

Benefits Realization through the Treatment of Organizational Issues

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INTRODUCTION

Information technology is now a ubiquitous and increasingly critical part of the fabric of the modern organization, supporting its day-to-day operations and all aspects of the decision-making process, as well as its strategic positioning. It is therefore not perhaps surprising that the implementation of a new technology or information system is likely to result in a wide array of impacts to the organization as well as the working lives of individual employees. There is a growing consensus within the literature that many such impacts are not deterministic and cannot therefore be easily predicted prior to a system's implementation (e.g., DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). The corollary of this is that many of the consequences of an information system's implementation will be unanticipated (Robey & Boudreau, 1999). While some of these unanticipated consequences, or incidental side effects, may be of a positive nature, negative impacts are also quite common, as IT-induced organizational change often results in user resistance and, in extreme cases, possibly even system rejection (Martinsons & Chong, 1999).

Information systems projects may not be totally predictable, but it can be argued that many of their organizational impacts only remain unanticipated, because systems developers are reluctant to tackle the human and organizational aspects of IT (Doherty & King, 2005). Systems development projects have typically been viewed as exercises in technical change, rather than socio-technical change; "most investments in IT are technology-led, reflecting too technical an emphasis" (Clegg, 2000, p. 464). This is a dangerous strategy, because unforeseen and unresolved negative impacts may increase the likelihood of systems failure. Moreover, beneficial impacts, of both a planned and incidental nature, may not be fully realized without an appropriate program of organizational change. Indeed, Ward and Daniel (2006) argue convincingly that the unacceptably high levels of IT failures are largely due to the absence of formal "benefits realization" approaches that explicitly target the organizational change needed to deliver business benefits. Consequently, we would argue that if systems development projects are viewed as an exercise in organizational change, in which all potential organizational impacts are proactively and systematically

analyzed, then many undesirable impacts could be avoided, while the planned benefits can be more effectively realized (Doherty & King, 2002). The importance of treating organizational issues may now be widely acknowledged (e.g., Clegg, 2000; Eason, 2001), but little progress has been made in the development of practical treatment approaches that have succeeded in making the transition from research laboratory to widespread commercial usage. The primary aim of this article is to present an innovative new benefits-oriented approach for their proactive treatment. However, in advance of this, it is important to establish the importance of treating organizational issues.

BACKGROUND: THE NEED TO TREAT ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

The information systems' literature is very clear on two points; general levels of failure are far too high, and the primary cause of this problem is the failure to adequately treat organizational issues (Clegg, Axtell, et al., 1997; Doherty & King, 2001). In this context, the term "organizational issue" relates to those organizationally-oriented facets of systems development projects that need to be treated to ensure that the resultant impacts of an information system are likely to be desirable. A comprehensive checklist of important organizational issues, that was originally drawn from the literature but then validated over a series of studies (e.g., Doherty & King, 2001; Doherty, King, & Al-Mushayt, 2003), is presented in Table 1.

To treat a specific organizational issue it is necessary to first evaluate the likely organizational impact associated with it, and then if necessary take steps to ensure that the resultant impact is likely to be desirable. For example, if it is found that a proposed system is likely to be poorly suited to an organization's working practices, then it will be necessary to either modify the system's technical specification, so that the mismatch is avoided, or redesign the working practices so that they are well aligned with the system. In essence, the treatment of organizational issues is the mechanism by which the project team should align the capabilities afforded, and the constraints imposed, by the technical system with

Table 1. Checklist of organizational issues to address

Issue	Description
Information systems strategy	The system's alignment with the current information system strategy.
Current business needs	The system's ability to satisfy the organization's current business needs.
Prioritization of needs	The prioritizing of development effort on those aspects that address the most important business needs.
Future needs of organization	The system's ability to satisfy the organization's likely future business needs.
Process design	The system's impact on the design of key business processes.
Health & safety/ergonomic factors	The likely ergonomic and health and safety implications of the system, such as RSI and eye strain.
User motivation/needs	The system's ability to satisfy user needs and support user motivations.
User working styles and personal skills	The implications of user working styles and personal skills for the system's design and ongoing use.
Job redesign	The proposed system's impact on the design of working practices.
Timing of Implementation	The interaction of the system's implementation with other planned concurrent changes.
Organizational disruption	The temporary organizational disruption that may be caused by the implementation of the proposed system.
Organizational structure	The system's effect on the organizational structure, and the lines of authority.
Organizational culture	The proposed system's impact on the culture in the organization (<i>i.e., the set of important assumptions [often unstated] that members of an organization share in common</i>).
Organizational power	The proposed system's political implications for the distribution of power in the organization.

the requirements and characteristics of an organization and its individual employees.

System developers typically view the system development process as a science, rather than art, which requires the use of structured methods that focus upon the delivery of technically effective systems, on time and within budget. They are extremely reluctant to tackle intangible, ill-defined, and politically-sensitive organizational issues (Doherty & King, 2001), for which they are ill-equipped, in terms of training, competencies, and motivation (Clegg, 2000). Consequently, approaches to the treatment of organizational issues have typically been reactive rather than proactive (Clegg, Coleman, et al., 1996)—get the system implemented and then worry about its organizational impacts. There is therefore a pressing need to find ways to encourage the systems development community to become more actively engaged in the treatment of organizational issues. One obvious strategy is through the creation of methods, tools, and techniques that are specifically designed to facilitate the treatment of organizational issues. A wide variety of organizationally-oriented approaches have now been proposed, which can be categorized as follows:

1. **Socio-Technical Methods:** Socio-technical methods that attempt to produce information systems that are

technically efficient and coherent, while also being sensitive to organizational and human needs, for example, ethics (Mumford, 1996) or multi-view (Avison, Wood-Harper, Vidgen, & Wood, 1998).

2. **Tools and Techniques for the Treatment of Specific Issues:** Many researchers (e.g., Clegg, Coleman, et al., 1996) have attempted to develop tools and techniques to aid in the treatment of specific organizational issues.
3. **An Organizational Impacts Analysis:** The “organizational impact analysis” (e.g., Sauer, 1993) is typically a one-off study to determine the ways in which a proposed system will affect the organization's decision-making, power, structure, culture, working practices, and so forth.

While each of these contributions has been very useful in increasing our understanding of the nature and treatment of organizational issues, there is little evidence that these contributions have made much of an impact on the practice of systems development (Clegg, 2000). This is probably, at least in part, due to technical specialists' continuing preference for the more technically oriented tools and techniques. However, if a comprehensive, coherent, and easy to use approach could be found, which complemented their existing methods, then it might have a greater chance of adoption.

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