

Chapter 67

Stakeholders and Power in Community-Based IT Projects: Examining the Role of Service Recipients

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ABSTRACT

Not-for-profit organisations put considerable effort into community-based Information Technology (IT) projects to bridge the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ of the digital divide. However, the outcomes of these IT projects are often seen as problematic with service recipients failing to gain the intended benefits. This research takes a critical research approach to examining the role of service recipients as stakeholders in community-based IT projects. In this paper, the authors address the first element of critical research, that of considering ‘what we think is known.’ Using the lens of Bourdieu’s forms of capital, the authors identify the power asymmetries among not-for-profit community stakeholders and provide an understanding of community characteristics that affect the delivery of project outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the substantial worldwide growth of the not-for-profit sector and its widespread use of information technology (IT), it remains an understudied area of Information Systems research (Zhang, Gutierrez, & Mathieson, 2010). The im-

portance of not-for-profit organisations is reflected in reports that in developed countries this sector contributes between 4 to 7% to a country’s GDP (Zhang et al., 2010; Hannum & Peralta, 2010; DCITA, 2005).

In times of economic uncertainty and decline, such as those currently being experienced in many countries, community-based projects in the not-for-profit sector become more visible and ways

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to improve the delivery of community project outcomes even more critical (Zhang et al., 2010). Information and communication technology (ICT)¹ has been identified as a potential enabler to enhance project outcomes in an increasingly networked world (Burt & Taylor, 2000; Zhang et al., 2010). Discussions on the potential of IT range from its uses for established operational tasks (Burt & Taylor, 2000) to widespread deliberations on how to bridge the digital divide and bring connectivity, and thereby access to information, to all (Warschauer, 2002; Kvasny & Keil, 2006).

The division into the 'haves' and 'have nots' of technology access has become a "critical public policy issue in nations worldwide" (Kvasny & Keil, 2006, p. 24). Kundu et al. (2011) distinguish the 'have nots' as the digitally disengaged. They argue that digital disengagement is caused by a lack of money, knowledge or skills, which limits people's access to a diverse range of opportunities in such areas as healthcare, transport, communication and education. They further assert that there is a correlation between digital and social exclusion; a theme that is reflected by others. For example, Warschauer (2002) uses the concept of social inclusion to reflect on the "imperatives of the current information era" where issues such as social participation, community and identity are key. He argues that what is important is the ability of people to engage in meaningful social practices, based on their access to computers and the Internet; a view echoed by Kvasny and Keil (2006).

In not-for-profit community-based projects the interactions between stakeholders is crucial. Unlike commercial organisations, where use of technology can be mandated and outcomes directed at creating business value, not-for-profits have many separate legal entities (providing a range of funding and support) that have their own interpretation of the organisational mission (Peizer, 2006). The end users or service recipients (Zhang et al., 2010) are intended to be the beneficiaries of the projects. However, attempts

to improve the lives of disadvantaged and marginalised people by providing meaningful access to information through technology have been problematic (Warschauer, 2002). For example, Kvasny and Keil's (2006) investigation of how to redress IT inequalities in two US cities concludes that providing free access to technology is not a solution to overcoming the digital divide. They argue that a critical perspective is required to achieve the necessary insights and to overcome the systems-rationalist perspective, identified by Kling (1980) that concentrates on the technology rather than the social impact perspective.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to greater understanding of the social impact perspective of not-for-profit IT projects by analyzing the 'what we think is known' (Myers & Klein, 2011) about such community-based projects. We examine stakeholders and the asymmetries of power in community-based IT projects, with a focus on service recipients, to further our understanding of why such projects so often fail to deliver planned benefits. Following Kvasny and Keil (2006), we take a critical research perspective, which in information systems is "concerned with social issues such as freedom, power, social control and values" (Myers & Klein, 2011, p. 17). Critical research calls for a broad insightful understanding of the current situation and starts with *a priori* theoretical concepts derived from critical theorists, such as Bourdieu. His work addresses the asymmetry of symbolic and social assets in society which contribute to discrimination and to the hierarchical structures that influence the division into the 'haves' and the 'have nots' (Myers & Klein, 2011).

In this study we use the first element of *insight* from Myers and Klein's principles for conducting critical research in information systems (2011). This calls for an assessment of the current situation and an examination of 'what we think is known', illuminating in this case what is 'known' about communities and their members in an IT situation. That IT community-based projects are so often problematic suggests that a perceived understand-

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