

Chapter 6

Theorizing HR Intranets: Contextual, Strategic and Configurative Explanations

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a longitudinal exploratory survey based on a sample of French firms. Different contexts of Intranet, as well as introduction, development stages, performance and Intranet content are presented. Three approaches are in existence: corporate Intranet, specialized Intranet and HR Intranet. These can be linked to different stages of development: communication, functional support, and knowledge management. The HR Function will be successful if it integrates Intranet in its management process, if the players are aware of the stakes and they behave as “real change agents”. Research shows the importance of strategic alignment between human resource management (HRM) and Intranet as well as the relevance of technological infusion, therefore, this paper’s result in showing a configurative approach that allows the integration of more variables and in turn leads to a systemic model contains great significance.

INTRODUCTION

The paper presents some interesting results of an exploratory and longitudinal survey based on a sample of French firms. The survey identifies

the diffusion of HRM practices, together with their developmental stages. Investigation aims at answering the following questions: How are Intranet networks linked with the development of HR competences? How could they support the HR-function? What are the best French practices linking IT and HR management? A questionnaire

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Table 1. Files distribution

Year	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Number of files	19	19	21	19	33	12	27

is submitted as an application file and includes open questions on the firms and their Intranet (techniques, cost, assessment, perspectives). In the first part, we analyze stakes, organizational and strategic risks linked with HR Intranet use. Theoretical IT concepts and technological infusion aspects are explained. Intranet contexts, development stages, performance and Intranet content are presented. In the second part, we propose an organizational configurative analysis resulting from a HR Intranet perspective. Research hypotheses are based on HR and IT theories. A final discussion offers an opening towards a scientific research protocol aiming to validate assumptions and confirm the positive aspect of HRM-IT integration. Three perspectives are proposed. The first one leads to the concept of technological infusion; the second one to strategic alignment between the Intranet and HR; the third one is larger and concerns the concept of configurations including HR Intranet.

A French Longitudinal Survey

In partnership with *Entreprise & Carrières* newspaper, CEGOS has organized an annual competition since 1998, aimed at rewarding the best Intranet as regards competence management. Since 1998, it concerns 150 firms.

The available data coming from the exploratory survey concerning Intranet use could be arranged into three categories: *context variables* (environment, strategy, HRM); *Intranet characteristics* (objectives, functionalities and technique, budget and implementation date, number of workers concerned); *results* (difficulties encountered, immediate results, appraisals and perspectives). For

each variable, data aggregation enables significant axes to be drawn (Table 1).

Sample: Firms Size and Activity Sectors

Even if the size of the companies using an Intranet is high, Intranets can be introduced in medium firms or even in SME companies. In our sample 26% of the firms have less than 1000 employees; 28% belong to the category (1000-4999 employees); 32% are a member of the group (5000-49999 employees) and 14% have more than 50,000 employees. Obviously, the number of employees is not a distinguishing factor for the development of an Intranet. Employees' geographical dispersal and Intranet accessibility are not a privilege for big companies. Professionals who have answered originate from the public sector (19% hospital, municipal council, chamber of commerce) as well as private sectors (28% service activity banks, insurance companies), 35% industrial companies; 18% IT (telecommunication, computing, software conception).

Intranet Context Variables: Environment, Strategy and HRM

Environment is a contingent factor for IT and Intranet introduction in organizations. Our survey reveals contrasted managerial contexts. 44% of firms evolve in a strong competitive environment. 11% are in a position of leader. 25% of the firms are confronted with intensive information environments. For public companies, the environment is less competitive but most of them are now players in an international environment. This is consistent

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