Chapter VIII

Looking Back, Looking In and Looking On: Treading Over the ERP Battleground

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Abstract

This chapter addresses the topic of organizational change brought about through the implementation of an enterprise resource planning system (ERP) at one of Queensland’s regional universities. This chapter describes the institution’s development and its increasing reliance on corporate information systems. The unsuccessful attempt to resolve problems associated with these systems, in particular the student record system via the Core Australian Specification for Management and Administrative Computing (CASMAC) project, is explored. How the need for ERP adoption was presented to staff is then examined. The reactions of staff to the implementation experience are then explored using preliminary results from focus group interviews. The chapter concludes by comparing the expectations, reactions, and outcomes of the ERP project with some recommendations suggested for improving organizational change induced by ERP implementation.

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Information technology (IT) has progressively penetrated corporate and government administrative systems over the past half-century. Beginning from a few small-scale and experimental projects in pioneering companies during the 1950s, information technologies are now large-scale, pervasive, and ubiquitous throughout modern organizations. As a result, during this period, the work conducted by people who perform administrative tasks in offices has been subject to continual change, as successive systems have been adopted. IT may therefore be viewed as an agent of both technological and social changes in the workplace: changes that have been instigated by the managers of myriads of commercial, industrial, and governmental organizations, including universities. One of the most recent and extensive of these IT innovations has been the adoption of enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems.

ERPs have achieved considerable importance in the contemporary information systems (ISs) arena. These systems are large and complex integrated software packages that support standard business activities. Ross (1999) described the widespread move to adopt these systems as the “ERP revolution.” Such a designation seems appropriate, given that, as Willcocks and Sykes (2000) reported, “by early 2000 the ERP systems generated over $20 billion in revenues annually for suppliers and an additional $20 billion for consulting firms.” ERP systems have now been adopted by the majority of the Fortune top 500 firms, and as the high end of the market becomes saturated, ERP systems are filtering down to medium-sized organizations such as universities, and to regions beyond those initially penetrated in Europe and North America (Kumar & Van Hillegersberg, 2000).

Only the most senior people in the organization possess the necessary authority to instigate a course of action that has such extensive financial, technical, and organizational ramifications. Apart from the issue of making decisions about investment and justifying the expense of these IT investments to themselves, managers also need to justify current directions to their employees and other stakeholders. This aspect of management is concerned with making sense of the organization’s actions and, according to Ginzel, Kramer, and Sutton (1992), seeks “to manage constituent perceptions of performance.” The issue of justification is extremely important when the adoption of an enterprise-wide system like an ERP system is concerned. The implementation of an ERP project requires the acceptance, compliance, and even commitment of a broad range of people. As stated by Bingi, Sharma, and Godla (1999), “Implementing any integrated ERP solution is not so much a technological exercise but an ‘organizational revolution.’ Extensive preparation before implementation is the key to success.” Systems of this type need to be grafted in to the organization very
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