



Innovating strategically in information and knowledge management: Applications of organizational behavior theory



Tor J. Larsen^{*,1}, Johan Olaisen

Department of Leadership and Organizational Behaviour, BI Norwegian Business School, Nydalsveien 37, 0442 Oslo, Norway

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ABSTRACT

A business school declares its strategy as becoming a leading European institution. As main vehicle for achieving recognition is the implementation of a top-down strategy naming five academic fields as key – (a) finance, (b) economics, (c) marketing, (d) law, accounting, and auditing, and (e) organizational behavior (OB). Top management allocates resources for research, academic activities, and positions to these five strategically chosen areas. Academic areas that are not strategically named must generate their own income through educational programs and research grants. Can OB serve as the platform to ensure the survival of IS/KMS? In our analysis, we found no other business school formulating a strategy along these lines; dominating strategic themes are internationalization, research excellence, and student environment. No academic field is singled out as strategic. We argue that selecting a few academic areas as a strategy is dysfunctional. We also found that OB is not very actively employed in research, be it positioning, theory, research model, analysis, or discussion. Hence, we do not find that OB offers any theorizing help to IS/KMS – this in contrast to innovation and change theories, for which we propose an framework as a means of defining IS/KMS research projects.

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1. Introduction

The field of information systems and knowledge management systems² (IS/KMS) has throughout its history experienced extensive change in technology, research, and education. These renewals will continue into the foreseeable future (Galliers & Currie, 2011). Yet, being met with success in developing the field in desirable direction may quite well depend on the strategy the academic institution hosting IS/KMS develops and implements.

In this article we address a true scenario in which a business school's top management enforces a top-down strategy in which the five fields of: (a) finance, (b) economics, (c) marketing, (d) law, accounting, and auditing, and (e) organizational behavior (OB) are singled out as those which shall make the business school

recognized among similar top European institutions.³ The business school declares research as being the foundation for its educational programs, research efforts, and communication with the larger society. The school is relatively large, about 15,000 students, running programs on the levels of bachelor, master, and Ph.D. In May 2010 the business school's President⁴ forwarded the new strategy of becoming a leading European business school to the Board of Directors. The strategy further specified that these target fields may be a department but also limited to a group within a department or a network of faculty across departments. Resources for new academic positions, visiting scholars, project seed resources and project support, seminars, and other academic activities, were

³ The name and location of the business school is kept anonymous. Since the business school's strategy is achieving excellence, we use the acronym *BSoFEX* for it.

⁴ A top down strategy could include other activities and structures than prioritizing a limited set of academic areas. These could be mechanistic of nature rather than organic (Burns and Stalker, 1994), including but not limited to: (1) the role and mandate of the *BSoFEX* President be developed in the direction of those of CEOs in manufacturing organizations; (2) increased monopolization of communication between the Chair of Board of Directors and President by removing the Provost from meetings with the Chair prior to Board of Directors meetings; (3) in the style of Management by Objectives (Odiorne, 1965) defining three objectives as a means to defining the next level down managers' jobs, but also serve as a means for job performance evaluation and salary increases; and (4) adherence to Critical Performance Factors (Rockart, 1979; Kaplan and Norton, 1996) in making major decisions on program portfolio and other key organizational performances.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +47 47712735.

E-mail addresses: tor.j.larsen@bi.no (T.J. Larsen), johan.olaisen@bi.no (J. Olaisen).
URL: <http://infomgt.bi.no/larsen> (T.J. Larsen).

¹ The authors, listed in alphabetical order, have contributed equally to the article.

² Different labels are used to refer to the field, for example: information technology (IT), information communication technology (ICT), information systems (IS), management information systems (MIS), and information management (IM). Knowledge management systems (KMS) is increasingly taken into use. Each term has its proponents; however, the terms are often used interchangeably. We use the term Information and Knowledge Management Systems (IS/KMS), see Harzing (2013).

to be prioritized to these target fields. Fields other than those prioritized would be maintained as long as they successfully generate an acceptable level of income through the delivery of educational activities, externally funded research projects, and grants. In principle, if a field were to lose its attraction in the market, it would be discontinued.

Because of these changes in focus, the faculty group of information systems and knowledge management systems (IS/KMS), in the newly renamed Department of Organizational Behavior, recognized the need for questioning its traditional thinking. Renewal and change in research and education became critical factors for future survival. It is recognized that IS/KMS is a key force in the ongoing societal and organizational renewal and change (Baskerville & Myers, 2002; Davis, 2000; Kebede, 2010). For example, in the US business sector, IS/KMS continues to consume about a 30% of yearly total investments made (Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2012). Recent research documents that IS/KMS supports the creation of business value, with particular emphasis on an organization's innovation and change capabilities (Aral, Brynjolfsson, & Wu, 2012; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2011). Knowledge management systems is, by default, strongly related to information systems; their creation, acquisition, implementation, and use (see for example, Bera, Burton-Jones, & Wand, 2011; Davis, 2000; Harzing, 2013; Hirscheim & Klein, 2012). Hence, in the following material we denote the two intertwined areas of information systems and knowledge management as IS/KMS. Traditionally, research in IS/KMS has been interdisciplinary in nature – since it draws on innovation theory, models of value creation, actors' roles and behaviors, the creation and running of task oriented groups, and how these relate to organizational structures and mechanisms (see for example, Roberts, Galluch, Dinger, & Grover, 2012). Yet, throughout its history the question of benefits from investing in IS/KMS has been lively discussed. Progress in understanding these key questions requires continued research into the role and connections among these complex issues and relationships. Organizational behavior theories may have the potential for further development of IS/KMS theories and increased understanding of its practical value. The benefits may be two-fold; first, organizational behavior (OB) focus on individuals and groups—their relationship to change and change processes, and second, organizational behavior is concerned with the interactions among individual actors, groups, and the larger organizational environment. We note that in undergraduate programs in IS in Great Britain, OB is ranked as the eighth most included business domain (Stefanidis, Fitzgerald, & Counsell, 2012).

Hence, the objective of the present research project is the identification of particular promising theories and concepts in OB and how these relate to the established insights into innovation and change capabilities in IS/KMS. In particular, the project is concerned with identifying the “people” behind organizational behavior theories and concepts. Through the identification of key actors, we intend to document how promising theories and concepts have been employed in practice. Our three intertwined research questions are:

RQ1: Do business schools single out some academic fields as strategic relative to others?

RQ2: Will organizational behavior be one of strategic academic fields?

RQ3: To what degree will organizational behavior theories and concepts support and assist in the further development of established theories and concepts in IS/KMS?

We are particularly concerned with the degree of research value in OB theories and concepts when compared and contrasted with approaches in innovation and change theory. The final outcome

would be propositions addressing the integration of theories, concepts, and value creation into the formulation of propositions, statements of direction, and frameworks. The article proceeds with background, methods, analysis, discussion, implications, and conclusions.

2. Background

The prerequisite for understanding the role of organizational behavior is a thorough understanding of its definition, leading us to question #1:

Q1: What are the salient definitions of OB?

At our *BSoFEX*, Organizational behavior is promoted to play a strategic role. To our understanding, the role has two aspects: (1) that also comparable academic institutions would name certain areas as strategic relative to other academic fields; and (2) that OB would be among these – otherwise it would not be possible to draw conclusions relative to OB's strategic impact. Hence, question 2 becomes:

Q2: Would recognized academic business institutions, as part of their strategy, select specific fields as a vehicle for obtaining recognition, and would OB be among these?

“The proof is in the eating of the pudding,” says an old proverb. By this we mean that if OB is to play a decisive role, it must be actively put into use. We propose that this use must have a degree of uniqueness within its core rather than a term being employed by all, hence:

Q3: In academic publications, would OB serve as a vehicle for differentiating a core group from other fields of academic activity (in particular, those having been chosen as being strategic)?

It follows that if OB is to serve a strategic purpose, it must be concretely employed in academic publications. We propose the following question:

Q4: In academic publications, is OB actively employed as a vehicle for creating focus, as an active element in discussion, and in the development of theories and practice?

For a strategy to work, it must be accepted among those mandated with carrying it out. In academia, this would imply that the research faculty would not only be cognizant of OB theories, but also recognize OB's strategic role. We propose the following question:

Q5: Do individual academicians in IS/KMS employ OB theories and concepts, do they recognize OB in its own right, and would they think it has a strategic role?

3. Methods

In identifying OB definitions (**Q1**) two sources were consulted; (1) The most recognized textbooks in OB and (2) academic articles in the EBSCO EconLit database, through the Lancaster University library services, using the search terms of *organizational behavior* AND *definition*. The EBSCO data base was found appropriate since it has 9243 entries filed for the search term *organizational behavior* (as of August 2011). The data for **Q2**, pertaining to specifying specific academic areas for recognition and if OB is included as one, were derived from top European and US business schools' statements on their internet web pages. The list of institutions visited is found in Appendix A. For finding articles that use the term OB (**Q3**), EBSCO was used by entering the search terms *organizational behavior* and *knowledge management*, *organizational behavior* and *finance*, etc., for the areas pointed out as strategically important. Also obtained for comparison was the number of articles in EBSCO

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