Mindfully Experimenting with IT: Cases on Corporate Social Media Introduction

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ABSTRACT

In many companies the process of new Information Technology (IT) identification and assessment lacks the rigor associated with experimentation. We explore cases of 5 companies not using formal experiments to implement social media but who applied differing levels of mindfulness to their social media implementations. It was observed that companies with a more mindful implementation had wider boundaries of assessments, richer interpretations of the IT’s usefulness, multi-level foci concerning benefits and costs, persistence to continue exploration, and a greater use of fact-based decision-making. The cases illustrate that the extent of mindfulness influences not only how new technologies are introduced, but also that a mindful introduction process can reap benefits of experimentation, such as greater stakeholder satisfaction and organization-wide learning and understanding the technology’s potential. Implications for theory and practice are outlined.

Keywords: Case Studies, Experimentation, Information Technology Implementation, Mindfulness, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Implementing new information technology (IT) can be especially problematic given IT’s pervasiveness, fast pace of change, and potential for harm (e.g., increased electronic security breaches and greater visibility). To avoid failures, some companies prefer to make implementation decisions based on experimentation following a rigorous, scientific approach of objectivity and reproducibility. However, daily operations take priority (Thomke, 2003) and many companies identify and assess new technologies through non-rigorous means—discovering the potential uses of IT at various levels of stakeholder participation throughout the organization. We call this process ‘IT introduction’.

Through experimentation, companies explore the potential benefits and risks of IT by designing and evaluating organized experimental events (i.e., trials) (Anderson & Simester, 2011). Those running experiments must establish investigational boundaries based on a set of expectations given stakeholder inputs.“

DOI: 10.4018/jdm.2014040102
structure trials such that lessons learned from current results provide input for future trials, and deal with outcomes that range from highly successful to complete failures (Thomke, 2001). Experimenters must also consider how to design trials and evaluate results given local and/or corporate oversight, time frames and review gates, and an environment that uses fact-based or hierarchically-based controls (Anderson & Simester, 2011). While systematic, the experimentation process can be onerous in expense and expertise and many companies instead follow a less rigorous introduction process to identify new IT and design and evaluate trials.

We draw from mindfulness theory to investigate how some organizations are able to manage the introduction process to gain greater satisfaction and understanding of potential organization-wide adoption. Prior literature on mindfulness suggests organizations that channel a consistent alertness regarding implementation may be in a position to identify and assess the potential of new technologies (Swanson & Ramiller, 2004; Teo et al., 2010), especially when being pursued in less-rigorous dispersed ways. According to Carlo et al. (2012), through mindfulness, organizations focus on both successes and failures, interpret situations based on diverse viewpoints, integrate local understanding with a holistic vision, employ inventive improvisation-based responses, and maintain cognition and decision-making that is flexible. This past work suggests mindful organizations may encourage dispersed teams to select parameters in ways that encourage a more comprehensive understanding of a new technology and satisfaction with the outcomes while not structuring experiments. Therefore, given the non-rigorous and dispersed nature of IT introductions followed by many companies, this study explores the research question: How do some companies move towards the benefits (i.e., understanding, satisfaction, and learning) found in experimentation approaches without actually structuring trials by using a more mindful process to IT introductions?

Our study examines how organizations that are exploring the introduction of new technologies can use a mindful approach and contributes to existing literature in the following ways. While definitions of organizational mindfulness exist (Teo et al., 2010; Weick, 1998; Weick et al., 1999), the role of mindfulness has not been extensively explored in the context of achieving experimental benefits. The benefits of experimentation can include gaining insights and learning (Thomke, 1998, 2003), making data-driven decisions (Reeves & Deimler, 2011), enabling competitive advantage (Thomke, 2001), and improving offerings (Thomke, 1998). First, based on mindfulness theory and five case examples, we examine IT introductions and define the attributes of a mindful introduction of IT and the attributes’ specific roles in identifying IT introductory trials. We illustrate how varying degrees of mindfulness impact the ability of companies to explore IT’s usefulness across the company. Second, building on these analyses, we describe an observed model of a mindful introduction process by incorporating how mindfulness occurs in the process of identifying technology and in designing and evaluating trials to achieve some of the benefits of experimentation. This process demonstrates that mindfulness enables the organization to manage introductory trials in ways that yield greater stakeholder understanding and satisfaction of the adoption/non-adoption rationale, and a better overall understanding of the synergistic organization-wide adoption potential of an implementation.

EXPERIMENTATION

Experimentation is defined as coordinating a series of analytical operations or procedures under controlled conditions with theory-driven propositions in order to discover unknown effects or laws, test hypotheses, or try out ideas (Cook & Campbell, 1979). Proper experimentation entails planning trials thoroughly following a structured progression of activities to examine an object, idea, or concept. Rules
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