An Extended Model of Decision Making: A Devil's Advocate Workshop

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INTRODUCTION

Enterprise resource planning (ERP) packages can be described as the most sought after means of organisational transformation and IT innovation since the mid 1990s. Over the past decade, ERP packages have become a major part of the organisational landscape and form the cornerstone of IS architectures for an ever increasing percentage of organisations. Despite the strong push toward enterprise-wide ERP systems in the wider organisational community and the experience accumulated over 20 years of large scale integrated systems implementations, there is, in relation to ERP deployment, a lack of understanding of the specific project management required to counter the difficulties that can arise when organisations fail to ensure that all the required factors of success are present in their projects. Therefore, novel ideas to help managers and project managers to better prepare for enterprise-wide ERP projects are badly needed.

This entry presents a method of practical relevance for organisational decision-makers by introducing the concept of a devil's advocate workshop—reminiscent of Klein's premortem sessions (Klein, 1993, 2002), but tailor-made for large scale Information Systems projects—which leverages the concept of sense-making, in introducing a preplanning "intelligence" phase in any enterprise-wide ERP project life-cycle.

BACKGROUND

There seems to be a misguided perception in the managerial community that ERP packages are the modern day IT silver bullet and this has been revealed notably by Swanson and Ramiller (2004, p. 554) in their award winning MISQ research article titled "Innovating Mindfully with Information Technology," where they reported that

by the mid-1990s, ERP was a topic that was being banded about in boardrooms. It wasn't just an information technology (IT) project, but a strategic business imperative… the ERP genie was out of the bottle—every company needed to have an ERP implementation.

However, Swanson and Ramiller (2004, p. 554), borrowing Weick's concept of mindfulness, suggest that

adopting organisations entertain scant reasoning for their moves. Especially where the innovation achieves a high public profile, as with ERP, deliberative behaviour can be swamped by an acute urgency to join the stampeding herd, notwithstanding the high cost and apparent risk involved.

Indeed, this mindless behaviour in pursuit of "best practise" is the rule.

Paradoxically, the argument can also be made that investments in these ERP packages are amongst the most significant an organisation has engaged, or will ever, engage in; and this is not adequately matched by the low level of managerial understanding of the impacts of implementation of such systems on the organisation. This trend supports the contention that the level of managerial understanding of technological innovations is generally low, and that managers need to be empowered and made aware of what is critical for a successful project implementation of ERP applications. Therefore, specific tools and methods must be proposed to provide managers with a means of assessing their organisation's level of understanding before they embark on complex innovating pursuits (for example, enterprise-wide ERP projects) and, from this assessment, to offer the means to improve the starting point.

MAIN FOCUS

ERP projects are highly complex and challenging initiatives to undertake (regardless of organisational size) for reasons relating to: projects being difficult to scope, with issues becoming apparent only once the project is under way, the benefits being nebulous, and the scale of the project being greater than an organisation is prepared for, in implementation. In fact, success has not been easy to achieve and organisations that implement enterprise-wide ERP systems, based on a myopic mindset and only for an immediate return on investment, have been in for a "rude and expensive awakening" (Gargeya & Brady, 2005). Therefore, improving the likelihood of success prior to undertaking a project would prove hugely beneficial to most organisations. In fact, many organisations view their project implementations as failures. However, it has also been argued that the cause of these ERP implementation failures relates to a lack of appropriate culture and organisational (internal) readiness, which, if addressed, is also a feature of the most successful enterprise-wide ERP projects. This readiness is referred to as a "readiness to change" and it has been argued that not enough time and attention has been devoted to the "internal readiness" factor at the outset of an ERP project and the subsequent changes required during the implementation process (Davenport, 2000; Gargeya & Brady, 2005). As a result, an organisation's state of readiness is extremely important in order to undertake an enterprise-wide ERP implementation and, as a result, the awareness of managers should be reflected in the preparations made for the project initiative.

AWARENESS AND PREPAREDNESS

Very little academic research literature in the enterprise-wide ERP systems area focuses directly on the issue of organisational readiness for enterprise-wide ERP projects. However, numerous articles in the trade press highlight the importance of an organisation assessing its state of readiness to undertake an enterprise-wide ERP project. However, these readiness checks are promoted by ERP vendors and consultancy groups and are tightly integrated into a preferred implementation methodology, which ultimately positions these checks on readiness in the planning phase of the project. Indeed, it can be argued that the planning stage is too late

for this self-assessment exercise, in that it should be a vendor/consultant-independent, methodology-independent and "preplanning" or "intelligence phase" thought process in relation to undertaking an enterprise-wide ERP project.

It seems that a critically important issue to consider with the introduction of any ERP package is the readiness of the organisation for such an initiative, prior to the project's initiation. This view is certainly supported by the available research literature and by the fact that a high number of enterprise-wide ERP projects fail in such a way that the cause of failure can be related to a lack of preparedness in the early stages of the project. Ideally, readiness is viewed as an organisational mindset and should be concerned with a straightforward and comprehensive assessment of the level of understanding that exists within an organisation, with regard to what is involved in undertaking an enterprise-wide ERP project, and the actual preparedness that is needed within the organisation for such a project undertaking. Therefore, organisational readiness is simply viewed as a "common sense" approach to an enterprise-wide ERP project. In fact, it can be argued that readiness leads to highlighting the criticality of certain factors a priori that may, if absent or unmanaged, lead to less than desirable project outcomes. As a result, organisational readiness should be concerned with providing focus and establishing the structures that should constitute an enterprise-wide ERP project.

While awareness is determined by the organisational decision makers' understanding of what an enterprise-wide ERP project entails, preparedness relates to the actions managers take to prepare themselves and the organisation for an enterprise-wide ERP project, thereby leveraging this awareness. As a result, a lack of preparedness can be as a result of a lack of awareness as to what is involved in such an undertaking and a lack of appreciation for the existing organisational configuration in the context of a managers own organisation. In accordance with Weick (1988, p. 306), if understanding is facilitated by action and "if action is a means to get feedback, learn, and build an understanding of unknown environments, then a reluctance to act could be associated with less understanding and more errors." Therefore, within implementing organisations a "delicate trade-off between dangerous action which produces understanding and safe inaction which produces confusion" exists (Weick, 1988, p. 306). This highlights the fact that low levels of awareness and

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