



Chapter 6

Viability through Web-Enabled Technologies

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It is often claimed that the Internet and associated technologies have paved the way for new types of businesses, new types of consumer behavior, and new types of services (cf. Cameron, 1996; Cronin, 1996; Laudon and Laudon, 1997). The emergence of virtual, office-less organizations, enabled by similar technologies, will—so it is said—profoundly affect both the way we work and the structure and culture of organizations (e.g., Ciborra and Suetens, 1996). Communication technologies and applications have led to the globalization of businesses, opening up new markets as well as new competition, even for small businesses (e.g., Sterne, 1995). The new technologies, brought together under the common denominator of web-enabled technologies (WETs), seem to offer great opportunities for those who recognize them, and severe threats for organizations that have awakened too late. Simultaneously, more deliberate voices call for caution. Anderson (1997, p. 5), for instance, asserts that “few companies are as yet making any money on-line, but plenty are trying.” He points out that this is only one example of the fact that “practically everything that was predicted about electronic commerce three years ago has turned out to be wrong” (ibid., p. 4). According to Anderson, it is a major mistake to equate the market potential of the Internet with its sheer size. Partly because of its size, “today’s Internet is, far from being a perfect market, the high street from hell” (ibid.). Such contradictory signals are bound to puzzle organizations and leave them struggling with questions like: “Could WETs significantly improve our current way of doing business?”; “Could these technologies enable us to define a new business

model?” or “Is it just hype and should it better be ignored?” In short, organizations are struggling with questions concerning the usefulness of WETs applied to their own situation. In a sense, this is nothing new since similar questions arise every time a new form of information and communication technology (ICT) is launched. For WETs the need for organizations to address this issue, however, may be more imperative, because their impact on organizations seems to be extremely diverse, highly complex and cannot be compared so easily to that of earlier forms of ICT.

What is called for, then, are guiding principles for relating the specific nature of WETs to questions of organizational impact. If, as the asserted impact of WETs suggests, these technologies affect the very existence of organizations, the focal point for assessing the organizational value of WETs should address questions of an existential nature. We suggest that the concept of ‘viability of organizations’ may provide this focal point. If WETs are really as fundamentally influential as claimed, using them or ignoring them will affect the viability of the organization and should, consequently, be addressed in the strategies that maintain this viability. The question, therefore, becomes how organizations can systematically approach the assessment of their viability through WETs. This question is the focus of this chapter. Such a ‘systematic approach’ consists of three elements. First, it involves an elaboration of the notion of viability as far as organizations are concerned. Secondly, it includes a description of the specific features of WETs. Thirdly, it presents a framework that ties viability to the specific features of WETs so that an individual organization can use it to assess the impact of the technology. This may be called a ‘generic framework’. The objective of this chapter is to present such a framework.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, the existing methods for analyzing the strategic impact of ICT will be discussed briefly to illustrate that they do not adequately connect the idea of viability to specific forms of ICT. Next, a framework for assessing the strategic organizational value of WETs will be developed following the three elements mentioned above. First, based on Beer’s (1979, 1981) Viable Systems Model (VSM), the concept of ‘viability’ is presented to direct discussions on the strategic potential of ICT, such as WETs. Secondly, a model is developed that structures the specific features of WETs. Thirdly, combining the model of organizational viability and that of the peculiarities of WETs results in a generic framework tailored to the specific features of WETs. This framework is discussed at a general level, in which directions for its use are also given. The application of the framework is illustrated in the penultimate section by presenting some case studies. The final section concludes the argument and presents additional researchable issues related to the application of the framework.

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