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701 E. Chocolate Avenue, Suite 200, Hershey PA 17033-1240, USA ITB9960
Tel: 717/533-8845; Fax 717/533-8661; URL-http://www.idea-group.com

Chapter I

Information Systems and Business Information Technology

This first content chapter of the book is meant to clarify the notions involved in the responsible management of information systems. The focus of this book is the concept of reflective responsibility, which will be developed in the subsequent chapters. However, the application of this theory will be the area of information systems. In order to develop what responsibility means in the context of information systems, we will therefore have to define the notion. This is not an easy task, as "information system" can mean many things. On the one hand there is the academic discipline, sometimes called information systems, computer information systems, management information systems, etc., and on the other hand there is the physical artefact. This artefact, be it a computer, a network, or some other type of ICT, becomes an information system by being used in social settings. Information systems have been defined as "an amalgam of hardware, software, procedures, and activities" (Lyytinen & Hirschheim, 1988, p. 19). This chapter will use another route to introduce the concept of information systems. It will look at three of the constitutive aspects of information systems, namely at business, information, and technology. By analysing these three terms and their composition, it will show what information systems are, and more importantly, why the theory of reflective responsibility is a promising approach to addressing the normative problems raised by them.

Most of us have a pre-theoretical idea what the terms "business," "information," and "technology" mean. It is useful to analyse them with academic

stringency, however, because the initial meaning we attach to the terms may be less than clear and it may not be inter-subjectively valid. Some of the ethical problems that seem to resist solution can be explained by a lack of attention to details and definitions. While ethical problems usually cannot be confined to mere semantics, one thing a scholar can do is try to clarify the concepts involved and thereby help structure the discussion and clear up misunderstandings. Apart from trying to do this, the following discussion of the basic concepts also aims to live up to philosophical standards. Philosophy is often defined as the art or the science of language and its use. Philosophers have recognised early that clarity of language and notions is a necessary precondition for the successful solution of theoretical and practical problems. In the context of this text, that means that one should start by defining the terms "business," "information," and "technology."

BUSINESS

The term "business information technology" comprises three words, each of which deserves a short explanation before we look at the combination. "Business" denotes the production and trade of goods and services. It contains several aspects that will gain importance in the course of this argument.

Firstly, there are the two aspects of theory and practice. At first sight business seems to be an eminently practical concept since it deals with real-life facts and figures. It results in real changes in everybody's life. On the other hand there is the theory of business as taught in schools and universities. A book such as this one is obviously mainly focused on theory since it is a part of it. The relationship of theory and practice is a complicated one and in many cases difficult to determine. Especially in business the perception is usually that practice is the prevalent reality whereas theory is there to describe this reality. Theory can be legitimately used to predict some aspects of this reality and to teach newcomers to the field how to behave in it. Many students, but also teachers, would subscribe to this view of theory and practice in business.

However, this distinction of theory and practice is not sufficient. Firstly, theory is a part of the real world. That means that the theoretician is not a mere observer, but has to know practice to describe it. On the other hand, the practitioner always needs some kind of theory to be able to orient herself in her business world and to make adequate decisions.

It is not only simplistic to say that economic theory describes economic reality, but in fact the relationship often works the other way around. Theory can create attention for reality and it can even create reality.