

Actors in Collaboration

Sociotechnical Influence on Practice-Research Collaboration

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There has long been a concern about the research-practice gap within Library and Information Science (LIS). Several authors have highlighted the disconnection between the world of professional practice, interested in service and information system development, and the world of the academy, focused on the development of theory and the progress of the discipline. A virtual organization, such as a collaborative, might support collaboration between LIS professionals and academics in research, potentially transforming the way research between these groups is undertaken.

The purpose of this study was to examine how sociotechnical aspects of work organization influence the initiation, development, and conclusion of collaboration between LIS academics and professionals in distributed research projects. The study examined the development of three collaborative projects from the start to completion in two countries, Italy and another European country. The data analysis aimed at deriving implications for the further development of theory on remote scientific collaboration, and for the design of a sustainable collaborative to support small-scale, distributed research projects between LIS academics and professionals.

The research design, data collection, and data analysis were informed by Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), in particular by Callon's model of translation of interests. Qualitative interviews and analysis of literary inscriptions formed the key sources of data for the three case studies.

The analysis of how and why collaborations between LIS academics and professionals initiated and developed revealed that the initial motivation to pursue collaboration has to do with the lack of economic and organizational resources on either or both sides, and with a genuine interest in a topic by both academics and professionals. The case studies in this study were decentralized and bottom-up projects in which LIS academics and professionals pursued collaboration because they had a genuine interest in a given topic and not because they were mandated by their employers, or they hoped to be acknowledged and promoted by them on the basis of their participation in the project. Market conditions and/or institutional pressures did not exert much influence on the start and development of these collaborations, although one project was influenced by political considerations and funding conditions in healthcare.

The patterns emerged from the findings of the three cases underpin the development of a sociotechnical framework aimed at providing a better understanding of remote collaboration between academics and professionals not only in LIS but also in other fields affected by the research-practice gap.

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