Chapter 22
Teaching Enterprise Information Systems in the United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

Although the notion of an enterprise information system (EIS) has been around now for several decades, there appears still to be a general lack of understanding within various sections of higher education over the true nature of these systems and subsequently how they should be presented to students. Although the topic itself is currently a hot one, with potential employers around the globe eagerly seeking new graduates versed in various aspects of EIS, this apparent lack of understanding has the potential to translate into courses or curricula that may not provide the most appropriate graduate skill sets. This chapter discusses how one university in the United Arab Emirates is addressing this issue by providing a curriculum and courses that set out to develop local graduates that will be highly valued by organisations seeking to extract full value from their own EIS's.

INTRODUCTION

The terms Enterprise Information System (EIS), Enterprise System (ES), Enterprise Wide System (EWS) and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) have at various times, been used synonymously to describe a similar phenomenon. These systems have become the de facto standard for large and medium organisations to run their major functional and process operations, being described by Kumar & Van Hillegersberg, (2000) as merely the price of entry for running a business.

Aloini, Dulmin, & Mininno, (2007) describe an ERP implementation not merely as just another computer project, but as a strategic tool which must be approached as such, (p559). ERP systems are, in effect, information systems that enable organisations to make decisions from the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1984-5.ch022

principle perspective of the enterprise, rather than from a principle perspective of a single or group of departments belonging to that organisation. Evans, (1997) once defined them as systems having *one* database, one application, and one user interface for the entire enterprise. He went on to say that where once disparate systems ruled manufacturing, distribution, finance and sales, it is a tool that takes information from every function, assisting employees and manager's plan, monitor and control the entire business. The term Enterprise Information Systems (EIS) will be predominantly used in this chapter, as it describes best what the author believes represents the raison d'être of this phenomenon — a system designed to enable information to flow throughout an enterprise.

There remains some debate throughout academia as to whether the subject of enterprise systems is best delivered by business colleges adopting an information technology perspective or information technology colleges adopting a business perspective. Indeed, within the United Arab Emirates (UAE) of the two principle national universities, one delivers the topic through its Faculty of Business & Economics within a management information systems degree while the other delivers it through its College of Information Technology within an enterprise computing major of an information technology degree. Teaching enterprise systems does require that elements of both business and information technology be addressed, so it is reasonable to expect that any business or information technology college would be capable of delivering their own particular version of an EIS curriculum. Implementations of various types of enterprise system often requires significant alterations in the way that things are done and as such may cause major changes in employees' work lives, (Bala, 2008). They have been described by Stewart, Milford, Jewels, Hunter, & Hunter, (2000, p967) as technology diffusions through social systems, and as such are always likely to be significant interventions in organisational life, (Stewart, 2001). The teaching of any type of modern information system, and particularly for enterprise systems, a social psychology perspective needs also to be added to the technology and business perspectives. It is however how these three perspectives interact with each other that is likely to provide the most useful outcomes for EIS students. This chapter will describe how one university in the UAE has developed its courses and curriculum to prepare its graduates to contribute within enterprise computing environments.

A STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

In an era of economic rationality, few universities, if any, throughout the world have been able to avoid the reality of addressing the issue of matching economic imperatives with academic initiatives. As such, academic faculty may not always be able to provide what they consider to be ideal curriculums because of limited budgets or conflicting demands for resource funding. Initiatives that are undertaken with the best of intentions by those charged with the responsibility of creating ideal curricula that best meet the needs of the student, industry and society generally, often find that practical considerations and administrative constraints will force changes to their original plans. If, for example, a new curriculum requires that a topic be covered that is outside the scope of any existing faculty member it is an economically attractive option to modify the ideal curriculum by replacing that topic with something that an existing faculty is an expert in. At any given time therefore any curriculum may not always represent the ideal but more one that reflects the constraints of the presenting organisation. As Maslow, (1965) once pointed out, for a man with a hammer every problem is a nail.

The whole concept of an enterprise system, which needs to be at the heart of teaching EIS is, in practice, alien to many higher education institutions. Seldom, do individual universities,