

Chapter 16

Revisiting Information Systems Research in Nonprofit Context: (Non-)Adoption 2.0 in a Small Voluntary Club

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ABSTRACT

Understanding information technologies and systems in the context of nonprofits is under-developed field of study. Hence, this chapter reviews current literature on this field. It maps four conventional views on ICT's benefits for the sector. Then, using insights generated through an ethnographic study on a small voluntary organisation, the challenges and issues surrounding the process of adoption and use of both typical and new information technologies are explored. It is finally discussed that social technologies, based on the notion of Web 2.0, may have some partial advantageous for volunteer-based organisations but perhaps greater benefits will emerge at the individual level.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nonprofit organisations play a critical role in human society in terms of providing socio-economic mobility and justice (Bell 1976). They have chosen a multitude of organising styles for themselves; however, they share their strategic goal for contributing in society where making financial resources is not their primary intention (Hull 2011). Studies show employment levels in voluntary sector set to grow (ThirdSector 2012).

Like business firms and governmental agencies, nonprofit organisations also uptake and use

various types of information and communication technologies in their daily operations, work processes and strategic changes (Burt & Taylor 2013). However, it is typically assumed that nonprofit and voluntary organisations are well behind other private firms and public institutions in terms of applying technological solutions into their organisations (Geller et al. 2009). Therefore, they cannot exploit ICT-enabled management for improving their functionality and expanding the boundaries of their activities (Beckley et al. 1996). Nonetheless, there is little research that has systematically studied how people respond

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to these technological applications (Zhang et al. 2007) and hence the process of adoption and use of ICTs in this context are considered a black-box and are poorly understood. This paper therefore aims to explore and understand the challenges of applying information technologies, in the context of volunteering and nonprofit works. Furthermore, as new information and communication technologies, labelled as social technologies, are persuasive in today's organisations; this research has an emphasis on them within this context.

Firstly, the paper provides a critical evaluation on the existing literature on nonprofits and ICTs. It is also discussed how two theoretical strands of Information Systems Research (IS Research) and Science and Technology Studies (STS) can contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between organisational changes and ICTs in nonprofit-based organisations. Challenges and issues of the effective use of ICTs are then discussed. Subsequently, the concept of social technologies is introduced and its theoretical and practical insights are considered.

Secondly, empirical findings from studying the IT-related challenges of a nonprofit-based swimming club are presented. The data collection method, analysis process and the emerging results are discussed.

Finally, the paper concludes with the remarks for better understanding and conceptualising of the ICTs in the voluntary and nonprofit sector.

2. ICT AND NONPROFITS

2.1. Existing Technology-Related Studies in Nonprofit Contexts

There are a number of studies that attempt to understand and explore ICT-enabled organisational changes within the context of nonprofit organisations. Studies around 'nonprofit technology', which have been carried out mainly by people whose background is in nonprofit affairs, can

be categorised on two lines of work: first, those focused on the organisational consequences of technological innovations (e.g. Burt & Taylor 2000; Saidel & Cour 2003; Seok 2004; Hart 2002), and second, those seeking to understand factors that influence the processes of adoption and use of technologies in this specific context (e.g. Halcker & Saxton 2007; Seth 2006; Iverson & Bukart 2007; Kase 2010).

These studies have generated valuable insights towards a better understanding of "Before" and "After" technological actions. They have yet to engage with and closely study the dynamics and complexities of the relationship between information technology and organisational processes. They almost tend to treat technology as a physical and external object that has positive and intended (pre-planned) impacts on the organisation. In other word, the 'in-between' process is less-developed within current literature.

Conducting a critical literature review on the papers published during the last decade, four categories on the role of technology in nonprofit context have emerged. These views assume that technology is an independent and external variable, which can be bought and used by people (mostly key decision makers and senior managers) in order to improve organisational performance through an exact planned change. Although these views are thematically linked, however, their central foci are quite different. These categories of ICT are: 1. Rich Communication; 2. Enabling; 3. Support; and 4. Catalyst. Based on the selected papers, the table 1 summaries key characteristics of each category and then delivers the essence of the suggestions provided, for the technological usefulness in this context.

2.2. Opening the Black-Box of Technology

The critical literature review on nonprofits and technology adoption and use, revealed that such studies suffered from an inadequately detailed

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