Appointing in-house employee facilitators in organizational level interventions in SMEs – experiences of bricoleurs

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Facilitation of interventions play a key role in successful interventions and typically are conducted by people with professional facilitator competences. Therefore, facilitation is a priority for any workplace implementing organizational level changes. In practice, however, developing effective and sustainable interventions and integrating facilitators as part of the process has been challenging and a low priority for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). One reason is that they do not have professional facilitators in-house like larger corporations nor do they have the resources to employ them. While large companies often have the financial means and structures to effectively initiate and implement such interventions, SMEs on the other hand lack the proper knowledge and resources, including calling on external expertise, to manage organizational level interventions and thus need support mechanisms tailored to their specific circumstances (González, Cockburn, & Irastorza, 2010).

Studies of in-house facilitators are scarce in the field of organisational-level interventions. Existing studies focus on external consultants e.g. Kompier et al. (1998) report than out of ten intervention cases they reviewed, seven had an external consultant involved. A reported advantage of using external consultants in interventions is that the person is neutral, which can make it easier for employees to express their opinions and concerns (Saksvik, Nytrø, & Dahl-Jørgensen, 2002). The disadvantages of using external consultants are that participants risk to lack ownership of the intervention, it can be difficult to sustain the changes after the consultant has left and external consultants can be expensive (Dahl-Jørgensen & Saksvik, 2005). Seen in this light, using in-house facilitators is an advantage with respect to involve employees and sustain changes when the intervention ends. A disadvantage could be that the in-house facilitators do presumable not have the same neutrality as an external consultant.

Given that the costs are high for external consultants, an in-house appointed facilitator has the potential to bring savings to the SMEs. But also to support a higher implementation success. Addressing the facilitation process during an organizational level intervention can impact the implementation of the changes and thus a chain of benefits for employers and employees of SMEs.
Consequently, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of appointing employees as facilitators, i.e. being bricolours (Weick, 2001) in organizational level interventions in SMEs and the competences the in-house facilitators require to facilitate the intervention activities.

We conducted the intervention and data collection in four SMEs in Denmark, two Information Technology (IT) companies and two manufacturing companies. As part of the intervention program PoWRS, we applied a mixed method including survey, observations, interviews and chronicle workshops to examine eight in-house facilitators in the four SMEs.

Our results show that it is possible to find and appoint employees as in-house facilitators in SMEs, though the facilitators did not receive any formal training in connection with the intervention program. The study also showed that the appointed facilitators draw on their own resources and experiences for example from earlier jobs and engagements to perform their role as facilitators and acts as bricoleurs. In the analysis we also studied the experiences from three perspectives: the employee, the in-house facilitator and the managers. The three perspectives make different emphasis on the identified facilitator competences, but together they highlight project management, communication, relational practice skills, cognitive skills and being trustworthy, as important competences. The study furthermore contributes with two new insights. The first insight is that suitable in-house facilitators are sensitive to the context they operate in – we call this contextual sensitivity. The other insight is that it is possible to appoint employees as in-house facilitators although they have not received formal facilitator training prior implementing the intervention program.

The study also offers practical implications for managers in charge of selecting the in-house facilitators. Since SMEs often do not have organisational units with process competence or resources for external consultants, we advocate that the construct of the in-house facilitator is a practical solution to utilize internal resources and gain from the employees’ detailed knowledge about their workplace.

**Brief summary**

Facilitation of interventions play a key role in successful interventions and typically are conducted by people with professional facilitator competences. In practice, however, developing effective and sustainable interventions and integrating facilitators as part of the process has been challenging
and a low priority for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). One reason is that they do not have professional facilitators in-house. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of appointing employees as facilitators, i.e. being bricolours (Weick) in organizational level interventions in SMEs and the competences the in-house facilitators require to facilitate the intervention activities.

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