknowingly using the Activity Theory framework to specify desired activity outcomes for a particular role. It seems a short step to formalise this procedure and structure the whole process within the framework outlined above. This will go some way to ensuring that mismatches between employees and work roles occur less frequently.

Research already begun will use an Activity Theory framework to develop a formal methodology for producing a profile instrument for work roles within our university department. This will be tested on clients and hopefully extended to general applications for other work positions.

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