

**About the impact of Information Technologies on the
atmosphere at the workplace**

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The problem

Some unease among workers in the cutting edge firms has appeared, which has been well documented by sociologists.

Are Information Technologies responsible for it?

Yes, according to the American sociologist Richard Sennett, who has studied this topic:

- Information Technologies allow a tighter control on the execution of tasks by the workers
- they allow to reorganize the teams when information on the market suggests new projects. The goal is a short term one: to maximize the shareholders' gains.

The outcome is a « passionate » atmosphere in the cutting edge firms, which means: the generation of projects by the market imposes the pace, the moves are unceasing.

The bad consequences (according to Sennett) are:

- the end of loyalty to the firm
- the end of “adaptive knowledge” (the particular knowledge which allows workers to adapt one to the other)
- the end of the attachment to the job.

In these conditions the workers fear less to be jobless than to be stressed, to be unsatisfied with their job, in particular if their skills are not fully employed.

Let us insist on the transition from large bureaucracies to cutting edge firms, before discussing the possible remedies for the unease.

The transition from large bureaucracies to cutting edge firms

The large bureaucracies were liked by workers, according to Richard Sennett (who used questionnaires to study this topic, decades ago).

Let quote these three famous novels:

- the Thomas Mann's novel "The magic mountain" where a sanatorium is the metaphor for bureaucracy. Bureaucracies pervaded the social life at this time (it was the time of the Max Weber's sociology).
- the Ernst Junger 's autobiographical novel "Storm of steel" shows the attachment of the soldiers to their army.
- The Arthur Koestler 's autobiographical novel "Thieves in the night" shows the attachment of a young man to Zionism.

The bureaucracy relied on the exchange protection / obedience.

The cutting edge firm relies on the exchange reward / potential.

If you are able to contribute to the firm 's goals being achieved in the present, you are rewarded.

If you are unable... your situation becomes uneasy.

The necessity of remedies (for the unease)

In some cases, the unease is such that it could damage the firm (absenteeism, illnesses, lack of motivation...). In general the top managers are pragmatic and engage in some reforms: to listen to workers, to give more room to the managers who are near the workers (those managing the teams), to slow the pace of professional and geographic mobility, etc.

The remedies (1): rebuilding the community thanks to a top-down process

Here the intellectual tradition is the Durkheimian sociology. The « anomie » of some workers (the fact that they are marginalized) is considered as something to eliminate. Only rules can allow it quickly. Clearly, these rules have to bring some protection to anomic workers. The goal is « integration ».

The remedies (2): rebuilding the community thanks to a bottom up process.

Here the theoretical tradition is opposed to the Durkheimian sociology. According to this stream of thought, discussion is fertile, and anomy is a good thing, a kind of opportunity: anomic people have to participate in the discussion, since they support original and interesting options (intellectual and practical) that one has to examine.

Indeed three schools think that discussion is fertile and indispensable:

- the philosophy of Life (Max Scheler, Jean Marie Guyau...). They start from the idea of a “social instinct”.
- the school of the “construction of the public” (John Dewey, Elinor Ostrom ...). Good rules allow the appearance of a public informed, able to discuss important topics and to understand what to do. -

- the sociology of Tarde. Logical duels (discussions on ethics, law politics ...) exist always and are inevitable, since imitation explains the social life.

The sites on Intranets can contribute to rebuilding the community:

- internal crowd sourcing. Studies have found that “anomic” workers (from the point of view of rank and geographic location) participate in these sites.
- Social Networks Sites.

Conclusion

Often cities succeed in the conversion from polluting, unskilled and painful jobs to not polluting, skilled and creative ones.

The metropolises attract headquarters, large firms selling services and high tech firms, while mid-sized cities attract call centers.

The frequent reorganizations inside cutting edge firms involve that physical sites are often created and removed. Hence a problem if staffers are attached to the city where they work, if the quality of life is good.

Possible solutions are:

- telework
- Information Technologies allow small-sized sites (but cutting edge firms prefer to concentrate their staff in large sites).

A possible sensitivity to quality of life in the cutting edge firms could have consequences for cities:

- creation of nurseries near the sites of firms
- cooperation between firms and public transport to plan the trips of the staff
- participation in municipal green initiatives
- etc.