Open doors and hallway conversations: Physical proximity and informal social interactions in information gathering during a career transition

Keywords: Information behaviour; Physical location; Information gathering; Transitions

Introduction

When individuals make a transition, such as doctoral students moving into continuing academic staff positions, they require information to figure out their new information landscape. While there has been a history of research examining academics' information behaviour (e.g., Catalano, 2013; Chu, 1999; Ellis, 1993; Meho & Tibbo, 2003; Sukovic, 2008), little is known about the information behaviour during a transition period. What is lacking is an understanding how information needs, seeking, use, and sharing are enacted during transitional periods of time.

Methodology and Methods

This paper is drawn from my doctoral research, which uses a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006) to explore the information behaviour of 20 early career researchers in Australia and Canada. This methodology was used as the research is exploratory in nature, examining an under-studied phenomenon. Three data sources are used to triangulate the data: two in-depth interviews, multiple check-ins, and documents. The paper will explore the data from interviews and check-ins. The in-depth interviews provide a detailed look at participants' overall transition experiences, while the check-ins provide a snapshot of salient events within the transition as they happen. Interviews were analysed using grounded theory analysis.

Findings and Discussion

One of the major themes emerging from this research is the importance of colleagues as a source of information, socialisation, and support to early career researchers.

Physical Proximity

In many cases, participants described physical locations of collegial interactions in which information was exchanged. For example, Madeline described an ongoing location of social interaction that facilitated information gathering. "We often have lunch together in the faculty lounge… And it means that I can usually take university-specific questions to people in the department." Jason described the difference between working at a distance versus being physically located in the department. "[I]f I had a minor question before, I would have to send a formal email about it. And that was really frustrating and often really time consuming. … Whereas

here now, it's no bother to just put your head in someone's door and say, 'Oh, could you help me with this for a second?'" Close physical proximity aided participants being able to seek out colleagues, who were important sources of information, aiding information gathering and social interactions.

Informal Social Interaction

Physical proximity appears to be a factor that facilitated the informal social interactions shared between participants and their colleagues. These interactions served several functions, including establishing relationships, determining how the community operates, facilitating information gathering and sharing, and obtaining support. Interactions were often described as quick and informal. Seth described department culture, "It's very open door here, which is fantastic. Everyone typically sits with their door open and it's not uncommon for people just poke their heads in either to ask a question or just to say hi." Evelyn described interactions with a mentor, "She'll just pop by, come sit down and say, "How are you doing? Are you okay?" Phrases such as "poke your head in" and "pop in" demonstrate the informal, unplanned, and physical nature of these interactions.

This paper will examine participants' descriptions of physical proximity and informal social interactions with colleagues, using the context of departmental culture as a backdrop, and draw on theories such as information grounds (Fisher & Naumer, 2006; Pettigrew, 1999), information horizons (Sonnenwald, 1999), and life in the round (Chatman, 1999).

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