Chapter II

Information Technology and Hegelian Inquiring Organizations

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Abstract

This chapter demonstrates how Hegelian inquiring systems may be applied to wicked problem situations and knowledge work and how Hegelian inquiring organizations are well suited for the discontinuous environments of the new world of business (Malhotra, 1997, 2000). In addition, the chapter discusses how Hegelian organizations and how emerging information technologies can support Hegelian processes, especially the Hegelian dialectic. We claim that extant information systems (IS) are not suitable for wicked situations due to their rigidity, which stems from a philosophical basis of logical positivism, coupled with the prevailing functionalistic, technology-driven IS development models. The need for a new approach is suggested, based on a multiple perspective pluralistic approach.

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Introduction

Churchman’s (1971) inquiring systems have been proposed as the basis for learning or inquiring organizations (Courtney, Croasdell & Paradice, 1998). Previous work (Courtney, 2001) has suggested that the Singerian model is appropriate for decision making in complex ill-structured highly interconnected environments and applications of the Singer model in situations of at least moderate complexity have been explored (Richardson, Courtney & Paradice, 2001). Within the context of inquiring organizations, Malhotra (1997, 2000) defines today’s organizational environments as increasingly more dynamic, discontinuous, and wicked and suggests the need for consideration of Hegelian models that can provide an organization or organizational unit(s) with multiple, diverse, and contradictory interpretations of data. This chapter continues the theme of adapting Churchman’s models of inquiring systems by exploring the Hegelian model as it relates to inquiring organizations. It is argued that the Hegelian model is suitable for the environments Malhotra describes. This chapter first discusses the wicked nature of future business environments, then describes the Hegelian inquiring system and how it may be applied to ill-structured organizational situations. Next, information technology appropriate for use in Hegelian organizations is described, and some conclusions are drawn with respect to the need for a new approach to IS development in such organizations.

The Wicked Environments of the Future

As a result of many factors, among them globalization, deregulation, privatization, and advancements of information and communications technology, today’s business environments are changing rapidly and discontinuously. The behavior of these new environments will be highly uncertain and unpredictable, what Rittel and Webber (1973) refer to as wicked situations. Mason and Mitroff (1981) identified characteristics of wicked problems found in strategic planning and policy making. These characteristics include interconnectedness, complicatedness, uncertainty, ambiguity, conflict, and social constraints. Wicked problems are accompanied by conflict of interest among individuals and teams and are intimately connected to each other. Therefore, there is no one single solution that can satisfy a wicked problem because it must also satisfy all other wicked problems. Most importantly wicked problems exist, not in a stable and predictable environment, but in a dynamic complex and unpredictable situation. Wicked problems require multiple interpretations since there is no knowable correct answer. To Ackoff (1999), real organizational problems are wicked and may be regarded as messes. Messes interact with each other and, thus, cannot be understood independently from other messes. They must be understood as highly complex ill-structured systems with strongly interacting components.

In such environments, the future of an organization depends on its ability to constantly question existing ways of doing things and to create new processes in order to respond quickly to dynamic changes. A number of researchers (e.g., Ackoff, 1999; Buckingham
Do We Mean Information Systems or Systems of Information?


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