Chapter 2
Feral Information Systems and Workarounds: The Present Position

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the extent of feral information systems in organisations and provides some insights for the possible reason for their development in relation to the user resistance literature. The factors associated with FIS development relate to individual, system, organisational, and process issues, and the relationships to each of these issues are presented in the context of existing research that has been conducted in three different sites in three different countries, namely Australia, the United Kingdom, and Denmark.

INTRODUCTION

Workarounds within information and communication technology (ICT) domains have been in existence for many years and there are many examples of ways to get around specific ICT problems. For example, common blog entries are as follows: “Looks like the DLL ‘wlidcli.dll’ is missing for Windows Live 2011 installation on Windows Server 2012 RC, but there is a work around!” (Brown, 2012) and “Hey folks, I’m very unhappy to report that we’ve discovered an issue with Coach’s Eye 2.0 that negatively impacts sharing.” (Coach’s Eye 2.0 Sharing Bug Workaround, 2012).

ICT Workarounds such as those mentioned above are common in technical areas; however when it comes to non-technical end-users in the management, many ICT professionals consider it necessary to block workarounds or lock down systems to ensure that people comply with and use systems as they were designed. This is particularly the case where people use mandated, off the shelf software such as enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems. The problem with this “lock down” approach is that in many cases these ERP systems are considered by employees to be inflexible. The reasons given by non-technical end-users for this perceived inflexibility range...
from a perception that the system does not do everything they want, to concerns about a lack of provision of relevant data to allow them to do their job effectively. However from an upper management point of view, ERP software is designed to integrate ICT resources and is developed as a package that is meant to provide a “single point of truth” for all employees in the organisation. Therefore there is a managerial expectation that every employee will use the system exclusively in order to achieve the stated aims of integration of all ICT resources. However there is increasing evidence that many employees develop workarounds to either circumvent ERP systems they deem inadequate or to help them achieve key performance indicators associated with their work. Some workarounds in the ICT area can simply involve writing notes (for example writing down a number instead of copying and pasting); however when these workarounds involve the development of IT artefacts, we refer to them as feral information systems (FIS). An FIS is defined as “an information system [computerised] that is developed by individuals or groups of employees to help them with their work, but is not condoned by management nor is part of the corporation’s accepted information technology infrastructure. Its development is [can be] designed to circumvent existing organisational information systems” (Kerr, Houghton & Burgess, 2007, p. 142). This book will look at the development of FIS and provide some suggestions as to why they are developed and how they can be managed. The term “feral” is used to indicate the sometimes “wild or untamed” nature of information systems developed by many individuals. These systems are usually developed outside the “accepted approaches” as outlined by the information technology departments of organisations.

Davenport (1998) suggests that one of the primary goals of an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system is to fully integrate the information technology functions of an organisation. In order for this integration to be successful, people are expected to use the system exclusively, and this implies that there is a good fit between the system and the work requirements of individuals. With respect to managing FIS, the organisational implications of the development of FIS within the ERP systems domain is an important consideration because of the assumption that an ERP system will provide a “single point of truth” because everyone will use it. However there are concerns that multiple FIS could provide variations from this and result in a number of different versions of “the truth” within different functional groups in the organisation. It is our contention that this diversity is not a bad thing as long as management is aware of it and FIS are accepted as necessary components of the IT infrastructure of an organisation. However from a governance perspective, caution should be exerted by management to ensure that there is no corruption of the main (master) data within an organisation from FIS outputs. If an FIS is kept secret and not encouraged by management to be revealed, we could end up in a similar situation of having islands of untamed systems providing localised information that is not interconnected and this could go against the intention of providing truly integrated systems as is the ideal envisaged through ERP implementations.

As mentioned above, a major reason for FIS is a perceived lack of flexibility of ERP systems and this is borne out in research. For example research by Akkermans, Bo-gerd, Yücesan & van Wassenhove (2002, p. 284) used an expert panel of 23 supply chain executives based in Holland and responsible for supply chain activities of eight European multi-national companies. Using the Delphi study approach they found that this expert panel considered that there was “only
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