ABSTRACT

This article presents a case study that documents how information systems (IS) principals in China strategically shifted to different change agent roles to accommodate various IS implementation contingencies in the organization. The case concerns a US-Chinese joint venture, located in China. The change agent models hypothesized by Markus and Benjamin (1996) serve as a lens to interpret the case. Based on observations of how these roles emerged in different phases of implementing packaged software, a meta-category called “adaptor” is offered to visualize what the data revealed and to contribute to this emerging research area. Implications for practitioners and researchers are addressed.

Keywords: case study; change agents; computing in developing countries; IS implementation; packaged software.

INTRODUCTION

On a research trip in China, the first two authors were invited to do a case analysis of a US-Chinese joint venture (JV) that was implementing packaged software (Dologite et al., 1999). This was in 1996 when this kind of IS implementation was not expected to be found in a typical provincial manufacturing organization in central China.

In a more recent revisit of the data from this case, a story about the struggle to successfully implement the packaged software captivated our interest. In particular, our focus was drawn to how the Chinese IS principals flexibly adopted various change agent roles to handle the challenges encountered as the implementation process progressed.

In a conceptual paper, Markus and Benjamin (1996) identify three, fundamentally different, models of the change agent role performed by IS specialists. They are the traditionalist, the facilitator, and the advocate, presented in the three models identified in the Appendix. After a full discussion of each model, Markus and Benjamin (1996) conclude with a single statement about an “as yet unconfirmed, hypothesis” that “the most effective IS specialists are those who can shift rapidly from one model to another depending on the circumstances” (pp. 400-401).
The Markus and Benjamin’s hypothesis, if demonstrated, could be relevant to better understand and explain the change agent phenomenon. What is currently missing in the IS literature is a study that documents and illustrates how IS implementers adopt various change agent roles to deal with the contingencies of installing IS in an organizational setting. This research seeks to fill this gap by contributing an empirical example, with the US-Chinese JV case. In doing this, the study sheds light on a phenomenon that is central to develop emerging theory and its related body of knowledge.

The following discussion begins with a review of the literature relevant to this research. It is followed by a description of the research methods used to construct this case study. Then follows the article’s main focus, the case study itself. Finally, a discussion, followed by implications for practitioners and researchers, concludes the article.

BACKGROUND THEORY

Organizational change implies the presence, or absence for that matter, of resistance to change. Best (1985) defines resistance to organizational change as a natural response, from individuals as well as work groups, which attempts to reduce the impact of change to a less stressful level. To decrease resistance and increase awareness of the need for, and receptivity to change, a skilled change agent would not only implement isolated changes but also persuade the whole organization to view change as normal and necessary.

In an IS context, Markus and Benjamin (1996) propose that change agency will most likely become the most important part of the IS specialist’s work in an organization. They view organizations as moving toward outsourcing application development, computer operations, and even IS management in an effort to cut costs and streamline operations. Information technology (IT) implementation, however, is perceived as work that requires organization specific knowledge (as opposed to pure technical knowledge) and, therefore, will be kept in-house (Markus & Benjamin, 1996).

IS specialists alone cannot bring about the success of a new IT implementation. A large body of research (for example, Baroudi et al., 1986; Joshi, 1991; Majchrzak, 1992; Markus & Benjamin, 1996; Markus & Keil, 1994) shows that managers as well as end users of a system must bring their contribution to the process. An IS specialist skilled in change management could, however, serve an important role to reconcile competing interests as well as obtain the support of key participants.

Change Agents

The role of a change agent, and for that matter any organizational role, is the product of interactions between the individual and the organizational environment as represented by others, the interests of different groups, and the shared values and beliefs conferred by the organizational culture (Markus & Benjamin, 1996; Rogers, 1995).

In their conceptual paper, Markus and Benjamin outline three “ideal types” of change agents hypothesized to exist among in-house IS specialists (1996, p. 387). The models are identified in the Appendix and are briefly described next.

Traditional Model

The perception of the IS professional as an agent of organizational change, pre-
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