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*Rethinking Information Systems in Organizations: Integrating Organizational Problem Solving*
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Having been a practitioner myself for the better part of my professional life, this book got my immediate attention when it talked about how the teaching of information systems is out of synch with the practice of information systems. I could not have agreed more when the author observed that one of the fundamental problems was that most of the teachers of this discipline had never practiced in the field. One has to work in a corporate environment for many years before learning the skills necessary to integrate information systems in organizational problem solving, which is the central theme of this book.

The book is organized into four parts. Part I is devoted to the discipline of information systems. Part II discusses the principals (ontology and methodology) of organizational problem solving. Part III contains an exposition of six inquiring activities (diagnosis, processes, monitoring and control, strategy, intervention, and evaluation) used in organizational problem solving. Finally, part IV presents an operationalization of inquiring activities with the help of a case study.

The book nicely traces the history (chapter 1) of the discipline of information systems and points out the roots of this discipline in computer science. This has resulted in a bias towards an efficient use of technology to solving computational problems as opposed to solving organizational problems. The text correctly points to the fact that organizational problem solving requires multi-disciplinary knowledge, which is lacking in the teaching of this discipline. On the practice side, early applications mostly involved massive handling of data, generating reports, and so forth. The practitioners were often not even aware of what problems were being solved. The
The author develops an argument that there exists confusion about what really constitutes the information systems discipline and that this has widened the gap between theory and practice.

The author builds a case for a new approach to practice, teaching/curriculum, and research in the field of information systems by pointing out the failures (chapter 2) in all these areas. He rightfully claims that the analysis of failed projects has been shallow and often conclusions are that projects failed because of poor project management. A deeper analysis of these failed projects, the author claims, would reveal organizational issues that were not addressed and were the root cause of these failures. He claims that the IS curriculum by and large is boring and irrelevant. He particularly picks on the SDLC methodology as an outdated approach and recommends the use of the UDM (universal data model) methodology. He points out how the major IS texts have failed in generating interest in students for the field. These texts, he contends, lack a focus on the functions of an organization and how these functions help or hinder solving business problems. On the failures of IS research processes, he points out a serious omission—that of an inquiring process to justify an action to solve an organizational problem. In my opinion, this is one of most important points the author makes in this book. The sentence “the research in the field remains rigorous but irrelevant” clarifies the point in this section.

After having discussed the history and failings of the IS discipline, the author proposes that the focus of IS discipline (chapter 3) ought to be organizational problem solving, and then he goes on to analyze the inherent challenges in doing so—mainly because of the complexity of organizational situations. This requires a truly systems approach—the approach that understands the nuances of human behavior. This chapter is very difficult to read and proves only one thing: that the author is capable of thinking (and writing) at a very abstract level—far above the intellect of a common reader. In chapter 4, the author proposes the methodology that is the backbone of this text. It consists of six steps—diagnosis, processes, monitoring and control, strategy, intervention, and evaluation—that are to be used by IS practitioners in solving organizational problems with the help of information technology and systems.

Part III of the text discusses each of these six steps in detail (chapters 5 through 10). The logical flow of these six steps is that one ought to diagnose the problem (root cause analysis to separate out the symptoms from the real cause). This requires that various processes have been understood well. This helps the analyst in pinpointing the impact of the problem as well as in determining the root cause (i.e., a two-way analysis). In order to determine which processes need changes, we need to monitor them. Also, we need to understand how these processes align with the strategy of the corporation. The output of these four steps is a set of actions or interventions that could be taken to solve the organizational problem at hand. The final step consists of evaluation, which will determine whether the interventions are yielding the desired outcome. Other than the abstractness that is a common theme in this book, this section contains a lot of useful information.

Part IV is billed by the author as operationalization of the inquiry process introduced in the text to integrate information systems into organizational problem solving. The case study is light and only
makes some marginal points about organizational problem solving. I would have preferred more details so to shed light on all six inquiry processes recommended in the book. Also, I found bothersome some of the (sexist) language that characterized the female member of the consulting team. I do not know about the UK, but such language is not used anymore in the U.S.

The book concludes with a very practical note, stating that an IS practitioner needs methodological thinking skills. “It requires wrapping knowledge of technology into a creative, innovative and exciting process of organizational problem solving.”

In closing, this book raises some very important points regarding the IS discipline—practice, teaching, and research. In particular, it points out the gap that exists between the theory and practice of the discipline. The author proposes that focus of the discipline ought to move away from technology to organizational problem solving. I found the book interesting, but felt that if the author had added some examples in support of his arguments, I would have enjoyed the book much more. Nonetheless, I highly recommend reading this book.

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