Chapter VIII

Conducting Action Research: High Risk and High Reward in Theory and Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Action research is a method that solves immediate practical problems while expanding social scientific knowledge. Based on collaboration between researchers and research subjects, it is a cyclical process that builds learning about change into a given social system (Hult & Lennung, 1980). On the surface, the discipline of information systems (IS) would seem to be a very appropriate field for the use of action research methods. IS is a highly applied field, almost vocational in nature (Banville & Landry, 1989). Action research methods are highly clinical and place IS researchers in a "helping-role" within the organizations being studied (cf. Schein, 1987, p.11). It should not be surprising that action research has been characterized as the "touch-stone of most good organizational development practice" and that it "remains the primary methodology for the practice of organizational development" (Van Eynde & Bledsoe, 1990, p. 27). Action research merges research and praxis, thus producing relevant research findings.

evance is an important measure of the significance of IS (Keen, 1991).

ever, the action research method has proved unpopular among IS researchers, particularly North American IS researchers. Action research articles in major North American research publications are disproportionately rare. Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) discovered only one action research article among the 155 major research publications between January, 1983 and May, 1988. While action research represented only a tiny fraction of major IS research articles in the mid-1980s, a longitudinal study extending across the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s revealed a steadily rising number of significant IS action research articles (Lau, 1997). Of the 30 IS action research journal articles published between 1971 and 1995, nearly half of these were published in the 1991-1995 time period. Although the successful use of the technique is attracting increasing IS journal attention, this is still a tiny fraction of the IS research corpus. Despite its overwhelming acceptance in organizational development, it is a poorly represented approach in IS, particularly among North American IS researchers.

Outside of North America, action research has made more contributions to the literature of the IS research community. Peter Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1981) and Enid Mumford's ETHICS (Mumford, 1983) both evolved from and incorporate action research. Their work has heavily influenced IS research by linking action research and systems development. This linkage has increased the presence of action research in the British, Scandinavian and Australian IS literature. However, action research is not a predominant IS research method even in those geographic regions.

Given the potential in the relationship between the vocational nature of the IS field and the clinical nature of action research, why is action research contributing so little to the IS research literature? One serious aspect of the explanation lies in the substantial risks in conducting action research. The risks associated with action research are not typically the explicit focus of published discussions of the techniques.

Consequently, the goal of this chapter is to define and analyze these risks and to discuss their practical effects. An understanding and awareness of the risks enables the action researcher to manage these risks, particularly in terms of an academic career. In order to keep this analysis within a useful sphere, the discussion will be grounded in the context of a range of six actual action research cases.

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