

Chapter 105

Why Change Programmes Don't Produce Change: The Case of IT-Enabled Change in Public Service Organisations

Joe McDonagh
Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Since the 1950s, the problems associated with the introduction IT in work organisations have proved to be of an enduring nature. Why do so many IT-enabled change initiatives fail to deliver on their promised outcomes? Having considered the nature of this dilemma with IT and related explanations from the literature in management and organisation studies, this chapter draws into sharp focus a range of institutional, organisational, and group pathologies that impede the effective delivery of IT-enabled change initiatives. Habitual organisational responses to these pathologies are highlighted as are the limitations of programme and project management when seeking to address pathologies that are predominantly of a behavioural nature. Implications for professional practice are outlined. The chapter draws to a close by reiterating the propensity for fragmentation and the role of good organisation development and change practices in fostering an integrated approach to IT-enabled change.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout much of the last half century, the process of introducing and exploiting information technology (IT) in public service organisations has often proved challenging (McDonagh & Coghlan, 2006, 2010). Whether the particular material manifestation of IT was reflected in electronic data processing (EDP) systems in the 1950's, enterprise systems (ES) in the 1990s, or digital government (DG) systems in the 2010s, it seems to matter little. Outcomes from IT-enabled change initiatives have been consistent across the decades with failure being far more common than the much touted contribution of IT to superior

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performance (Loonam et.al. 2014; McDonagh & Coghlan, 2006, 2010). For whatever reasons, it seems that a large proportion of IT-enabled change initiatives do not actually deliver change as envisaged. Offering an in-depth critique of this enduring dilemma, the chapter is organised as follows.

Section two sketches the persistent patterns of failure associated with IT across the decades (Dempsey & McDonagh, 2014; McDonagh & Coghlan, 2006, 2010) while section three seeks to explore a number of explanations for such persistence through time. By way of nurturing a deeper and more interventionist approach to inquiry and change, section four seeks to foster an alternative lens on IT-enabled change that emphasises organisational practices, organisational processes, and organisational routines. The fruit of that alternative lens as applied to a range of scholarly reviews of IT-enabled change initiatives yields a series of institutional, organisational, and group pathologies presented in section five. Section six notes the habitual responses public service organisations make to these pathologies while section seven questions whether programme and project management practices will ever be able to rise to the challenges posed by these pathologies. Section eight sketches the implications for professional practice while the chapter draws to a close by highlighting the propensity for fragmentation and reiterating the need for good organisation development and change (OD&C) practices with a view to increasing the chances of success with IT-enabled change initiatives.

PATTERNS OF UNDERPERFORMANCE AND FAILURE

Since the 1950s the process of introducing IT systems into work organisations has been fraught with difficulty (Loonam et.al. 2014; McDonagh & Coghlan, 2006, 2010). Both the literature in the academic field of management and organisation studies along with the literature relating to professional management practice provide strong evidence of the persistent nature of this dilemma (Bloch et.al. 2012; Griffith, 2001; Nelson, 2007). Over the decades the difficulty has manifested itself in persistent patterns of failure (Dempsey & McDonagh, 2014; McDonagh, 2014, 2014a).

While the language relating to IT has evolved across the decades, it matters little in terms of the related narrative of failure. Whether it was electronic data processing (EDP) systems in the 1950s, data processing (DP) systems in the 1960s, management information systems (MIS) systems in the 1970s, strategic information systems (SIS) in the 1980s, enterprise systems (ES) in the 1990s, extended enterprise systems (EES) in the 2000s, digital government systems (DGS) in the 2010s, all of these decades offer a consistent and solid stream of evidence pointing to the difficulties associated with the introduction and exploitation of IT systems. A review of academic and professional practice literature across the decades confirms that EDP, DP, MIS, SIS, ES, EES, and DGS are all subject to the same dynamics of change and the same outcomes. The particular manifestation of IT matters little, the pattern of failure is persistent and consistent (McDonagh & Coghlan, 2006, 2010).

This pattern is best understood in terms of outcomes associated with IT-enabled change initiatives (Bloch et.al, 2012; Nelson, 2007). In general, around ten percent of initiatives are considered to be an outright success in terms of delivering on and possibly exceeding promised outcomes (McDonagh & Coghlan, 2006, 2010). A further forty percent are considered to fall short of promised outcomes. Here, less than fifty percent of promised functionality is delivered at twice the budgeted cost and twice the scheduled delivery time (McDonagh & Coghlan, 2006, 2010). Finally, a further fifty percent of initiatives fail outright and deliver nothing by way of promised outcomes other than burning scarce resources on ailing programmes and projects (Loonam et.al. 2014; McDonagh & Coghlan, 2006, 2010).

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