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"Why don't they know what we want?" The Knowledge Communication Chasm between IT-Cracks and Insurance Professionals

Teaching assistant Jeanne Mengis has created this anonymous case under the guidance of Professor Martin J. Eppler. The case study is based on 15 qualitative interviews with IT specialists of various hierarchical levels (from the team leader to the IT department manager) of a multinational insurance company. The aim of the study is to inspire class discussion.

"Why can't they tell us earlier what they want from us?" Edward Ferguson thought. He had just left a meeting in which he had realized that the project would once more take another direction and lag even more behind the original schedule. "We can't go on this way. We are already in the development phase of the software application and the people from the business line think they can still bug us with requests for changes," he muttered, "I really want to understand why we once again find ourselves in this depressing situation."

Ferguson is a project manager of various IT application projects. Together with his 16 team members, Ferguson is responsible for IT applications for the life and pension department of a large European insurance company. The aim of these applications is to support the people from the business line in handling their insurance processes. In the yearly planning of the IT department a few big application development projects are identified and set. But for minor changes in the existing applications, the relevant officer of the business department simply calls up Ferguson. Such was the case for this project. At the beginning, the heads of the IT teams involved met the project mangers of the business line. Ferguson remembered that it had been quite difficult (already at that point in time) to build a shared understanding of the key issues. It was as if the people from the business line knew that the current solution was not satisfactory and needed a new solution, but had major difficulties in explaining exactly what they needed, or what type of application they expected. They looked at the problem from the perspective of an insurance specialist who has to produce insurance quotes or risk calculations, or who wants to combine two working steps, or who simply does not want to press as many keys as he has to now. Thus, the staff from the business line would say things like: "We have to allocate higher rates of 1% for the covered savings with regard to external saving processes in the principality of Lichtenstein for such and such reasons". The IT-specialists were left puzzled by this insurance jargon. They wanted to know what this meant for the actual programming of the application.

But Ferguson had the feeling that the words of his IT specialists were equally difficult to understand for the business managers. In fact, he remembered that IT specialists sometimes communicated irrelevant details about applications to the business specialists, like, for example: "in module X we should read the constant Y out of database Z and then multiply it by the value W and save it at address K". In retrospect, Ferguson was convinced that it was not only such apparent misunderstandings which were making the project lag further and further behind schedule. "At the end of those first meetings, which actually were quite difficult, we finally all had the feeling that we were talking about the same thing and that we agreed upon the task we had to do." Only later did the people involved in the project find out that this was actually not the case.

After those first meetings and since time was running out, the IT specialists immediately started to analyze the situation. Soon, they presented the business line with the possible solutions to the problems and the specific requirements for each of the proposed changes. This meeting was not totally positive, Ferguson remembered. He remembered that the business people looked rather bored when the IT specialists presented the details and specifications of their solutions. Nevertheless, Ferguson, like all the other participants, was convinced that the two parties had understood each other by the end, and that after the okay from the business line, his IT specialists could finally start to program the application. At the beginning of the development phase, the team leaders divided the tasks into subtasks and instructed the programmers. Because of the huge time pressure, the team leaders decided to communicate only what was absolutely necessary to the programmers. "We do not have the time to show the programmers the whole business context." For this reason, they limited themselves to designing and completing a form with the detail specifications for each subtask so that the programmers knew exactly what they had to do. But many team leaders reported to Ferguson that they were not excited about these forms. How could the whole complex requirement configuration be represented in these prefabricated boxes? The team leaders thought the forms were not really useful since the programmers often did not understand them, and the issues had to be discussed anew in lengthy meetings.

When the IT specialists finally started programming, the business staff called various times to communicate smaller or bigger changes. At the meeting which Ferguson had just left, the IT team had presented the first prototypes of the new application to the business people who, however, were not really pleased. "That was not what we had hoped for." Several small and some bigger details needed to be changed and the mood of the participants deteriorated progressively during the meeting.

Ferguson wondered how things could have got to such a point. "How could we have misunderstood each other to such an extent? At the beginning of the project, we really tried to build a common understanding of the issues and spent a lot of time on an extensive face-to-face briefing and a clear definition of our requests. The IT specialists

elaborated a report with the analysis of the situation and the outline of the various possible solutions and presented it personally to the business leaders. In the "scope", a type of written contract signed by the two parties, the detail specifications of the application and its requirements were fixed. Nevertheless, there had been apparent misunderstandings between the IT specialists and the business line and the project was now way behind schedule. Ferguson asked himself a few simple questions based on this experience that was not the first of its kind:

- What are the reasons why the communication between the business and IT specialists has led to various misunderstandings?
- What should I do in the short term to finish the project successfully and not fall even further behind schedule?
- What has to be done differently in future projects (in the general process of the project, in the communication process and in the individual interactions), so that collaboration between the business line and the IT specialists is less problematic and the projects can meet their deadlines?

Further Questions:

- How would you shape the communication process (in the general project process)? What is the role of communication at the beginning and at the end of a project and what communication types and instruments are most effective in the respective situations?
- What are the advantages, but also the challenges when communicating domain-specific knowledge in an interdisciplinary meeting or in a personal talk?
- What are the requirements for good written knowledge communication? How would you deal with the trade-off whereby knowledge-intensive communication has to be standardised on the one hand (to enable synthesis, easier orientation, etc.) but, on the other, has to make it possible to represent complex issues?
- What are the general key factors for the success of knowledge-intensive communication between two parties which belong to two different departments and do not share the same domain-specific knowledge?