Chapter XVI

Organizational Mission Statements: A Postmodernist Perspective on the Management of an IS/IT Function

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ABSTRACT

The mission statement embodies certain beliefs about the management culture of the organization, which can be examined and placed within underlying theoretical contexts. This chapter examines postmodernism in this respect, which, in addition to forming a critique of modernist approaches, posits alternative views about philosophy, organization and subsequently IS/IT management theory. The study applies an ethnographic case research methodology where data was collected from 16 interviewees employed within

a multi-national financial services group. In this way, the organizational mission statement was used as a vehicle for analyzing the contribution of postmodern approaches to the management of the IS/IT function. The influential Ashridge Model was adopted to map the findings of the study which suggest three propositions for postmodernism in providing: (i) cultural context, (ii) a textual or 'deconstructive' analysis and (iii) an ethnographic empathy for further IS/IT research. Finally, it is argued that the modernist/ postmodernist dialectic is ultimately a productive discussion, which can positively contribute towards research in terms of analytical techniques and interpretative strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Business requirements for successful IS/IT strategies increasingly demand changes in the way that we view the organization as a whole. A holistic approach is commonly associated with earlier research through "systems" theory (Checkland, 1981) and more recently "social" theory (Giddens, 1992; Walsham, 1993). However, these challenges to organizational and IS/IT research continue to be regarded with some theoretical pessimism. Theorists allude to "crises of organizational analysis" (Boje et al., 1996) or even "Saving IT's soul" (Davenport, 1994). Theoretical pessimism is supported by a poor record of success in IS/IT strategy where theorists are now frequently attacked as offering "fad management" solutions to business situations (Brooks, 1987). The overrunning of time and expenditure of IS/IT projects, and the failure of these management initiatives have sought to undermine confidence in dominant traditional approaches to IS/IT exploitation (Connell & Shafer, 1989). A popular management initiative is the introduction of organizational mission statements. However, despite widespread adoption (Boland & Hirschheim, 1991; Jones & Kahaner, 1995), it is unclear what effect they have at an organizational level. The specific research questions attempted within this chapter are identified as follows:

1. To what extent can an assessment of a mission statement implementation be informed by recent developments in cultural theory such as postmodernism?
2. In what ways can postmodern interpretative strategies inform discussion upon the management of the IS/IT function within an organization?

This chapter argues that an understanding of the philosophical determinants of existing management practices can help to build an awareness of the pitfalls of traditional approaches to the management of the IS/IT function. In this instance the

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