



Chapter VII

Investigating the Dynamics of IT-Enabled Change: The Appeal of Clinical Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1950s the process of introducing information technology (IT) into work organizations has posed formidable challenges all too frequently resulting in reports of significant underperformance and failure. On closer inquiry it emerges that such poor outcomes are due, in no small way, to a distinct inability to effect an integrated approach to change, an approach that concurrently attends to economic, technical, human, and organizational facets of change. Considering that extant research fails to adequately address this enduring dilemma, this chapter acknowledges weaknesses in dominant positivist approaches to inquiry and establishes the case for a more collaborative approach to inquiry, an approach that is firmly embedded in the post positivist tradition. In particular, the case for one such collaborative approach, clinical inquiry, as a legitimate and profoundly important research approach to investigating the dynamics of IT-enabled change is presented.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s the process of introducing IT into work organisations has been marred by reports of significant underperformance and failure. While it emerges that such underperformance and failure is due, in no small way, to an inability to effect integrated strategic change, it is unfortunate that much IT-related inquiry has failed to adequately address this dilemma. Acknowledging the weaknesses of dominant positivist research approaches, this chapter outlines the case for clinical inquiry as a legitimate and profoundly important research approach relevant to investigating the dynamics of IT-enabled business change.

THE PLIGHT WITH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Empirical studies over the last 25 years provide substantial evidence to support the assertion that underperformance and failure all too frequently mar the introduction of IT into work organisations (Standish Group, 1998). Unfortunately, the number of IT-related change initiatives that actually deliver espoused business benefits is in the order of 10% while the number of initiatives that fail or are abandoned completely is in the order of 50% (McDonagh, 1999). The impermeable and enduring nature of this dilemma is of concern to both investigators and practitioners alike.

Such underperformance and failure are rarely explained by way of attending purely to economic and technical criteria, yet such criteria appear to dominate the introduction of IT in work organisations (More, 1990). Executive management tends to view the introduction of IT as an economic imperative while IT specialists tend to view it as a technical imperative (McDonagh, 1999). Alas, this narrow techno-economic bias, sustained over time by the coalescent behavioural patterns of both the executive and IT communities, results in the human and organisational aspects of IT-related change being marginalized and ignored (McDonagh, 1999).

Such an outcome is rarely inconsequential since failing to attend to the human and organisational aspects of IT-related change is said to be responsible for the high incidence of underperformance and failure. Indeed, investigators are increasingly of the opinion that economic and technical aspects of IT account for less than 10% of underperformance and failure while human and organisational factors account for more than 90% (Isaacc-Henry, 1997). The nature of this dilemma is both obstinate and enduring.

This predicament is further compounded by an inability to effect integrated change due to the requisite knowledge and expertise being widely dispersed in organisational settings (McDonagh & Coghlan, 2000). Those organisational actors who understand the technology have little appreciation of the human and organisational aspects of IT. Similarly, those organisational actors who understand the human and organisational aspects of IT have little appreciation for the technology. Addressing this plight inevitably places a high premium on integrating different forms of knowledge and expertise (McDonagh, 1999).

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