ABSTRACT

This paper describes our use of Morgan’s (1997) metaphors for making sense of end-user attitudes and behavior in an information systems development project, in a UK National Health Service hospital. We employ a case study approach, within which we elicit the attitudes using a questionnaire and infer the behavior using observations and interviews. We present the results in the form of a journey, tracking the metaphorical shift for each end-user, over the project duration. We show how individual journeys can be combined to capture organizations’ shift in metaphorical position. Our results show that within a space of eighteen months the organization’s overall metaphorical stance shifted from the organism to the machine metaphor. This reflects the end-user’s initial optimism for the change to enable ease of working to that of efficiency dictated by the senior management towards the end. We also found that this shift was due to organizational conditional factors. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Information Systems Development; Metaphors; Organizational Factors; Paradigms

INTRODUCTION

Metaphors are useful communication devices in our daily conversations. They are conceptual tools that we use to make sense of the world and interpret meaning (Ortony, 1975; Oswick & Grant, 1996; Pepper, 1942; Smith & Simmons, 1983). Using analogies, metaphors create mental pictures that help to interpret the world, such as viewing the working of an organization as a machine. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Morgan (1986) believe that by
creating certain types of realities within our minds metaphors assist us to contextualize the world in ways that we may not have envisaged before. Morgan (1986) provides eight metaphors for organizations: machine, organism, brain, culture, political system, psychic prison, flux and transformation, and instruments of domination. A detailed description of these is given in Appendix 1. These metaphors help to make sense of organizational structure, management control, management style and behavior by associating certain meanings to them. On the other hand, these metaphors encapsulate perceptions of individuals by expressing their motives, desires, attitudes, needs and dedication towards the organization.

Orlikowski and Gash (1994) suggest that attitudes, mental frames or cognitive structures have a key effect in shaping the information system development (ISD) related behavior of individuals. End-user involvement and satisfaction is crucial for system success (Adams, 2004; Butler & Fitzgerald, 2001; Harris, 2000; McGill, 2004) especially in public sector organizations (Aladwani, 2002; Lau & Herbert, 2001). However, understanding of end-user attitudes and behavior during their involvement in ISD is a difficult and complex task, as end-users’ views can be deep-rooted or hidden (Shaw & Lee-Partidge, 2003) while they are still learning about the system and its proposed use (Stein & Vandenbosch, 1996; Tiwana & McLean, 2005; Wagner, 2000). We believe that metaphors can be very useful in dealing with such complexities (Xia & Lee, 2005). In the past, metaphors have been used by IS researchers in making sense of organizational context. However, most researchers only used one or two metaphors in their study (see for example, Boland & Greenberg, 1992; Heiskanen, 1993; Kling & Iacono, 1984; Mumford & Weir, 1979; Wilson, 1994). However, we concur with Walsham (1991, 1993) and Oates and Fitzgerald (2007) that applying several metaphors would help in making a better sense of the research situation.

Therefore, in this research we use all eight of Morgan’s (1986, 1997) metaphors in making sense of the attitudes and behaviors of end-users, during their involvement in an ISD project, in a UK National Health Service (NHS) hospital. Using our research instrument (Appendix 1) we mapped Morgan’s (1986, 1997) eight metaphors onto Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) paradigms. This enabled us to link each of these eight metaphors to their philosophical underpinning. We conducted a gap analysis between the underlying attitudes and behavior of several key end-users at the beginning and towards the end of the project. This allowed us to identify a metaphorical journey, for each end-user, during the ISD. For the purpose of this research we define attitudes as the mental concepts (constructs) or assumptions of end-users. Whereas behavior relates to any demonstrable physical actions as well as decision-making observed by us or narrated by the end-users (as a reflective or experiential account of the situation). We explain the choice of particular metaphors for each end-user and track their journey by using graphical representation. We use Walsham’s (1993) organizational conditional factors (namely, context, process and content or nature of the system) in explaining the metaphorical choices of end-users, hence their metaphorical journey.

The structure of this article is as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review on the use of metaphors in the IS field. Section 3 provides a brief overview of the case organization. Section 4 describes the research methodology, data collection and analyses. The subsequent sections comprise: research results, discussion,
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