Abstract

Outsourcing work relies on the supplier’s interpretation of the work delegated by the client. Existing streams of outsourcing literature tend to assume that the supplier should use the same convention as the client to make sense of the work package. In this research, we use a semiotic lens to challenge this assumption by viewing such sensemaking as a process of decoding symbolic representations. This complementary view involves innovative use of digital technology for re-representing the outsourced work through new conventions. We studied a Chinese business process outsourcing supplier in-depth to learn how such re-representation is achieved through the creation of special-purpose languages. Our research contributes to the Information Systems outsourcing literature by providing a semiotic view on the design of outsourcing work supported by digital technologies. Three re-representation practices (i.e., dissociating the signifiers, signifying through new conventions, and embedding new conventions in the digital infrastructure) constitute the core of this view. The results are highly significant for outsourcing theory and practice, not least since they suggest that the use of semiotics and visuals for re-representation may enable suppliers to reformulate outsourcing work and the expertise needed to deliver services.

Keywords: Outsourcing, work design, representation, digital infrastructure, semiotics, case study