Chapter IX

Exploring the Power and Politics of a PeopleSoft® Implementation

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Abstract

The implementation of an enterprise wide system has far reaching effects on an organization. The distribution of power is one aspect that is often disturbed. End users who perceive a loss of power may use political behavior to resist and obstruct the implementation. A case study of the implementation of PeopleSoft at an Australian university is used to explore resistance and obstructive behavior and explain these by looking at the implications of the system design for the organizational power balance. The authors believe that more understanding of the role of power and politics during an enterprise wide system implementation will enable teams to avoid user reactions that can threaten the success of the project.
Introduction

What makes for a successful implementation of information systems (ISs) remains an unresolved mystery despite research spanning several decades (Ginzberg, 1978; Keen, 1981; Sauer, 1993; Keil, Mann, & Rai, 2000). There is a consensus on some guiding principles that are entrenched in the folklore of the IS research community and information technology (IT) professionals, but there is still scope for more research. An area that has been neglected for some years is that of the political impact of a new information system. It is recognized that information systems can alter many aspects of an organization, such as communication paths, influence, and control. Explicit planning of the implementation strategy to deal with political behavior is advisable (Keen, 1981).

Power shifts and political behavior are particularly relevant when the implementation is centered on an enterprise-wide system, which, by its very nature, impacts widely across the organization. If the implementation of the enterprise-wide system is part of an open and explicit business process reengineering project, the team will be expecting to deal with significant changes to the power balance within the organization. If the project is more restricted, the power balance is still likely to be affected, intentionally or otherwise.

Phrases such as “political behavior” and “manipulation of power” carry connotations of deceit, mistrust, and cynicism, but within all organizations, politics is central to effective managerial work (Butcher & Clarke, 1999). In addition, personal power hunger is a natural human characteristic that spawns actions that we condone in government but would somehow like to imagine are inappropriate in the commercial world. Awareness of the roles of power and politics in the reactions of people to change should empower managers and systems analysts to avoid wasteful resistance and facilitate smooth project implementation.

In 1983 Markus used the implementation of a computer-based financial accounting system to explore how resistance is generated when a new information system affects the power balance within an organization (Markus, 1983). In 2001 we used a similar methodology to examine a difficult implementation of an enterprise-wide system (PeopleSoft®) into the financial services department of an Australian university.

This chapter starts with a review of some of the literature on politics and power, particularly with respect to the implementation of information systems. We then introduce the case study and report the examples of political behavior that were revealed in our research. Finally, we attempt to explain how resistance and obstruction were generated by the power changes implicit in the system design and what effects those behaviors had on the implemented system. Some implications for developers are presented.
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