

Chapter 7.17

We've Got a Job to Do – Eventually: A Study of Knowledge Management Fatigue Syndrome

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of knowledge management systems at universities can be tremendously costly in terms of both human and capital resources. One reason for this cost is the extended time period, generally measured in years, not months, over which they are implemented. This qualitative study presents data on the implementation of one such project at a Research I university in the southwestern United States. The analysis focuses on the concept of knowledge management fatigue syndrome and the increase of technological bloat and academic technocracy as a result of the project.

INTRODUCTION

Unforeseen costs and consequences of knowledge management projects at universities frequently are cited in the press. For example, the California State University system began a \$400 million overhaul of its administrative information system in 1998. By 2003, there were many questions about the appropriateness and efficiency of the system, and it was clear that it has caused numerous unintended consequences to numerous administrative functions from accounting to student advising (Olsen, 2003). Similarly, an unforeseen problem with a management software upgrade at the University of Florida led to a delay in the processing of paychecks of more than 400

hundred graduate teaching assistants for nearly a month (Carnevale, 2004). These are just two examples of the problems universities face when implementing knowledge management systems. Given such problems, one wonders why a university would choose to implement these large-scale “enterprise” systems and what that process entails. This study illuminates one such implementation demonstrating knowledge management fatigue syndrome (Hakken, 2003). Further, the case study shows how knowledge management implementation can lead to technological bloat and academic technocracy (see Chapter IV).

This chapter is concerned with how such a long term project has affected the units of the university that have been directly involved in the first rounds of implementation, how users have responded to the system, and how the overall structure of units have changed. I will explore these questions by presenting data from e-mails, informal interviews and participant observation in one of the units that have been directly involved with the first round of the system’s implementation. Before presenting data, I will discuss the conceptual framework that guided my inquiry.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Many organizations, including universities, in the 1990s chose to use knowledge management systems to improve the efficiency and service quality of their operations. As indicated in Chapter IV, these intended gains in efficiency and quality have remained elusive at best. Why, then, have organizations continued to pursue such goals? The concept of an academic technocracy presented is central to my analysis. In the previous chapter, my colleagues and I discuss three consequences of higher education institutions’ efforts to respond to the pressures of academic capitalism and technocracy: the digital restructuring of academic labor, the unproven efficiency argument

of academic technology, and the emergence of “technological bloat.” Each of these phenomena may be giving rise to an “academic technocracy.” In part, this chapter will present data that helps to support these hypotheses, but, more importantly, the chapter will incorporate Hakken’s (2003) idea of “knowledge management fatigue syndrome” as an explanation of how an institution-wide knowledge management implementation project could continue for more than a decade.

More than 10 years ago a Research I university in the southwest (Southwest University) proclaimed in a strategic planning document for information technology that it would “leap forward utilizing information technology to fulfill the University’s goal of becoming the best land grant institution in the country.” Certainly, the goals of this project were grand. While it is not necessarily shocking to see a university desiring to improve its status in the U.S. higher education system, the study university does demonstrate a new dimension in how it intends to create this increased prestige. “Southwest University” intended that an information technology system would create the change needed to achieve the goal. Initially, the implementation process was intended to take only two years; today, after more than a decade, the project has yet to be fully realized. As discussed above, Southwest University envisioned a knowledge management system that would allow students and staff alike the ability to access essential data at any time, from any place. This access, of course, would be attainable because of the Internet and other advanced information technology. Hakken (2003) suggests that the early to mid 1990s was the prime time for such assertions because at that time knowledge management was the “killer application” that would justify the massive organizational investment in automated information technologies: “It [knowledge management] fed (and fed off) the media hype about the ‘knowledge society’” (p. 55). In the early 1990s, it was reasonable to

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