



On the interpretative flexibility of hosted ERP systems

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Abstract

This paper explores the interpretative flexibility of ERP systems through the study of a project to implement a hosted system for the Central Accounting Department of a large multinational. The paper presents intensive case study data around the decision to implement the system and analyses it in terms of the interpretative flexibility of the system. The paper questions the extent to which technological features of the new system influence the perceived flexibility of the system.

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1. Introduction

For more than 40 years, technology-based organisational transitions have captivated academic researchers who have used examples of innovations to look beyond the particular effects of specific new technologies on organisational structures and business processes to theorise the technological artefact. Through the studies of numerous systems and their implementations, researchers have developed an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the role that technology plays in relation to organisations and society more generally.

Every new technology provides an opportunity to highlight nuances about the technological artefact and to ask further questions about the relationship between technology and society. Within this research programme, this paper studies enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems. The large scale of the ERP systems, coupled with

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their claims to provide ‘best practice’ support for organisations raises many new areas of interest. For example, it is common to speak of ERP systems as being ‘configured’ rather than ‘programmed’ and for any implementation problems to be seen as organisational rather than technological failings. As a result, ERP systems are very different to early centralised office data processing systems or the later desk top computing and end-user computing and will highlight different aspects of the technology–society relationship.

There is a significant body of research that has been devoted to the implementation of enterprise resource planning systems (e.g. Howcroft and Truex, 2001/2002; Newell et al., 2003) as companies have increasingly opted for this generic packaged software in favour of custom-developed systems (Lucas et al., 1988, p. 537). The prospect of replacing ‘home grown’ legacy systems with the integrated business solution offered by ERP systems like SAP/r3, PeopleSoft and Oracle, has proved to be irresistible (Caldwell and Stein, 1998). The momentum that surrounded these ‘off-the-shelf’ software packages in the 1990s is captured by what Ross (1998) terms ‘The Enterprise Resource Planning Revolution’.

The majority of adopting organisations that have joined the ‘ERP bandwagon’ (Kremers and Dissel, 2000) have presumed that with relative ease they can benefit from the alleged ‘best-of-suite solutions’ that are embedded within the business processes of these generic packages (Robey and Boudreau, 1999b, p. 291). The latest innovation enables global companies to host generic or customised SAP systems through networked servers across multiple sites.

Much of the published research on ERP has been about the specific benefits of the technology or particular features of their implementation in individual organisations (Francalanci, 2001; Murphy and Simon, 2002; Ragowsky and Somers, 2002). However, Lee (2000) argues for the information systems research community to try to develop a cumulative and current body of research findings ‘despite the never-ending onslaught of newly emerging technologies’ (Lee, 2000, p. viii) by using the experiences with particular instantiations of the information technologies themselves to produce ‘contributions to theory’ that emerge in the interactive system effects between the technological and the organizational.

The aim of this paper is therefore to contribute to this tradition of conceptualising the IT artefact through the study of ERP systems.

This paper presents an interpretive, impressionistic study of the implementation of hosted ERP systems in a division of a large multinational.

When conceptualising ERP systems as a form of technological artefact (Orlikowski and Iacono, 2001), a variety of approaches have been adopted in the literature. One common form, given the large scale nature of the systems, has been adopted by Ciborra and associates (2000) who consider the technology as an information infrastructure and emphasise its large, interconnected nature and installed base (Star and Ruhleder, 1996). Viewing the system as an infrastructure highlights many similarities with institutions (Avgerou, 2002; Scott, 2001; Zucker, 1977) and this notion is explored critically Section 2.

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