



When digital systems meet human-centred work: a qualitative study of information behaviour

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Abstract

Introduction. This study explores how employees engage in information behaviour in professional environments undergoing digital transformation. While digital tools are introduced to support documentation and knowledge sharing, they may disrupt established information practices and professional routines. The study focuses on how individuals negotiate and adapt their information behaviour in response to new documentation tasks, particularly in contexts where interpersonal communication and professional judgment are central.

Method. The study is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted over several months in day care institutions within one municipality in Denmark. Data were collected through observations and informal conversations with managerial staff as they engaged with a newly introduced digital documentation task. Nine observation sessions in total are included in the analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed using the Whisper transcription tool and WhisperX for speaker diarization, processed within a secure, GDPR-compliant research infrastructure.

Analysis. Information behaviour was analysed using a thematic approach and furthermore interpreted through the lens of information culture. This analytical perspective enabled an examination of the values, norms, and practices shaping their everyday engagement with information and digital documentation systems.

Results. The findings show that employees consistently prioritized human-centred and relational work, while digital documentation tasks were often perceived as peripheral and time-consuming. The introduction of the new system conflicted with established information cultures, highlighting uneven digital competencies, uncertainty regarding responsibility, and limited trust in the system. Adapting to the new documentation practices required additional skills, time, and a renegotiation of existing routines.

Conclusion. The study demonstrates that understanding everyday information behaviour is essential for aligning digital documentation initiatives with professional values in relational workplaces. Information culture plays a critical role in shaping how individuals respond to technological change.

Introduction

Digital systems are increasingly embedded in workplaces to support collaboration, streamline documentation, and enhance access to information. Organizations across the world encourage their employees to share information and invest heavily in systems developed specifically to allow employees to engage in knowledge sharing (Chen & Wei, 2019; Pitafi et al., 2025). While designed to improve teamwork and access to knowledge, such systems may also overwhelm users with excessive information and thereby cause information overload. When the volume of information exceeds employees' capacity to process it, even well-intentioned sharing practices can lead to stress, disengagement, and thus reduced productivity (Sun et al., 2025; Wynen et al., 2025). The paradox of information abundance is that, despite having access to vast amounts of information, it can be time-consuming to scan to uncover meaningful insights (Bhambri, 2021). Information overload is a persisting challenge tied to information at work and also draws the attention of researchers (Widén & Steinerová, 2019).

Digitalisation impacts everyday work by introducing new demands, such as increased workload, slower workflows, and the need for new skills. While digital tools are often seen as beneficial, their implementation can overlook practical challenges faced by employees, especially when time and support for learning new systems are limited. If these issues are not adequately addressed, digital solutions risk undermining rather than supporting core work tasks (Kaihlanen et al., 2023). These challenges are closely linked to how individuals engage with information in their daily work. Information culture is the 'socially shared patterns of behaviours, norms and values that define the significance and use of information' (Choo et al., 2008). Information culture is an inherent aspect of every organization, shaped by its mission, historical background, leadership practices, and the people who work within it (Choo et al., 2008; Cusick, 2025; Oliver, 2008; Widén & Steinerová, 2019). There are many similar concepts, including information climate, information environment, and information ecology (Widén & Steinerová, 2019), but also many related concepts including data culture (Oliver et al., 2023).

In human-centred work, working with information is often embedded in collaborative processes and tacit knowledge, making it highly contextual and dynamic. Systems or tools may demonstrate potential in assisting human-centred professionals in their work, however, if the tool or system is not perceived as optimally integrated into daily practice, implementation may fail (Becqué et al., 2025). In many human-centred workplaces, documentation systems have been introduced to increase efficiency and quality (Meißner & Schnepf, 2014). However, implementing an electronic documentation system does not necessarily have the full support of the staff. They may see it as a benefit if working routines can be simplified, but if working routines become more complicated in the system, it is perceived as a burden (Meißner & Schnepf, 2014).

The intended increased data quality in documentation when implementing new documentation systems is, however, tied to perceived usefulness of the system. Staff members are more inclined to document information if they believe it will be accessed and used effectively (Monticelli et al., 2025). Perceived usefulness of the documentation systems thus influences the accuracy and completeness of data. Furthermore, working with information technology in the daily work processes is influenced by trust in others but also in technological systems and in the broader organizational culture (Huisman et al., 2020). Information systems, for example, are designed to help users manage large volumes of data and reduce overload by collecting and processing relevant information. However, trust in these systems is necessary for them to work efficiently (Meefßen et al., 2020). Trust in information systems is defined by Meefßen et al. (2020, p. 12-13) as 'an experienced state, defined as the willingness to depend on and be vulnerable to an [information system]'.

This study investigates how employees navigate digital systems in relational workplaces where empathy is essential. While digital tools are designed to support information use, they may also introduce challenges such as information overload, uncertainty, or resistance. These tensions become particularly visible when employees are asked to adopt new practices that shift focus away from core interpersonal tasks. Through qualitative fieldwork, this study explores how individuals engage with digital documentation tasks and how they interpret their responsibilities. The analysis focuses on everyday information practices, including how participants make sense of new systems and negotiate their roles within broader organizational structures.

More specifically, this project aims to explore the following research question: How do employees in relational workplaces adapt to new digital documentation systems?

In the following sections, we introduce the setting, which is Danish day care institutions. Next, we present the information culture framework which is being used in the analysis of the data. After this, we describe the methods used, and present the findings before discussing and concluding.

Case: Implementation of documentation systems in day care institutions

This project examines the implementation of IT technology in day care institutions in one municipality in Denmark. In the day care sector, digital solutions are already part of everyday life, such as platforms for communication with parents. The day care institutions work with several different systems to fulfil their record-keeping obligations. Some systems are accessible to all employees in the day care institution, while others can only be accessed by the managerial staff. Each day care institution also has two G-drives: one accessible only to management, and another accessible to both management and staff. All systems used to fulfil the record-keeping obligations automatically create an archival version, meaning that once the system has been used, the record-keeping obligation is considered fulfilled.

In this case study, a new electronic case and document management system is being introduced to allow these institutions to manage documents that contains personal information. As part of the process, the institutions must review and clean up historical material stored on their local drives. Although in this project we are exploring the implementation in day care institutions, in practice we are focusing on the managerial staff in these as they are ultimately the ones facing the challenge of using these new systems. They may choose to share the task with their administrative staff, but the responsibility lies with the managers. All managerial staff have been introduced to the task at a meeting, covering both the formal requirements for document management, as well as the practical processes.

Documentation tasks may, however, describe a broad range of very different tasks. De Groot et al., (2022) uses a framework from OECD to divide documentation tasks for health care professionals into clinical documentation and documentation regarding organizational and financial issues. Clinical documentation characterises working with patient electronic health records to document medical conditions and the care provided by healthcare professionals. Organizational documentation characterises working with records related to personnel management and shift coordination. Financial documentation characterizes tracking hours worked for billing or insurance purposes. Although the tasks are characterised using these three categories, OECD also stresses that a clear demarcation of administrative tasks is challenging because many tasks can serve both an administrative and a clinical purpose (OECD, 2017). Organizational and financial documentation seem to have increased over time but as documenting organizational and financial issues is not the core focus of relational workplaces, these aspects of documentation might be perceived negatively (De Groot et al., 2022). In this case, the tasks related to the new systems are focusing primarily on tasks related to organizational and financial documentation and the systems are not being used for tasks directly related to the children in the day care institutions.

Information culture

The information culture framework is used in this study as the framework for examining the values, norms, and practices that shape employees' everyday use of information. The information culture framework is a theoretical model used to understand and analyse an organization's information culture (Oliver & Foscarini, 2014). It focuses on the values, norms, and behaviours that influence how information is managed and used in daily practice. The framework aims to explore how employees relate to information and helps identify the cultural and structural conditions that either support or hinder effective information management. It also enables a human-centred understanding to take into account technological, organizational, and human factors that influence information and knowledge sharing. It emphasizes that information culture cannot be understood in isolation but is closely connected to competencies, infrastructure, trust, and governance. Importantly, the information culture framework is a non-normative theory as it does not prescribe how an information culture should look. Instead, it seeks to describe and explain how information culture functions in a specific context.

A key component of the framework is its three levels, which together form the foundation of an organization's information culture. These levels illustrate how infrastructure, competencies, governance, and trust are interrelated and how they influence information practices. The first level addresses the foundational conditions and contexts for an organization's information culture. It focuses on the cultural and contextual factors that shape how information is used and shared. The second level concerns the skills and competencies within the organization related to information sharing. This includes examining employees' capabilities and knowledge in handling information. Finally, the third level focuses on the overarching organizational values and norms that shape and influence information behaviour. The three levels are interconnected, and challenges at the first level can affect outcomes at the next two. Therefore, it is essential to view these elements as part of a dynamic system that influences and emphasizes information practices.

Methods

The study explored the implementation of a digital documentation tool in professional practice. This project employs a method assemblage approach (Law, 2004), combining elements from multiple methodologies to explore a complex field. Over several months, data was collected through field visits, observations, and informal conversations with staff from day care institutions that volunteered to participate in the study. They were divided into three groups, according to the timeline for their participation. The participants were not informed about what group they were placed in or why. The grouping was used as both a practical tool to maintain the overview of the project and as a guideline for potential challenges appearing during the field visits. Challenges were defined as situations in which documentation-related questions could not be immediately addressed by the researcher or where technological issues occurred. Such challenges were subsequently examined and addressed in order to minimize their recurrence for subsequent participants or groups. Throughout the process of collecting data, there was a focus on the iterative perspective.

Participants were introduced to a new digital task and asked to engage with it as part of their documentation responsibilities. The researcher alternated between passive observation and active facilitation, depending on the context. Notes were taken on interactions, challenges, and adaptations. The process was iterative, allowing for adjustments based on what emerged in the field. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality and the right to withdraw were upheld throughout. The researcher's prior experience in practice-based professions contributed to navigating sensitive situations, building trust, and supporting participants in engaging with a task that lay outside their core responsibilities. The role shifted between observer, facilitator, and practitioner, depending on the situation, and this flexibility influenced both the process and outcomes. The managerial staff was

introduced to the task as well as the researcher at a meeting. They were informed that they would be able to get assistance with understanding and completing the task. The researcher collecting the data has extensive experience working in a relational focused workplace, although in a different sector, namely health care. The researcher guided participants through the submission process and thus acted as both a participating observer and an observing participant.

The data analysed consists of 11 recorded observations, however it was reduced to 9 in the analyses as consent for this study was not obtained in time to perform the analyses. Transcriptions were generated using the Whisper Transcription tool, using the Whisper large language model from OpenAI and WhisperX to add speaker diarization. The tool was accessed via UCloud which is a secure, cloud-based research infrastructure hosted by the University of Southern Denmark. This setup ensured GDPR-compliant processing of sensitive data. In the findings the participants are named B-K (observations with participant A and E are omitted due to lacking consent).

The analysis followed in two stages: initial coding and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). During the initial coding phase, we examined words, lines, and segments to identify what the data were about. We applied short, action-oriented codes that remained close to the data, allowing us to build a relationship with both the material and the participants. This phase emphasized openness to possibilities within the data rather than fitting it into predefined categories. Although the codes reflected our interpretations, they were shaped through repeated engagement with the data. In the focused coding phase, we identified which initial codes were most analytically significant. This allowed us to organize the data and highlight emerging themes and categories. Focused coding provided the foundation for conceptual development and guided the transition from descriptive coding to analytical abstraction. Finally, the information culture framework levels formed the basis for organizing codes. Together, these phases supported an iterative and abductive process, through which our understanding evolved in dialogue with the data.

Findings

From the analysis of the observations, we identified the following themes that capture both individual reflections as well as collective reflections within the group: systematics and guidance, difficulties, technology, time, responsibility, deletion, and reuse. Each theme is explored in more detail below.

Systematics and guidance

Participants consistently emphasized the necessity of clear guidelines and a structured approach to documentation tasks. The municipality of these institutions had a standardized procedure that guides the process of saving various documents, however, despite being familiar with this procedure, a new technology creates room for uncertainty. The uncertainty results in the tasks become very time consuming as each step is characterized by hesitation and second-guesses. These two statements from one of the participants clearly shows that there are uncertainties despite formal procedures and the participant feel that there is a need for shared workflows.

I really find it difficult to figure out what is actually supposed to go where. (C, 18:32–18:40)

So we probably also need, in some way, to have a bit of a system in place. But what do we do? How? (C, 18:32–18:40)

This lack of clarity not only increases cognitive load but also inhibits the establishment of efficient routines. Without predictable workflows, participants struggled to perform documentation tasks consistently, undermining both confidence and perceived competence.

Difficulties and burden

Several participants address several difficulties arising described the documentation process as cumbersome, particularly because it involves unfamiliar procedures. As one of the participants notes, the system may not necessarily support their current workflow:

Now we have a problem with this system, because we're not good at adding detailed information here. (J, 00:22:03 – 00:22:11)

The simultaneous introduction of new systems and new tasks compounds these difficulties and difficulties arise in both cases. This convergence of technological and new procedures transforms the documentation process into an additional burden rather than an integrated component of daily work. One of the participants stresses that this is something that will require a lot of work:

That really does sound like a very large task (H, 06:20 – 06:22)

Consequently, participants perceive the task as an extra burden rather than as a natural part of work.

Technology

Observations revealed significant variation in the technical proficiency of the participants. While some participants found the system easy to use, others struggled even with the initial basic steps in using the software. One participant stated that 'now everything just goes blank here' (C, 14:34 – 14:36) in a situation where the participant was struggling to use the system. This reveals very uneven levels of technical skills. Some participants struggled more with using the software, which again causes more frustrations. These disparities in digital skills lead to frustration and inefficiency, as participants with lower technical competence require more time and support.

Time

Time constraints are a recurring concern and participants repeatedly stated that it is time consuming and taking up valuable time. Some of the participants clearly stated that they are not patient with the system and that they do not have the time to struggle with the tasks. Participants repeatedly noted that documentation tasks are highly time-consuming, diverting attention from core responsibilities. Statements such as 'It's just very time-consuming' reflect a perception that the system imposes an undue burden on limited time resources.

The participants are afraid of how time consuming these processes will be which is stated by Participant G:

You would think that it would take a really long time if we had to [include a large number of documents] and document everything. (G, 12:20 – 12:25)

They clearly state that they could make better use of their time. The participants can in many cases recognize that the lack of time available for these processes makes them even more time-consuming when addressed at a later stage. The lack of patience and available time intensifies resistance to adopting new workflows. Others explicitly articulated that time spent on documentation competes with essential duties, highlighting the perception that the system detracts from rather than supports professional priorities. These perspectives, which frame documentation as a non-essential task, indicate that even though the municipality attempts to establish foundational practices at the first level of the Information Culture Framework, this alone is not sufficient if the skills and competencies at the second level are not adequately developed across the organizational units. Furthermore, the values and norms embedded at the third level exert a significant influence on whether documentation is perceived and treated as a core organizational task.

Responsibility

There is confusion about accountability and participants worried about personal liability for sensitive data. The participants worry that they are managing sensitive data incorrectly. As one of the participants stated:

We can say that we're now doing what is legally correct by sending it off, even if that means we end up keeping too much stored on our side. That's what we feel safest doing. No one is going to come after us for that. (B, 46:59 – 47:08)

They understand the importance of protecting sensitive data carefully and worry that the new procedures and systems cannot live up to these expectations. Uncertainty about compliance with data protection standards is a cause for concern and unfamiliarity with new procedures and systems creates uncertainties. Consequently, concerns about roles and obligations complicates task completion and erodes confidence in the process.

Deletion

Furthermore, deleting files is a cause for concern for some participants. They see the deletion of files as something risky. They might accidentally delete important information. On the other hand, some participants see deletion of old, unused files as a time-saving necessity that may prove valuable for managing information at a later stage. As stated by one of the participants, it may even feel good to delete:

Then we can delete that folder afterwards. We can go in and delete the folder completely afterwards. That way you get a clear conscience, right? (F, 22:53 – 23:03)

Regardless of their view of deletion, many participants reflect on these aspects.

Reuse

Finally, concerns about future access to archived files influence attitudes toward deletion and overall trust in the system. Many participants see the current procedures and systems as insufficient for meeting future information needs. The participants are concerned with the trustworthiness of the new system and this uncertainty fosters hesitation to fully adopt new workflows, as participants fear that essential information may become irretrievable.

Summing up, across all themes, there are many uncertainties. Some of them are tied to the new workflows whereas others are caused by difficulties or unfamiliarity with the new software. The analysis highlights that unclear guidelines, technological challenges, and time constraints significantly hinder the adoption of new documentation systems. Uncertainty about roles, data sensitivity, and future file access further erode trust and create resistance. Furthermore, participants do not see the new IT system as helpful in solving what they consider their core tasks and this obviously limits motivation.

Focusing on the information culture and the three levels, this analysis is organized according to the three levels. The first level addresses the cultural and contextual factors that shape how information is used and shared. The participants struggled to get into routines with the new system and to some extent this is related to the lack of prioritizing these processes for years and in many cases not even conducting them by themselves. Participant G has taken over a number of folders from a previous employee and struggles to organize more effectively:

Yes. And what if you have a really bad system? Yes. Well, that's because, well, this is [a number of folders], which I took over a year and a half ago from another manager. Another manager who has been there has had that folder system for 25 years. (G, 00:25 – 00:25)

Similarly, participant H describes how this person has just received access to a vast amount of information from a previous employee without fully realizing the extent of this information:

And there could be anything in here, because I got access to it in January. And I haven't spent any time trying to clean up in here at all. So there could be anything in here. (H, 21:53 - 22:02)

The second level in the information culture framework concerns the skills and competencies within the organization which includes the capabilities and knowledge of employees in handling information. In this study, we see that the participants are unfamiliar with processes but become more familiar with them during the process.

Yes. So it's about learning how to put the different things where they need to be. And some examples like that. [...]. I've learned something new already. [...] That's crazy. [...] There are a lot of passwords you have to know. [...] And they're long. (H, 15:38-17:35)

However, introducing this new system also sheds light on some not being familiarised and comfortable with existing systems. Participant I shares experiences with colleagues that have developed their own procedures for managing information:

I don't know where this information is from. I've had a colleague here who has printed everything out, or saved all sorts of emails from everything. (I, 00:23 - 00:24)

Finally, the third level focuses on the overarching organizational values and norms that shape and influence information behaviour. The participants are struggling to find the time for working with the IT-system as they find the task less important than many of their other tasks. As stated by participant F:

What I think is the problem for me is finding the time to do it. Yes. If I'm being completely honest, because I have so many tasks, this, it feels... I can hear and see and understand that it's important, but in my book, there's just a lot that's... (F, 39:27 - 39:45)

Similarly, Participant I clearly says that working with information and IT-systems is not a priority:

I know that I must document things, but... Well, we're not supposed to sit here just to document. And sit and document... No, we're not supposed to document for the sake of documenting. I have a different core task. (I, 01:23 - 01:23)

Summing up, the findings show that long-standing information cultures in relational workplaces prioritize human interaction over systematic information processing. As a result, introducing high-quality documentation practices requires not only new systems but also time, skill development, and a renegotiation of values and norms surrounding information work.

Discussion and conclusion

Before discussing the results of this case study, some limitations need to be highlighted. First, the case design could have been communicated more clearly to the participants. The different systems used by the day care institutions and their role in documentation tasks were clear to the project team, but the participants were not aware. This misalignment led to confusion about tasks and technologies. Second, the small number of observations (nine included in the analyses) allow us to see only a small fraction of how the day care institutions work with documentation tasks and the new system. Furthermore, only institutions participating in the project were observed and they may not be comparable to the non-participating institutions. Finally, although the observation approach was very flexible and allowed the observant to adapt to various situations, it also

compromised consistency. A more structured approach could have enabled us to compare across institutions and increased generalizability. In sum, flexibility in method and data collection enabled contextual sensitivity but introduced complexity and potential participant confusion.

Turning to the discussion of the results, the lack of time and the need for prioritizing according to the human-centred nature of their work obviously introduced barriers to the implementation process for a new IT-system and information management procedures. The prioritization of the human-centred nature of their work also defines the information culture in the organization. The three levels are interconnected, and challenges at one level can affect outcomes at the other two levels. Therefore, it is essential to view these elements as part of a dynamic system that influences and emphasizes information practices. This study thus highlights the complex interplay between digitalisation and everyday information behaviour in professional settings. While digital documentation tools are introduced to streamline workflows, their implementation may overlook the deeply embedded information culture within the organizations. Participants' responses to the new documentation task were shaped not only by individual preferences, but also by shared norms and values that prioritize the human-centred nature of their work.

At the individual level, employees made deliberate choices to minimize engagement with the digital task, often reframing it as peripheral to their core responsibilities. These actions reflect a form of resistance rooted in professional identity and practical judgment. In a study of perceived time spent on various documentation tasks by nurses De Groot (2022) found that the nurses perceived a high workload due to documentation activities and despite spending twice as much time on clinical documentation as on organizational documentation, they considered the workloads comparable. The organizational documentation led to many frustrations whereas working on clinical documentation was perceived as worthwhile. Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of user-friendly documentation systems.

The findings in this study indicate that relational workplaces may not necessarily see the value of documentation and may thus not prioritize this work over what they consider their core tasks. The findings also suggest that information culture is a valuable lens for understanding how digital tools are received and used. Rather than viewing resistance as a barrier, it can be seen as a meaningful expression of professional values. Designing supportive digital systems requires acknowledging these values and creating space for adaptation and skill development.

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