Organizing ecosystems for collaborative learning: How professional worker's identities are affected when firms seek knowledge beyond professional and organizational boundaries

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Digitalization is causing actors and firms to rethink their organizational forms, professional roles, and strategies to stay competitive. This development is particularly salient in professional service firms (PSFs), as the professional knowledge and the services they provide are increasingly challenged by new digital solutions and artificial intelligence (AI). To understand and meet this change, PSFs have started to look for knowledge outside their domains of expertise and engage in external ecosystems for learning.

An ecosystem can be defined as "…a set of actors with varying degrees of multilateral, nongeneric complementarities that are not fully hierarchically controlled." (Jacobides et al., 2018:2264). Thus, the ecosystems connect different actors across traditional organizational boundaries (Teece 2007) and can be seen as a new approach to organize and access recourses and to gain new knowledge and collaborative learning (Faraj et al., 2016; von Krogh et al., 2003). However, how an ecosystem is organized in practice and how it affects professional roles and identities is not well known. Subsequently, the aim with this paper is to explore how a legal PSF responds to digitalization by shaping an ecosystem for learning and how such efforts affect their resourcing strategies and the professional identity of being a lawyer.

In this paper we follow an incumbent law firm in their attempts to organize an ecosystem spanning across their organization and professional jurisdiction. They do this by creating an Innovation Lab with three separate parts, an internal innovation initiative, collaboration with researchers and an incubator for legal tech start-ups. While we expected digitalization to affect this setting by an increase of digital competences and resources and the development of a professional identity increasingly affected by digitalization, we also found that the creation of an ecosystem can have the opposite effect. From our initial interviews we identified that the opportunity to access technological resources from outside of the firm boundaries, instead of being employed or sourced from within, in fact also enable the law firm to focus on their key value creating activities of legal service delivery by the means of human resources. We also found that this effect simultaneously strengthened the established professional identity of lawyers.

Thus, it seems that the creation of an ecosystem has dual effects. While it does empower and enable the law firm access to digital technologies and knowledge, it also allows the law firm to focus on human expertise. This could rather strengthen than disrupt the legal professional identity. In effect this finding would contrast previous research that suggest that both legal professional work and the professional identity of lawyers will be disrupted by digital technologies (Susskind and Susskind, 2015; Christensen at al., 2013). However, this needs to be further investigated and we are in the process of conducting our case study.

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