



Chapter 20

Studying the Translations of NHSnet

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This chapter explores the ways in which innovative information systems projects take on a life of their own. The chapter begins by reviewing some of the more traditional ways of making sense of this phenomenon: resistance to change, escalation and unintended results, before introducing the sociology of translation. This provides a theoretical framework for viewing the transformations that an information systems project undergoes. The framework is then applied to the case of the NHSnet project in the United Kingdom. Using the language of sociology of translation, we consider the underlying stakeholder relations in the case study and draw more general conclusions for the responsibilities of stakeholders involved in an information systems lifecycle.

INTRODUCTION

Few information systems projects follow a straightforward path from initial idea through to widely used working system. Instead, what typically occurs is that the nature of the innovation and the purpose of the project changes many times during the implementation process. Much information systems research attempts to try to explain what goes on over the life of the project. The purpose of this chapter

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is to add one new element to the range of conceptual tools available to the information systems researcher trying to understand what happens to a particular innovation and to demonstrate how the insights from using this tool can add to our understanding of information systems implementation.

The chapter begins by reviewing some of the main ways in which the changes that an information systems project undergoes have been conceptualised. These include unintended effects; resistance to change and escalation. The chapter then introduces the notion of translation that has been used in the field of science studies and shows how it can be applied to the study of information systems, paying particular attention to the particular kinds of translations that an information systems project can undergo. The chapter then presents the case study, namely the introduction of a new shared network in the UK national health service (NHSnet). This project is seen as a series of translations and the paper explores some of the main translations and discusses their implications for relevant stakeholders. The chapter ends with a summary and discussion of the benefits of using this approach to analyse the “life” of information systems projects.

UNDERSTANDING THE LIFE OF A PROJECT

There are many different ways in which information systems researchers have tried to conceptualise the life of a project. One approach is to describe the events associated with a project and to talk about them in terms of anticipated, unanticipated and emergent changes. Another approach is to talk about the changes in terms of resistance to change and the mechanisms that can be used to counter the implementation of the system. A third approach is to consider the project as potentially escalating out of control.

Unanticipated Changes

Orlikowski (1996) describes an organisation introducing Lotus Notes as a groupware solution for a firm in the software industry. The firm, pseudonymously known as Zeta Corporation, is the developer of a range of powerful software products in the area of decision support and executive information. Their tools are based around the Omni fourth generation language and allow users considerable flexibility in how to analyse their data. As a consequence, many users have technical queries about how to make the products perform particular tasks. The groupware system was introduced into the product support area to enable the sharing of information about problems between the support team (Orlikowski, 1996, pp. 25–27).

The organisation had previously used a stand-alone system to store details about client problems. The existing system had limitations in terms of inconsistent

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