Power and Politics in University Portal Implementation

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INTRODUCTION

Authors in the information systems (IS) discipline have started exploring the socio-technical approach to the development and implementation of information systems (Mitev, 2001; Orlikowski, 1992; Peszynski, 2005). However, few have extended this exploration into the realm of Web portals. Previous studies have explored process-oriented models and the categorical critical success factors associated with broad systems selection and implementation (Avison & Fitzgerald, 2003; Davis, 1974; Hoffer, Valacich, & George, 1998).

Mitev (2001) argues that we need to “move beyond commonsense explanations of failure and success and find more complex and richer ways of understanding the use of IS in organisations through the inclusion of broader social, economic, political, cultural and historical factors” (Mitev, 2001, p. 84). Rather than take the social aspect of implementation at face value, we need to understand and perform research that recognises the complexity and historical construction of the members of a selection and implementation team (Mitev, 2001). Essentially, the implementation of any information system, and in this case, Web portals, is complex, messy, and inconsistent.

By undertaking this research, we can identify outcomes of the implementation of a Web portal in an Australian university (to preserve confidentiality we have made up the name: “University of Australia”) and therefore provide a better understanding of the human factors involved in the implementation of Web portals. In order to do this, we will present a narrative of the implementation of a Web portal in this university. A narrative has been adopted, as it enables the researchers to present the findings of the implementation and resulting power relations and politics associated with the implementation of a Web portal.

THE CASE STUDY

The University of Australia began implementing a Web portal in 2003. The Web portal was designed to be built over a 2 to 3-year period and built on the infrastructure and expertise that already existed within the university. Essentially, the Web portal incorporated knowledge of the processes and integrated the services of the university, for both students and staff. By enabling the portal to be accessed via the Internet, all services within the university become Web-based (Kvale, 1996). Staff and students would have access to information, knowledge, and tools to enable transactions by staff and students in the one location. The goal of the Web portal for the Senior Executive at the University of Australia was to facilitate better decision making through quicker and more consolidated access to information sources within the university, supported by a variety of technologies.

The creation and implementation of the Web portal at the University of Australia was considered successful at many levels. All indicators in terms of performance, delivery of modules on time, integration and performance within the university administration, and the provision of administrative services to the university were all more than satisfactory. Reviews from University Council documents and other internal documents within the university demonstrated that all critical success factors were met within the desired limits set at the start of the project.

What follows is the story of the implementation of the Web portal at the University of Australia, which highlights the political and power-based dramas seldom discussed in the literature.

The Beginning

The Web portal at the University of Australia began with an identified need for integration of services. The university had, for a long time, been using IT for the provision of various services to student and staff, which included Finance, Human Resources, and student services, including e-mail. However, there had been no attempt to integrate these services. This is not an unusual scenario in the tertiary environment.

As a result, the University of Australia began by looking at their own resources and seeing what could be created. The implementation of the Web portal at the University of Australia was led by a champion in the second most senior position within the university. This meant that the power