

Chapter 6.7

Understanding Human Factors in Systems Selection and Implementation: Exploring the Role of Power and Politics

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of power and politics in systems implementation. Current literature misses the complexities involved in systems implementation through human factors and the political nature of systems implementation and is simplistic in nature. The concept of power relations, as proposed by Foucault (1977, 1978), has been utilised by the authors to identify the dynamic nature of power and politics. A case study of the implementation of an enterprise-wide learning management system at Newlands University is presented and analysed using social dramas to distinguish between the front stage issues of power and hidden discourses. Challenges for power are acted out in the front stage, or public forums between various actors. The social dramas, as they have been described here, are superfluous to the discourse underpinning the front stage. Furthermore, the enactment of policy legitimises power and establishes the discourse, limiting resistance.

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the selection and implementation of an enterprise-wide learning management system at Newlands University. The enterprise-wide learning management system, implemented

in Newlands University in 2003, is a system that enables academic staff to manage students, by keeping track of their progress and performance across all types of training activities. This learning system allows staff to create learning resources, deliver content, monitor student participation and assess student performance. The focus of this

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study is on the social issues involved in systems selection and implementation, rather than on the technical or the system implementation process itself. The social aspect of systems selection and implementation refers to the human factors involved, such as the political environment. Describing the social factors involved in systems selection and implementation will help provide richness to an understanding of what contributes to either a successful or flawed implementation process.

The failure of an information system in an organisation can have a crippling effect on the organisation itself, the members of that organisation and the reputation of that organisation. Stories of failed systems occur regularly in the media. These stories can damage the credibility of organisations and turn potential customers away. The costs of systems failure vary. Typically they include economic costs, such as investments in equipment and labour; the cost of missed opportunities, where a system fails to deliver on benefits promised; and the costs incurred in terms of client service or risks to the community (Sauer, 1993).

The information systems community needs a deeper understanding of what is involved in systems implementation, and more specifically, what enables successful implementation and what contributes to unsuccessful systems implementation.

The approaches adopted in previous studies have over-simplified a complex process influenced by social factors, rather than exploring the inherent political issues involved with systems selection and implementation. This makes the systems implementation process messy, inconsistent and imbued with ambiguity, rather than structured or manifestly associated with factors creating success. The motivation behind this research is that previous studies of systems implementation and social factors have been structuralist and simplistic (Mitev, 2001). Previous studies reduce a complex process into various steps with particular factors involved in order to implement a system. It is argued that the systems selection and implemen-

tation process does not follow the linear system development lifecycle, nor do the critical success factors truly represent what is occurring in the systems implementation process. The researcher wishes to explore and report on what occurs during the selection and implementation of a new system in an organisation, paying particular attention to the role of power and politics in the systems selection and implementation process. This motivation has led to the development of the following question:

How are power and politics integral parts of the systems selection and implementation process?

By undertaking this research, we can identify outcomes of the selection and implementation of an enterprise-wide system by providing a better understanding to the human factors involved, and specifically the power and politics in systems selection and implementation. It should be noted, however, that the outcomes of this study do not aim to provide a solution to the power and politics involved in systems selection and implementation, but to fully recognise that there are political factors involved in implementing a system.

SYSTEMS IMPLEMENTATION, POWER AND DISCOURSE: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

For decades, systems implementation has received considerable attention in the literature from numerous authors including Davis (1974), Lucas (1981), and Avison and Fitzgerald (2003). The general description of systems implementation is the process of identifying the need for an information system of some kind, and the process(es) involved in getting that system installed into an organisation. Lucas (1981, p. 14) characterises information systems implementation as “an ongoing process which includes the entire development of the system from original suggestion through the feasibility study, systems analysis and

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