



Chapter X

Managing Complexity and Institutionalization: Power and Politics in ERP Implementation in an Australian University

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Abstract

This chapter reports a case study of ERP implementation in an institution of higher education. The ERP is one based on integration of administrative tasks based on Oracle® systems and is successful both in terms of its embeddedness in institutionalized practice and in supporting that university's operations. The key issue that emerged from the study showed that understanding complexity, institutionalized practice, and the power relations in existence enable the implementation to be more effective, as it can be managed when understood. The chapter argues that organizations reproduce practice and that an ERP challenges that. To deal with that challenge, social dramas emerge wherever power exists, and the resulting conflicts

challenge the effectiveness of the systems put in place. In this case study, the key role of the project champion in resolving the social dramas became evident.

Introduction

Enterprise resource planning (ERP) implementation success or failure depends on more than just technology. The realms of power and institutional politics and the demands of institutionalized practice affect not only the decisions about an ERP system but also its implementation and its impact. This chapter will use a well-formed model of social drama and power to examine the building of an Oracle®-based ERP system the university integrated with a “portalized” knowledge management system and the delivery of Web-based services.

Traditional studies of ERP implementation tend to focus on models of process, which are static and often linear. We will take a different approach focusing on the social relationships informing the decisions and actions throughout implementation. This requires us to take a more open view in telling the story, thus enabling the rich dialectics of power and political challenge to emerge. We will be representing these stories via social dramas, a concept used to make sense of social conflict, change, and often ritual. Social dramas provide specific contexts in which decisions made in society can be evaluated. These dramas express nuanced shifts or switches in the balances of power or ventilate divergent interests with common concerns. As a result, social dramas provide a framework in which society exposes itself and provide windows into a sometimes secluded or invisible world. In the evaluation of ERP implementation, this approach is unique, as the emphasis is not on what is apparent, but what is meant, not on objective reality, but on the researcher’s interpretation of what was perceived to have happened. We argue that social dramas provide a limited area of transparency on the otherwise opaque surface of regular uneventful social life. We will do this via a case study of the implementation of an ERP system in the university.

Background and Overview of Relevant Literature

According to the literature, ERP systems are complex multidimensional, multifaceted information systems (Gibson, Holland, & Light, 1999). ERP systems

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