



Chapter X

Users Behaving Badly: Phenomena and Paradoxes from an Investigation into Information Systems Misfit

Panagiotis Kanellis, Information Society S.A., Greece

Ray J. Paul, Brunel University, UK

Abstract

In its formative years and during the 1990s, Global Energy PLC (GE)¹ went through a series of structural changes precipitated by the deregulation of the electricity industry in the UK. The severity of these changes had a disruptive effect on its enterprise information systems, which were found unable to adapt to the new and constantly emerging organizational realities. GE's experiences illustrate the vulnerability of information systems in turbulent environments, provide for a rich description of the causes of misfit due to contextual change, and establish the ability of a system to flex

and adapt as a dependent success variable. In addition, the idiographic details of this interpretive field study raise interesting questions about a number of assumptions we hold regarding the development of information systems and the means by which flexibility can be attained.

Introduction

Avison and Fitzgerald (2003) identified instability as a “notable trap” of the systems development life cycle (SDLC) approach due to the modeling of processes that are unstable because of changing business and markets. Similarly, Lycett and Paul (1999) argue that the methodical approach to system development leads us to design systems that are unable to deal with the challenge of evolutionary complexity and work in a dynamic world. If the future is one in which change will have to be reacted to continually, we understand “disappointment” as a resulting phenomenon due to the destabilization imposed by change on information systems (IS) that have not been designed to provide for it. On the contrary, the post-industrial organization should demonstrate adaptability and therefore must be characterized by frequent and continuous change in structures, domains, goals, and so forth, even in the face of apparently optimal adaptation (Huber, 1984). It is our contention that so should its IS. Flexibility as a success variable for IS — albeit implicitly or with varied placement of emphasis — has also been stressed by Blumenthal (1969), Cotrell and Rapley (1991), Fitzgerald (1990), Gunton (1989), Oei, Proper, and Falkenberg (1994), and Swanson (1982), amongst others.

Needless to say, the myriad of reasons that determine whether an IS is successful or not can be matched by an equal number of explanations. Arguably, one of the prevalent methods of inquiry that characterizes a large body of the empirical IS literature revolves around the concept of “fit” as defined by the contingency approach in organizational theory. In general, such research is grounded on the argument that any determination of information requirements must be based upon the organizational use to which the IS is put. Hence, the success of any IS must be measured in terms of what it accomplishes in the organization. Thus, a direct approach is mostly followed, aiming to define what are the relevant factors affecting the interaction effect or “fit” between a pair of organizational components (structure, culture, tasks, technology) and then develop a measurement instrument with standard metrics (see, for example, Goodhue & Thompson, 1995). This largely positivist stance adopted by the majority of researchers has deprived the IS field from the rich and insightful

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