Chapter 2
Contrasting Approaches to Preparedness: 
A Reflection on Two Case Studies

Lorraine Warren
University of Southampton, UK

Ted Fuller
Lincoln University, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects on ongoing research in SMEs in the manufacturing and service sectors. It contrasts different approaches to the issue of preparedness from an organisational and social perspective, in two cases where new enterprise-wide business processes were implemented and integrated in different settings. In both cases, the emergence of new systems presented a huge challenge to companies hard-pressed to marshal the resources to mount effective change and implementation projects on this scale. The cases presented enable a comparison of different strategies used, one firm responding to organic growth, and the other to rapid industry-driven change. The chapter focuses not on the implementations per se, but instead on the issue of preparedness for change. The chapter concludes by drawing out general lessons concerning how to support and maintain organisational preparedness for enterprise wide change in different industry settings.

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INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I worked with a small manufacturing company in the UK horticultural industry that was experiencing the need for improved communication and control across the enterprise as growth took place (Warren, 2002, 2003, ab). Parts of the business responsible for different product lines wanted to talk to each other, more efficient financial management systems were essential to meet increased orders, and further, there was a need to develop more internet-oriented customer management and marketing systems. This situation resulted in a two-year project with the local university under the (then) Teaching Company Scheme (which has now evolved into the Knowledge Transfer Partnership programme) which employed a graduate under university supervision to analyse and redesign the company’s management and information systems in an enterprise-wide endeavour. During the scheme, through an extensive consultancy, development and training programme, we introduced Beer’s Viable System Model (VSM) (Beer, 1981, 1985) as a learning vehicle to support the development of a conceptual design for integration that at the time, in itself, met the company’s needs. Later on, this turned out to be a stepping stone on the road to a technological implementation of the design. The project was deemed successful, with the organisational learning that took place through using a simplified version of the VSM during the analysis and design phase being seen as essential to success. Through a variety of participative fora, staff across the enterprise developed insight into the need for change and made input into how the new systems would work. Over the period of the project, a sense of ‘preparedness’ for change emerged among all sections of the workforce.

Based on this experience, presented in the first case below, I went on to develop successfully this modus operandi for developing new business systems (in terms of preparedness for implementation) with other small companies, both service and manufacturing, public and private sector (Ragsdell and Warren, 1999; Warren, 2003c). It was only when I encountered a different kind of company that seemed to be operating and growing in a new way, that I realised I was seeing a different kind of preparedness. At this point, my research took a new direction. Thus, the second case I present examines a ‘rapid response’ to industry change from a service company in the airline industry. In this case, competitive advantage (and indeed survival) is linked to the rapid embedding of new systems in short time frames as new business models emerge across a whole industry. This chapter therefore examines, in reflective mode, the two projects that proved to be landmarks in my understanding of how small organisations organise for enterprise-wide change.
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