



Mounting effective IT based customer service operations under emergent conditions: Deconstructing myth as a basis of understanding

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Abstract

Recent research studies have revealed how social structures or contexts can lead to unanticipated and dynamic outcomes in IT based activities. However, they have not sufficiently addressed the question of how organizations can act effectively under such emergent conditions. This research sought to address this gap, by adopting a semiotic framework of analysis, and undertaking an in-depth, interpretive case study of the customer service operations at the call center of a large retail firm. The analysis of these operations takes into account the call center's 'myth' – the underlying image on which its customer service aim or vision is based. This myth is used to highlight key tensions and incompatibilities arising in the center's operations. These incongruities are used to identify improvements in the effectiveness of the center's service practices and its use of IT. This research illustrates the potential value of using rhetorical formulations of performance aims as a means to engender useful understanding on the properties of IT use or organizational design in emergent contexts.

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1. Introduction

Information technology systems may be considered to a certain extent as pre-formulated designs for organizational action, as they are used by firms to deliberately structure or prescribe the way work is done, or the way interactions are carried out with customers,

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suppliers and other parties. On the other hand however, numerous studies have shown that the use of IT systems in organizations is also significantly characterized by *emergent* forms and consequences – dynamic patterns of organizing or unanticipated outcomes of action which cannot be explained by a priori plans or intentions (Lee, 1999; Orlikowski, 1996).

There is thus a key requirement for theoretical approaches that can capture the complex, emergent nature of organizations (Lin & Cornford, 2000; Truex, 1991). Understanding emergent outcomes in IT based work activity is particularly important at present, given the frenetic pace of change and turbulent environments that many organizations now operate in (Orlikowski, 1996). The use of IT has amplified the unpredictability of emergent effects in organizational practices (Galliers & Baets, 1998; Lee, 1999).

Using such perspectives as structuration theory (Orlikowski, 2000), actor-network theory (Walsham, 1997) or situated action theory (Suchman, 1987), recent IS studies have revealed the emergent nature of IT based activities in terms of being a process, shaped by social and cognitive structures of human agency and the context in which they occur. Central to this stream of work is the different meanings or implications that social actors ascribe to the properties and use of IT (Markus & Robey, 1988; Truex, Baskerville, & Klein, 1999). These differences are seen to engender the complex, unexpected outcomes characterizing emergent contexts of IT use.

However, this prevailing focus within the IS ‘emergence paradigm’ (Klein, 1996) may be seen to have left one area relatively unaddressed. Shulman (1999) asserts that while such studies have produced key insights on the structuring of organizational action, they offer little guidance on understanding how *effective* organizational performance is enabled or inhibited by the use of IT. This suggested the need for a different approach to extend current IS understanding in this area. It appeared necessary to study emergent IT based action from a standpoint of organizational effectiveness, rather than process or social structure. This requires taking primary account of the functional role an organization is envisioned to fulfill, as expressed by its principle aim or vision.

The empirical context of call center-based service operations seemed a fruitful arena in which to apply this fresh stance in the investigation of emergent IT based action. Call centers are a modern IT based organizational form, that is at the forefront of a current trend of technological intensification of service activity (Taylor & Bain, 2000). They have had limited attention in past IS research, despite wide, dramatic rates of adoption (Boddy, 2000). A handful of IS studies have made quantitative assessments of the impact of IT on their work environment. Staff are seen to experience greater performance in service tasks, higher mental stress, diminished quality of staff relationships, and lower job satisfaction (Irving, Higgins, & Safayeni, 1986; Kraut, Dumais, & Koch, 1989; Knights & McCabe, 1998; Subramanyam & Krishnan, 2001; Turner, 1984). Few IS studies of call centers have been qualitative, however. Orlikowski (1996), studying the use of a Lotus Notes system at an ‘IT help-desk’ call center, found that work practices altered significantly in emergent ways, in terms of quality of knowledge, patterns of collaboration, and coordination and control features. Boddy (2000) also found that the implementation process of a new call center emerged, in unanticipated ways, from interactions between users, IT tools and structural properties.

Thus, while call centers have been seen to exhibit emergent features in their operations, there has been little qualitative research on the nature of their effectiveness as service work-sites. Moreover, work conditions at these ubiquitous sites are often rife with tension and contradictions (Richardson & Howcroft, 2006), which are inadequately studied aspects of

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