Power and Politics in University Portal Implementation

Konrad J. Peszynski
RMIT University, Australia

Brian Corbitt
RMIT University, Australia

INTRODUCTION

Authors in the information systems (IS) discipline have started exploring the socio-technical approach to the development and implementation of information systems (Mitev, 2001; Orlikowski, 1992; Peszynski, 2005). However, few have extended this exploration into the realm of Web portals. Previous studies have explored process-oriented models and the categorical critical success factors associated with broad systems selection and implementation (Avison & Fitzgerald, 2003; Davis, 1974; Hoffer, Valacich, & George, 1998).

Mitev (2001) argues that we need to "move beyond commonsense explanations of failure and success and find more complex and richer ways of understanding the use of IS in organisations through the inclusion of broader social, economic, political, cultural and historical factors" (Mitev, 2001, p. 84). Rather than take the social aspect of implementation at face value, we need to understand and perform research that recognises the complexity and historical construction of the members of a selection and implementation team (Mitev, 2001). Essentially, the implementation of any information system, and in this case, Web portals, is complex, messy, and inconsistent.

By undertaking this research, we can identify outcomes of the implementation of a Web portal in an Australian university (to preserve confidentiality we have made up the name: "University of Australia") and therefore provide a better understanding of the human factors involved in the implementation of Web portals. In order to do this, we will present a narrative of the implementation of a Web portal in this university. A narrative has been adopted, as it enables the researchers to present the findings of the implementation and resulting power relations and politics associated with the implementation of a Web portal.

THE CASE STUDY

The University of Australia began implementing a Web portal in 2003. The Web portal was designed to be built over a 2 to 3-year period and built on the infrastructure and expertise that already existed within the university. Essentially, the Web portal incorporated knowledge of the processes and integrated the services of the university, for both students and staff. By enabling the portal to be accessed via the Internet, all services within the university become Web-based (Kvale, 1996). Staff and students would have access to information, knowledge, and tools to enable transactions by staff and students in the one location. The goal of the Web portal for the Senior Executive at the University of Australia was to facilitate better decision making through quicker and more consolidated access to information sources within the university, supported by a variety of technologies.

The creation and implementation of the Web portal at the University of Australia was considered successful at many levels. All indicators in terms of performance, delivery of modules on time, integration and performance within the university administration, and the provision of administrative services to the university were all more than satisfactory. Reviews from University Council documents and other internal documents within the university demonstrated that all critical success factors were met within the desired limits set at the start of the project.

What follows is the story of the implementation of the Web portal at the University of Australia, which highlights the political and power-based dramas seldom discussed in the literature.

The Beginning

The Web portal at the University of Australia began with an identified need for integration of services. The university had, for a long time, been using IT for the provision of various services to student and staff, which included Finance, Human Resources, and student services, including e-mail. However, there had been no attempt to integrate these services. This is not an unusual scenario in the tertiary environment.

As a result, the University of Australia began by looking at their own resources and seeing what could be created. The implementation of the Web portal at the University of Australia was led by a champion in the second most senior position within the university. This meant that the power

invested in that position was able to drive forward the need for such a system and ensure that the project got underway, that the project was kept on time and within budget, and that the project was eventually successful.

The role of the project champion is certainly a critical success factor in determination of any implementation of a system (Akkermans & van Helden, 2002; Martinsons, 1993). In the case of the University of Australia, the role of this person was substantial and played a significant role in the successful implementation of the Web portal. Power vested in a position can play a substantial role in dealing with the complexities associated with a Web portal. In the University of Australia the complexity was created from a university with six campuses located over 300 kilometres apart. The University of Australia has five diverse faculties, all seemingly independent with their operations, thus creating complexity in an amalgamated scenario. The University of Australia was not a university which was simply created and then operated. The University of Australia was created out of an existing university and five additional campuses of a previous college of higher education. This meant that there was complexity not only with structure, but complexity created by different IT systems which had been in existence and created by different organisational cultures.

In this case, the organisational cultures were extremely diverse. However, the role of the champion and the role of a powerful vice-chancellor ensured that the decisions made about the Web portal were supported from the top of the university, not only in terms of rhetoric but also in terms of resources that were made available to ensure that the project was successful.

The Process

Decisions were made about the Web portal in 2003, when it was decided that the Web portal would be built on a single database of information and connected to other databases relating to functions, including administration and finance. A key decision made in this early part of the development of the Web portal related to a university-wide decision to build all of systems on Oracle databases.

The belief was that by using a single database as the underpinning system for the integration, the fields and relationships between data could easily be transferred. This came about because of a belief by the IT Manager of the university that this was the way to move ahead. It was the way that business had been moving and it was a way to deal with the complexities created by the amalgamation of the university and the original colleges and the need to integrate the services, based on a common foundation.

This created a social drama. The concept of a social drama refers to a series of events in which there are shifts in power, views, opinions, and changes in social groups in which the social drama is operating (Corbitt, 1997; Turner 1974, 1980).

Social dramas occur within groups of persons who "share values and interests and who have a real or alleged common history" (Turner, 1980, p. 149). As an idea is contested, it leads to a challenging of what currently exists.

In the implementation of a system there appears to be a series of events, contestations, struggles, crises or "social dramas," which the actors in the implementation process go through (Corbitt, 1997). It is argued that implementation is rarely an ordered or sequential process. Actors within implementation contest and reconstruct the system to achieve their goals, to maintain their ideologies, to change programs, to change existing ideologies, or to shift real power.

In this case study, the need to move toward a Web portal and to integrate the variety of services offered by the university for staff and students challenged the previous organisational cultures associated with the previous institutions. Essentially, individuals, groups, and faculties within the university had developed their own portals, enabling staff and students to interact in the one location online. As such, resistance and challenges emerged, which created a social drama. Actors involved claimed that their system was better than the proposed system, that their system should be adopted. However, that scenario was not possible because the previous institutions never had anything similar. It was an absolute feat for someone to come into the drama that was created by such a decision and override the challenge, creating a new decision. That was the role of the champion. The power vested in that champion enabled him to support the decision made by the IT Manager.

Control of the information technology was the second issue in relation to dealing with the complexity involved with the creation of the Web portal within the University of Australia. As soon as decisions were made about the necessary technical infrastructure, more social dramas developed. Each of the divisions and faculties involved had their own views and had been operating on older systems, legacy systems and individually developed online systems, which had been in place for some time. Immediately, there was a complexity of 20 factorial combinations of groups and people within the university, each desiring a different scenario, different structure, different process, and different base which they wanted to operate. These dramas were created because a decision was made by the champion, that the university would have a single operating system across all of the campuses and faculties.

This immediately challenged the comfort zone of people, so they immediately engaged in dramas. They instantly began challenging, questioning, and trying to alter the decisions that had been made. However, power vested in the champion and the position that they held instantaneously enabled the decisions and the dramas to be worked through quickly.

Committees were established and discussions were engaged in all ways. There was an underpinning basis on which any discussion would eventually lead to the conclu-

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