

Life Cycle Challenges of Online Learning Support Systems

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INTRODUCTION

For centuries, biologists have described the living world in terms of life cycles (Campbell & Reece, 2005; Quinn & Cameron, 1983; Lester, Parnell, & Carraher, 2003). Similar to the epigenesis of the individual (Erikson, 1980), theorists have asserted that there is a natural rhythm to development in the corporation (Adizes, 1988). Pathology occurs when the characteristics inherent in each developmental stage are thwarted. In the past several decades, organizational consultants began the assimilation of corporate health to that of the individual, citing life cycles in organizations as being epigenetic and predetermined (Adizes, 1988; Lester, Parnell, Carraher, 2003; Masurel & Montfort, 2006; Liao, 2006). The catalyst for change is similar to that of life crisis in the individual where an otherwise steady state is dismantled by environmental events (Beck & Cowan, 1996). Moving from a successful level of endeavor to a deteriorating, chaotic level, the business is forced to change in sometimes quantum ways. Not unlike the individual, the business resisting change is arrested in development and faces stagnation and possible deterioration. There are occurrences where whole industries are stimulated toward change; as a response, individual business in that industry must decide to adapt to the change or fail. In traditional academia, triggers in the millennium environment have directed a change toward internet-based education and digital format. Support systems in academia, like college book stores, are stimulated to adapt to non-traditional delivery platforms.

The stimulus from brick-and-mortar bookstores to online booksellers triggered such a change in the commercial book industry. Newly designed and evolved

businesses concepts such as internet-based education signaled entrepreneurial innovation across platforms. The other mature more dated elements of the industry were forced to adapt and change to this trigger. A similar catalyst has occurred in the academic book store industry as the components of electronic commerce popular in commercial sales are now evident in academic book sales. For example, by the end of 1999, college bookstores had begun the transition into electronic commerce businesses, and as a response have simultaneously considered leasing bookstore functions to commercial companies with a greater capacity to expand brick-and-mortar services to include electronic and digital elements (Vargas, 2000). In fact, the Independent College Bookstore Association estimates that over half of all college bookstores are now managed by lease operators (Deahl, Get 'Em While; Phua, 2005). Community college bookstores are exposed to the simultaneous triggers of evolving electronic components and the threat and opportunity of leasing operations due to the entrepreneurial nature of expanding Internet services.

The position of a particular organization or firm in its life cycle depends on many factors, some of which are controlled by management (Liao, 2006), internal and external markets (Adizes, 1988), stakeholders input (Williamson, 2004), industrial forces, and the economic climate (NACS, 2006). Based on the concepts and theories of organizational life cycle management, businesses in varying industries may bear striking similarities. For example, the small nonprofit college bookstore suffers similar environmental threats as do more strategic for-profit businesses with one differential. The profit-bearing business must respond to the stress more rapidly due to lack of economic insula-

tion noted in nonprofit businesses. However, due to the rapid shifting of student enrollments, this level of security is weakening. As college administrators bear the strain of changing demographics and shifting campus enrollments and the proliferation of e-commerce delivery systems there is a demand for entrepreneurial development in these arenas.

Organizational life cycling impacts, and is impacted by, our entrepreneurial society. While it is true that entrepreneurs “dream” their organizations into existence (Adizes, 1988), it is also true that both societal ambition and resilience often bring them to fruition. It must be noted that in any long-term situation positive momentum is difficult to sustain. Creative leadership, open to both change and innovation, is key to sustaining vital organizations and their entrepreneurial spirit. Adizes (1988, p. 56) writes of a purposeful organizational stage in which businesses exhibit the flexibility of entrepreneurialism and the stability of maturity. Businesses noted to display purely mature organizational characteristics are less likely to demonstrate entrepreneurialism as a natural trait and to resist the adaptation and innovation necessary for long term viability (Cummings & Worley, 2005; Flamholtz & Randle, 2000). Businesses confronted with profound industry innovation, as that noted in digital platforms, are pushed to expand into more entrepreneurial formats or flounder.

Online learning as a free standing program or as a component of an established program has evolved academia and the support systems that contribute to e-commerce success. A new format to the small community college and its support systems, digital platforms may be strenuous and difficult to maneuver. The community college bookstore succeeds or fails under circumstances which are little different from those that affect businesses in other industries. The drive in maturing or declining industries provokes similar reactions. In the particular case of the college community bookseller, the artifact of industry consolidation from small brick-and-mortar businesses includes movement to contracted services through national booksellers and expansion of electronic, digital, and consumer sensitive products. Consideration of alternative forms of book business processes and Internet-driven delivery systems is imminent as the young college student becomes more demanding toward a “connected” environment (Vargas, 2000). Sensitive to millennium generation demographics and values, the small college bookstore book sales are correlative to the college enrollments, as

well as the changing buying behaviors of the younger college student favoring national brands (Deahl, Get Em’ While), and electronic commerce (Vargas, 2000). Due to changing preferences in the millennium generation student, the community college administrator faces the necessity to create start-up features that emphasize Internet and digital format educational mediums.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational Life Cycling: As A Model

The stages of life cycles, according to Lester, Parnell and Carraher (2003) are dependent upon an organization’s activities and corporate structure. Threats and opportunities vary as organizations and firms move through their life cycles (Jawahar & McLaughlin, 2001, p. 9). An effective life cycle model aids management in a variety of areas, as the model guides an organization through formal procedures and systems upgrades, strategies, priorities, and management changes. Such models can demonstrate the need to abandon past practices, in seeking growth and success through newer transitions. Some theorists (Masurel & Montfort, 2006; as cited in Churchill & Lewis, 1983) have developed life cycle models that describe and fit certain types of firms, and that are appropriate for organizations of various sizes. Other theorists (Lester, Parnell & Carraher, 2003; Quinn & Cameron, 1983) present a generic model for profit and nonprofit businesses entities.

Organizational life cycling theorists create models that aid leaders and managers as they evaluate and develop long term strategies for their businesses. The particular theory or model chosen by a manager is dependent on, but not necessarily determined by, a business’s practices or its type. Prevailing theories related to the impact of life cycles in an entrepreneurial society vary dependent on the position(s) of a firm and its particular life stage. Similarities between organizational life cycle theories are more common than are differences. However, this article is particularly interested in the effects and analysis of, organizational life cycling, in its relationship to the open or arrested decisions of administrators to move in the flow of new delivery systems, namely electronic commerce. The research which concerns life cycling particular to the college bookstore includes theories based on small service firms, universities, and educational institu-

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