Chapter 6.15
Successes and Failures of SAP Implementation:
A Learning Perspective

Tanya Bondarouk
University of Twente, The Netherlands

Maarten van Riemsdijk
University of Twente, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In this article, we conceptualize the implementation process associated with SAP_HR as an experiential learning one (Kolb, 1984), and analyze qualitative data collected using discourse analysis during a six-month case study. We saw that a lack of communication plus misunderstandings between the different parties involved in the project led to mistakes in working with the system. However, with encouragement from the "top" to improve learning, working with the system became easier for the whole group involved and for the individual users. Although Kolb's theory is widely acknowledged by academics as a fundamental concept that contributes towards our understanding of human behavior, we propose another use: to consider this theory in association with an IT implementation strategy to identify the mechanism of IT adoption in an organization.

INTRODUCTION

This article is about the implementation of information technology (IT). Although this topic has been debated for several decades, the practical arena is still confronted with the so-called "go-live" problems with IT projects being less successful than predicted.

It is widely recognized that "go-live" IT use often develops in a different way to that in the plans made, and that the degree to which the use of a technology corresponds to the anticipated rules and norms can vary considerably, depending on the organizational context, the type of

IT, and the end users' awareness of the system. (Arkich, 1992; Bardram, 1998; Bikson & Eveland, 1996; Ciborra, 1996; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Orlikowski, 1996).

There has been much research with consequent recommendations on how to introduce a new IT to employees in order to minimize or avoid troubles during IT projects. However, IT introductions are still known to be time consuming, indirect, and sometimes impulsive developments, leading to a mismatch between the initial ideas behind the information technology, and its real use seen through the employees' perceptions and experiences.

So, why have we apparently learned so little from IT failures? There are two popular reasons. It is argued that traditional IT research, focused as it is on IT implementation factors, has failed to identify the true causes of failure (Sauer, 1999). Perhaps, the traditional factors and processes considered are symptoms of, rather than the reasons for, the failure and, if so, attacking the symptoms will not cure the disease. The other popular possible reason is that even if the identified failure factors *are* the causes of the IT failure, they are not easy to avoid (Kling, 1987). Arguably there is a third possibility: that the traditional studies do not mirror the interactive, complex reality of the IT implementation process in which users are involved.

Given this situation, this article proposes to look at IT implementation from an interactive prospective, focusing on the collaborations among users while working with the newly introduced technology. Almost all modern technologies have networked, or collaborative, fragments, and users are engaged in common tasks through these "fragments." With the rise of wireless, mobile, and Internet technologies on the one hand, and with integrated office environments on the other, organizations are increasing their demands for cooperative working. Cooperative "fragments" can often be recognized in various work situations ranging from document sharing, cross-functional and cross-departmental projects, to incidental correspondence between employees linked by a given task. Stand-alone computers nowadays are generally used only for trials and experiments in organizations, the most common situation sees workstations hooked up to an organizational network.

Fundamentally, users communicate with *one another* when using IT. The communications during an IT implementation project reflect a situation in which groups of users are developing a common understanding of the technology they are forced to (or want to) use through learning processes amongst themselves.

The importance of several aspects of learning within collaborative settings has been seen in various IT studies:

- Changes in technology may lead to changes in various aspects of professional competency such as knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These, in turn, can influence the ongoing use of the system. Hence, in theory, there is an ongoing process of professional and technological development which is referred to as a learning process by Neilson (1997).
- User groups have to adapt to a novel way of working when a new technology is introduced. Adaptive structuration theory has shown that not all groups do this in the same manner, and the adoption process, referred to as "appropriation," depends on the group processes and the way in which people interact with one another (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Hettinga, 2002; Ruel, 2001).
- In the "extended version" of the structurational perspective, Orlikowski (2000) proposes looking at "communication, mutual coordination, and storytelling" as important determining sources for engagement with the system (p.411).

Although some "feeling" for the topic now exists, and recent research has emphasized the

Related Content

Socio-Cognitive Engineering

Mike Sharples (2009). *Human Computer Interaction: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 677-684).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/socio-cognitive-engineering/22279

An Examination of Prestigious Stigma: The Case of the Technology Geek

Jo Ellen Mooreand Mary Sue Love (2011). *International Journal of Social and Organizational Dynamics in IT (pp. 1-25).*

www.irma-international.org/article/examination-prestigious-stigma/53823

Studies on Utilizing the Three Famous International Index Systems to Evaluate Scientific Research Level of Higher Learning Institutions

Xun Liu, Changyu Huang, Wei-Liang Qianand Yong-Chang Huang (2013). *Strategic Adoption of Technological Innovations (pp. 150-160).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/studies-utilizing-three-famous-international/74260

Digital Identity Built on a Cooperative Relationship

Ivan Ferrer Maiaand José Armando Valente (2013). *Digital Identity and Social Media (pp. 58-73).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/digital-identity-built-cooperative-relationship/72380

Improving Classroom Management and Teacher Retention: A Needs Assessment

Jill Stefaniak, Jilian L. Reynoldsand Tian Luo (2020). *Cases on Learning Design and Human Performance Technology (pp. 201-226).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/improving-classroom-management-and-teacher-retention/234181