Chapter IV

The Non-Technical Side of Office Technology: Managing the Clarity of the Spirit and the Appropriation of Office Technology

Huub J. M. Ruël
University of Twente, The Netherlands

INTRODUCTION

Office work plays an important role in Western economies, and the use of office technologies in this type of work is inextricably linked. People employed in office environments are confronted with an almost continuous introduction of new office technologies, as decision-makers in companies believe that the market drives them towards being very attentive to the latest developments in the field of IT. Furthermore, IT in general has become a strategic factor in doing business (e.g., e-commerce), which has further increased the need for the newest office technologies. As a result, the number of projects in organizations to develop and implement new office technologies has unarguably increased. However, office technology projects are often confronted with problems. In our view, these problematic experiences are due to a lack of attention to the non-technical side of office technology development, implementation and use. Hence, in this chapter, we present a study based on a view of office technology
project that stresses the non-technical side of office technology. We introduce the concepts of spirit of office technology and office technology appropriation. By testing three hypotheses based upon this view, it is shown that this concept can be helpful in contributing to an improvement in the understanding of office technology development, implementation and use. This is scientifically interesting and relevant since the outcomes of our study say something about the value of the theoretical framework applied. It is also of practical interest, as the results of the study can help in the everyday practice of office technology projects.

This chapter is structured as follows: first, we explore the problematic aspects of office technology projects; then we present our theoretical framework and formulate the three hypotheses to test. Subsequently, we discuss the methodology, and present the results. Finally, we come to conclusions and discuss the consequences in terms of practical guidelines.

OFFICE TECHNOLOGY PROJECTS: DIFFICULT TO MANAGE

The development and implementation of new office technology in offices is, in general, managed through projects, which we can call office technology projects. We define these as: an initiative to develop, implement and use a new office technology system carried out by a temporary organization especially brought into being for the realization of this initiative.

Office technology projects are a familiar phenomenon in organizations, as shown by the results of Ewusi-Mensah and Przasnyski’s study (1994). In more than 60% of the organizations that responded to the survey, over 20 IT projects had taken place in the previous five years. In a further 27% of the organizations that responded to the survey, between 1 and 20 IT projects had taken place within the same period. However, office technology projects are very often not successful. One of the main reasons for this is that the introduction of IT is often exclusively based upon the belief that the intended advantages will arise; processes to actually measure the advantages are in many cases never undertaken (Fitzgerald, 1998). So, whether the expected advantages really do occur often remains questionable—this despite the considerable impact IT projects often have on the work environment of employees, and the large amount of money invested in IT. It has become clear that to quite an extent these investments do not satisfy the objectives. A large number of office technology projects end in complete or partial failure (Doherty & King, 1998; Ewusi-Mensah & Przasnyski, 1994). However, hard evidence about the rate of
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