

Abstract

The engineering company is a particular kind of institution: not a laboratory and not a research organization, but nonetheless a site of knowledge creation and a place of innovation. The employees of an engineering company are responsible for designing and producing technologies in addition to developing their own sets of knowledge and skills to further their career development. Underlying this work is the necessity of looking out for the company's economic bottom line: as a private institution, the engineering company must make a profit in order to survive. The engineers and managers who work at a company utilize a particular combination of technical and social/communicative skills to complete their work. The combination of "hard" and "soft" skills required to work successfully as an engineer, as well as the situation of the engineering company as both an innovative institution and one that is tasked with the practical development of technologies, gives the engineering company as an organization a unique position within current discourses on innovation and new modes of knowledge production.

Using an Austrian engineering company and developer of space technologies as a case study, this project explores the nature of the engineering company as a site of knowledge production through an examination of the work practices of its employees. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation of meetings at the company were used to develop a qualitative analysis of the company employees' practices of assigning roles and responsibilities, identifying and assessing risk and collaborating with their partners and customers. A discussion of these regular work practices reveals assumptions and imaginations of the company's identity as it is understood by its employees. Conclusions are drawn about the differences and similarities of the engineering company as an institution to the sites of more traditional STS studies of knowledge creation and projectification in the life sciences and elsewhere.