Chapter 57

Understanding the Use of Business-to-Employee (B2E) Portals in an Australian University though the Management Lens:
A Qualitative Approach

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INTRODUCTION

The application of the Internet for commercial purposes has led to different types of e-business initiatives, which have been widely discussed in the scholarly literature and trade magazines. However, it is the Business-to-Consumers (B2C) and Business-to-Business (B2B) e-businesses that have so far dominated discussion in the contemporary literature. These two types of e-business initiatives collectively are believed to have enormous impact on business practices, industry structure and our society at large. On the other hand, Business-to-Employee (B2E), which represents an employee centric e-business initiative (Turban et al., 2008), is relatively less recognized in extant literature. Despite little attention given to B2E e-business, it represents an emerging area which has the potential to benefit businesses and IT vendors alike (Rahim and Singh, 2007). For businesses, B2E e-business solutions can act as a source of competitive advantage through retention of satisfied workforce (Hansen and Deimler, 2001). The IT vendors are currently competing to capture market share by offering various types of innovative web-based B2E solutions (e.g. employee portals, e-HR systems and ESS). According to several industry sources, an increased growth has been observed in the demand for various types of B2E products (Killen Associates Report, 2006; Merrill Lynch Capital Markets cited

in Brooks, 2004; and Banks, 2004). Yet, despite industry forecasts, the use of B2E e-business solutions by employees has largely been ignored in the current scholarly IT/e-business literature. This lack of attention is possibly due to the implicit assumption made in the literature (due to media hype) that employees would happily embrace and use B2E systems once these technologies are introduced in organisations. We however disagree with this view and argue that evaluation of the use of B2E solutions by employees represents a key research concern because the benefits arising from the introduction of such solutions are unlikely to be realised when they are not satisfactorily diffused among employee community. Therefore, managers need to be aware of the factors that may potentially affect the use of B2E e-business systems in organisational settings.

We acknowledge that existing literature has reported the attempts made by several scholars (e.g. KieBling and Kostler, 2002; Gounaris and Dimitriadis, 2003; Holsapple and Sasidharan, 2005) who have studied such aspects as portal usability and portal design challenges associated with various types of online B2C interactive portals (e.g. tourist portals, citizen portals) which have some degree of similarity with B2E systems. Despite this similarity, clear differences still exist because unlike B2C portals the users are employees not external customers who need to be provided with access to organisational internal controls, and many different types of services, and more in-depth information of B2E systems. Therefore, as the motivations and purposes of B2E systems are different (although many of the underlying technical issues are similar), we can expect that the usage behaviour of B2E systems by employees is different from that of users of online B2C service portals. Consequently, although the findings of these scholars are useful they are not directly applicable to B2E systems context without further empirical confirmation. Recognising this difference is important because

little (if any) research attention has been given to understand use of B2E systems.

In this article, we thus report the experience of a large Australian university in introducing an employee portal. In particular, we analyse the views of the portal steering committee (who represent the interests of the university senior management) relating to the portal usage behaviour of university staff and identify the key factors which they believe to have contributed to employees' low usage practices of portals. Identifying factors from the perspective of senior management is important because unlike other employees (who act as ordinary users) they have better understanding of the strategic rationale for the introduction of portal initiatives in organisational settings. We argue that it is this focus of trying to understand B2E systems use from the viewpoint of senior management that sets our study apart from other existing adoption studies on online B2C service oriented systems which primarily adopt the viewpoint of actual users rather than the strategic management of the organisation which introduces their online systems. Hence, we contribute to literature by highlighting the views from a major stakeholder (i.e. senior management) in relation to B2E systems adoption.

Our article is organised as follows. First, we review e-business and human resources literature in which the notion of employee oriented e-business systems has been discussed. Consistent with our objectives, we however restrict our literature review attention to those studies which adopted the perspective of organisational management and then identify the research gaps and broad research concerns. Next, our research approach is described. Following that, the background of the participating tertiary educational institution is presented. Next, empirical evidence collected from the institution is described and discussed in light of the existing literature. Finally, the contributions of our research are highlighted and areas of possible further investigations are mentioned.

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