ABSTRACT

In this paper the concept of performative action is introduced to address how individuals can engage in IT adoption processes. The study investigates how local government employees adopt and localize ideas from a Danish National IT initiative called eDay3. Particularly the actions of a project manager are highlighted to portray how individuals can engage with historically produced discourses making them performative. The case study presented spans a two-year time period and demonstrates a double loop adoption process. First, a localization-process as discourse is used to support the specificity and variance of the specific local government. Second, a feedback loop re-attaching the localized project to the national reform program in order to maintain and protect the newly formed local practices. The study concludes that individuals actively struggle for social positions in IT adoption processes. Through the use of performative actions the positions are never stable and firm but constantly enacted and changed in discursive practices.

Keywords: Discourse, E-Adoption, IT Reform Programs

INTRODUCTION

The formulation of strategies has become a vital part of organizational life. A closer look into the day-to-day practices and relations within the existing strategy discourse literature suggests that discourses create organizational reality (DiMaggio et al., 1993). In this view, the practices, activities and negotiations of discourses creates reality (Fairclough, 1992; Whittington, 1996). The relationship between strategy and discourses give some positions (upheld by certain actors) the possibility to speak and act while others are disregarded and silenced. As a result, the way in which someone is in a position to talk about strategy is related to the exertion of power formations with political implications (Fairclough, 1992; Marinetto, 2007).

While strategic discourse has been studied in relation to management (Hardy et al., 2000; Schultze et al., 2004) organizational issues (Grant et al., 2001; Keenoy et al., 1997) and power (Whittington et al., 2006), the practice-oriented aspects of strategic discourse levels remain underexplored (Hardyet al., 2000). We still know relatively little about how discursive aspects
of strategy are managed in practical relations. For instance, the tension between studies of recursive forms of strategic actions at macro levels and specific intra-organizational contexts and individual cognition has been highlighted in literature (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 1996). Recent attempts to address such issues e.g. (Chia et al., 2007; Hay et al., 2000) have revealed a highly complex scene of macro, micro and meso discourses wherein actors act, perform and produce meaningful connection to engage in strategy discourses.

This paper addresses the issue of how to use discourse in the adoption of a national IT reform initiative. We study the nationally decided eDay3 program, in a local government to explore how a number of performative actions are used to translate strategy into practice. In particular, we focus on the actions of an individual actor to show how discourses can be evoked to shape, enact and make sense of macro level strategies in a local context. We ask: How can individual actors actively engage with historically produced discourses to navigate between national and local levels in terms of IS adoption? To address this question we present data from a case study that spans a two-year time period to present how the national reform program is first formulated into a local government by the evoking of historically produced and context dependent discourses. We then demonstrate that locally produced discourses also need to be evoked and re-attached to the national reform program in order to enable new local practices. Our study shows that formal reform programs and strategies are never stable and firm objects but rather are constantly enacted and changed as part of discursive practices.

PERFORMATIVE ACTION

An understanding of the practices where individuals can take place necessitates the study of the text and talk in historically and discursively produced contexts. Discourses are seen as an interrelated set of texts with practices of production, dissemination and reception that bring an object into being (Parker, 1999). This theoretical perspective is used to study how individuals access different discourses in order to generate new meanings that help the enactment of particular strategies (Hardy et al. 2000). The historical dimension is essential (Hardy et al., 2000; Wodak, 2001) as actors cannot simply produce “adoption-discourses” to suit their own immediate needs but rather must locate and derive meaningful activities within their historical context if they want to create new forms of actions leading to adoption of a particular information system.

Acts and statements put forward are not placed in a vacuum but have to be reformulated and recreated in order to give meaning in a specific context. How the interpretation is received depends on the position of the subject who enunciates the interpretation. Three characteristics should be in place to ensure successful interpretation of a concept into a local context: first, there should be a relation between the overall concept and the local reality; second, the subject who brings forward this interpretation has a mandate to do so; and third, the new chosen concept should be able to possess receptivity at both local and national levels.

As such discourse entail a performative aspect that derives from questions like: “Who transmits the national policy into the local government? What is transmitted? To whom? Through which medium? In what form? And with what effect?” (Lyotard, 1984). If the articulations do not resonate with those of locally situated actors they will fail to convey the meaning intended by the enunciator and consequently be ignored. Discourses become performative when the concepts evoked in discursive statements are embedded in the larger discursive context. Consequently the relevant concepts must be created in such a way that they provide meaning for those individuals to whom they are directed. An individual does not have a free choice in employing concepts and cannot conjure a new object out of thin air (Hardy et al. 2000). What legitimates knowledge is thus
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