



Organisational Mission Statements: A Postmodernist Perspective on the Management of the IS/IT Function

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The mission statement embodies certain beliefs about the management culture of the organisation which can be examined and placed within underlying theoretical contexts. This paper examines postmodernism in this respect which, in addition to forming a critique of modernist approaches, posits alternative views about philosophy, organisation and subsequently IS/IT theory. The study applies an ethnographic case research methodology where data was collected from sixty interviewees employed within a multinational financial services group. In this way, the organisational mission statement was used as a vehicle for analysing the contribution of postmodern approaches to the management of the IS/IT function. The influential Ashridge Model was adopted to map the findings of the study which suggest three propositions for postmodernism in providing i) cultural context, ii) a textual or 'deconstructive' analysis and iii) an ethnographic empathy for further IS/IT research.

INTRODUCTION

Business requirements for successful IS/IT strategies increasingly demand changes in the way that we view the organisation as a whole. A holistic approach is commonly associated with earlier research through "systems" theory (Checkland, 1981; Stowell et al., 1997) and more recently "social" theory (Giddens, 1992; Walsham, 1993; Lee et al., 1997). However, these challenges to organisational and IS/IT research continue to be regarded with some theoretical pessimism. Theorists have consistently alluded to "crises of organizational analysis" (Boje, et al, 1996), or even "Saving IT's soul" (Davenport, 1994). Theoretical pessimism is supported by a poor record of success in IS/IT strategy, where theorists are now frequently attacked as offering "fad management" solutions to business situations or failing to evaluate the critical issues in IS/IT assessment (Brooks, 1987; Hirschheim and Smithson, 1999). The overrunning of time and expenditure of IS/IT projects and the failure of these management initiatives have sought to undermine confidence in dominant traditional and contemporary approaches to IS/IT exploitation (Connell and Shafer, 1989; Willcocks and Lester, 1999). A widespread management initiative is the introduction of organisational mission statements. However, despite widespread adoption (Boland and Hirschheim, 1991; Jones and Kahaner, 1995), it is unclear whether mission statements have a positive (or negative) effect at an organisational level.

The research axes are identified as follows:

1. In what ways does the mission statement impact upon the management of the IS/IT function within an organisation?
2. To what extent can an assessment of a mission statement implementation be informed by recent developments in cultural theory such as postmodernism?

This paper is not about attacking modernism or mission statements. Rather, this paper argues that an understanding of the philosophical determinants of existing management practices can help to deepen cultural awareness of why management practices succeed or fail within the organisational setting. In this instance the company mission statement is the management practice under investigation, which can be informed by placing them within a postmodern "cultural" context. The methodology for this paper is to undertake a philosophical and practical empirical analysis, which is intended to describe the postmodern context of the organisational setting. This description is applied using a case study involving a medium sized IS/IT company within a multinational financial services group. In the case study postmodern contextualisation is used to examine and interpret the implementation of a mission statement within a specific company. Organisation and IS/IT theory are intentionally intertwined in this paper. It is argued that postmodern cultural insights into organisational context are useful in helping to understand why

IS/IT projects frequently fail to achieve their objectives in the company as a whole (Feeny and Willcocks, 1998).

Postmodernism has in fact been used for a number of years within the arts and social sciences, and a small amount of research currently exists of postmodernist theory in organisational and IS/IT literature (Clegg, 1993; Coyne, 1995; Hatch, 1997). This paper proposes to extend the sociological field of IS/IT analysis to include "postmodern" aspects of cultural theory. Organisation theory has to a greater extent assimilated many postmodern concepts (Clegg, 1993; Boje, Gephart, Thatchenkery, 1996; Hatch, 1997). With some exceptions the application of postmodern cultural theory in IS/IT literature has been modest (Coyne, 1995). Traditional modes of thought within science, IS/IT and organisation theory are characterised by a typically "modernistic" outlook (McBride, et al., 1997). The modernist tends to favour certain rational, centralised, structured methodologies (Winograd and Flores, 1986). However, a number of leading social and cultural commentators have proposed that the modernist framework has reached its boundaries, and new modes of conceiving society and the organisation are called for (Gergen and Whitney, 1996). This emerging framework has been termed "postmodernism". These postmodern theorists indicate that modernistic approaches alone are no longer satisfactory due changes in the cultural contexts of events (Gergen, 1992).

Postmodernism is a broad and complex movement, and the summary sections contained in this document represent an appraisal of what could be described as the "postmodernist mainstream". Many postmodernist authors would naturally be uncomfortable with accepting any such distillation of their ideas into general guidelines. It is important to accept that the analysis undertaken develops along overtly modernist lines. However, it was felt that the most productive approach was to draw together common themes into a conceptual framework.

POSTMODERNISM: PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS

Postmodernism is perhaps best introduced in terms of its critical points of departure from modernism. Modernism is the term used to describe the scientific-rational movement dominant in academia and business practice since the nineteenth century. Modernism asserts a primacy of reason over irrationality, by appealing to "universal" laws, or general principles. Implicit within this view is the impulse to formulate structure, order and homogeneity in modernist conceptual frameworks. General principles are also founded on the assumption that science and knowledge are cumulative and hence progressive. A key modernist tenet is that science is essentially involved with the quest for knowledge or truth.

In contrast to the scientific-rational approach, postmodernism has been described as "the death of reason" (Power, 1992, p.110). Where the modernist project was

founded on eliminating ambivalence and uncertainty, postmodernism seeks to expose disunities. Where modernism seeks to universalise, postmodernism seeks to celebrate differences.

Much of postmodernist writing is complex and elusive (Abrams, 1993). This may contribute to the fact that postmodernism does not have the prevalence in management or IS/IT study that it does in arts, sociology and philosophy (Cooper and Burrell, 1988). There are a number of reasons for this postmodern "awkwardness". Postmodernist writers often celebrate and play with multiple meaning. Postmodernist writing is also often littered with technical and ambiguous terminology. Four seminal postmodernist theorists will be discussed in this short summary section: Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Baudrillard.

Jean-Francois Lyotard popularised the term "postmodernism" in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). In this book Lyotard described postmodernism as an "incredulity towards metanarratives." By using this expression Lyotard directly attacks the modernist tendency to form general rules about society. The term "metanarrative" is used to describe the modernist approach to "theory." Lyotard regards modernist theory as an attempt to impose a common vocabulary, or set of principles, or assumptions, on a given situation. In particular Lyotard targets the emerging "science" metanarrative. Lyotard believes that, in the 20th century, science has lost its sense of unity. Science itself has split into various sub-disciplines and trends. For Lyotard this fragmentation is indicative of a theoretical and cultural shift away from the general and timeless, to more localised and temporal concerns. He terms this shift "the postmodern condition" (1984). Lyotard also believes that there is an emerging "atomisation of the social", meaning that the local takes priority over overarching theories or ideology. Lyotard cites Marxism as an example of a "grand narrative" that has been dissolved. For Lyotard, Marxism has been rejected in favour of local consumerist concerns.

Jacques Derrida (1978) is another key figure in the postmodernist movement. Derrida emphasises the linguistic nature of cultural life. For Derrida, human interaction and Western philosophy revolves around the production of "texts". In speech, writing, and action we all produce texts. These texts endlessly collide with an infinite number of other texts that are produced by ourselves and others. Rather like a literary critic, Derrida closely reads these texts, unpicking and unravelling meaning. From close reading, it might be expected that Derrida was interested in finding essential interpretation for the text. The opposite is the case. Derrida's philosophy is based on celebrating the endless indeterminacy of meaning. Derrida argues that Western philosophy has been directed at suppressing multiple meaning and uncertainty. Derrida seeks to expose multiple meaning in order to unravel

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