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Information and Organization 13 (2003) 285–313

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# Networks, negotiations, and new times: the implementation of enterprise resource planning into an academic administration<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Higher education is a sector entering an era of IT-enabled modernization in which it may have to cope with an influx of unfamiliar corporate concepts and practices. This paper analyzes one of the first Enterprise Resource Planning implementation projects within the academic administration of an Ivy League university. We contribute to existing qualitative literature in information systems by developing the theme of temporality within actor–network theory to support our analysis. This enables us to extend process-oriented ERP research by focusing on the identification of temporal zones and creation of durable work times designed to re-order priorities between competing visions for the future of higher education. We analyze detailed negotiations during periods of controversy to reveal how standard work practices come to be created and recreated. We consider how the ERP that emerges is affected by progressive trials of strength during the project and analyze the achievement of order as an on-going process. Our findings highlight the distinctive contribution that a ‘temporal turn’ can bring to longitudinal research studies by providing insight into the technical agency of ERP packages and how its temporal inscriptions shaped the emergence of a socio-technical information system. This reordered organizational work life and created a hybrid temporality that still needs to be negotiated into the working rhythms of the University’s actors.

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*Keywords:* Interpretivist perspective; IS implementation; Enterprise resource planning; Negotiation; Organizational change; Actor–network theory; Sociology of time; Narrative; Academic administration

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## 1. Introduction

The widespread adoption and appropriation of enterprise resource planning (ERP) technology across a variety of organizational contexts and geographical locations in recent years is well documented (Davenport, 2000; Soh, Kien, & Tay-Yap, 2000; Hossain, Patrick, & Rashid, 2002). A significant body of work has emerged identifying the issues that organizations confront in localizing these standard packages (see Rogowsky & Somers, 2002), emphasizing the importance of our continued efforts to understand the effects of large systems projects such as ERP on organizational agendas. This literature provides the necessary groundwork for thinking about how technologies are introduced, shaped, and reshaped over time and with significant organizational consequences.

In this research paper we attempt to contribute to the development of theoretical approaches focused on this process of technological design and implementation. Our case study highlights how contradictions are created by attempts to include multiple perspectives into an ERP system that is expected to be used in daily operations by diverse stakeholders in an Ivy League university. We draw on and extend contemporary thinking about technology design, actor–networks, and agency by foregrounding implicit temporal features involved in negotiating and translating interests. Our aim is to understand how organizations negotiate with ERP technology in an attempt to create a local information system. We begin by providing some background into the ERP information systems phenomena.

The last decade of the 20th century heralded ‘The Enterprise Resource Planning Revolution’ (Ross, 1998) with enterprise systems implemented within most Fortune 500 companies (Kumar & van Hillegersberg, 2000). Business leaders, persuaded by the concept of an emerging global marketplace (see Castells, 1996; Held, 1999), were convinced by the technology’s promise to streamline organizational activities, eliminate duplication of effort and data, and co-ordinate business operations across geographically dispersed locations (Davenport, 2000; Markus, Tanis & Tanis, 2000). International management consultancies were a driving force (Walsham, 2001) behind the proliferation of the trend, as they worked with software vendors to sell ERP as an appropriate ‘solution’ for multiple markets (Soh, Kien, & Tay-Yap, 2000; Walsham, 2001). Fuelled by media coverage of the feared year two-thousand (Y2K) millennium bug, the trend increased as a mass of organizations from a variety of industries, jumped on the ERP bandwagon (Kremers and Dissel, 2000; Kumar & van Hillegersberg, 2000). By early 2000, ERP-related sales generated \$40 billion in revenue split between software vendors and consulting firms (Willcocks & Sykes, 2000) and literature claimed that “the business world’s embrace of enterprise systems may in fact be the most important development in the corporate use of information technology in the 1990s” (Davenport, 1998, p. 122).

While a great deal of support can be generated for adopting the fashionable business trends of ERP, Swanson (2003, p. 24) notes that these grand visions offer promises that distract organizations from ‘knowing why they selected the ERP, and how to successfully realize its promises’ as a workable socio-technical infrastructure. The financial investment required to implement ERP technology is exponentially higher

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