

Using a case study to test the role of three key social enablers in ERP implementation

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Abstract

The literature indicates that three key social enablers—strong and committed leadership, open and honest communication, and a balanced and empowered implementation team are necessary conditions/precursors for successful enterprise resource planning (ERP) implementation. In a longitudinal positivist case study, we find that, while all three enablers may contribute to ERP implementation success, only strong and committed leadership can be empirically established as a necessary condition. This presents a challenge to future ERP researchers for resolving apparent contradictions between the existing literature and the results of our analysis. One possible direction for future research would be to undertake an interpretive re-examination of the rationalistic assumptions that underlie much of the existing literature on ERP systems implementation.

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1. Introduction

Today, enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems are considered to be “the price of entry for running a business” [19], and large growth rates in ERP implementation, especially among mid-sized and small-sized companies, are expected worldwide [2,9,14,30,44]. Unfortunately, a significant proportion of ERP implementation projects do not succeed [5,7,10], and a number of potential explanations for ERP implementation failures have been offered in the literature [7,18,29,38] that may broadly be classified as human/organizational

(e.g. lack of strong and committed leadership), technical (e.g. problems in software customization and testing, and lack of technically knowledgeable staff), and economic (e.g. lack of economic planning and justification). While each set of factors is important, there appears to be a growing consensus among researchers that human factors, more than technical or economic, are critical to the success of ERP projects [3,19,26,29,32]. Surprisingly, few studies have attempted to examine the role of these human factors through detailed analysis in an empirical setting.

In this study, we seek to fill this void by focusing on three human/organizational issues or social enablers (*strong and committed leadership, open and honest communication, and a balanced and empowered ERP*

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Table 1
Results of the deductive case study

<i>Social enablers</i>	<i>Phase I: changing organization structure and culture to prepare for ERP software introduction</i>	<i>Phase II: implementing “core modules” of BASYS—the chosen ERP software</i>	<i>Phase III: implementing the configurator, an “add-on module” of BASYS</i>
	<i>Outcome: success</i>	<i>Outcome: success</i>	<i>Outcome: failure</i>
Strong and committed leadership	Present at all relevant levels	Present at the top level, process level, project-level, and for the MIS function	Absent
Open and honest communication	Almost not present between top management and rest of the organization; later, communication channels among functional units started opening up	Great deal of communication present, though sometimes selective and deceptive. Not much communication among implementation-team and shop-floor workers	Communication between implementers and other stakeholders almost absent
Balanced and empowered team	Absent in the first part of Phase I; no “team” in the second part; thus no possibility of “empowered team.” Some of the individuals involved in this phase were partially empowered though	Present; team carefully chosen; members were clearly empowered	Not balanced, somewhat empowered

implementation team) that have been suggested to be necessary conditions for ERP implementation success in the literature.¹ While we do not claim that these are the only social enablers that deserve careful investigation, we have chosen to study them because of the importance attributed to them in the ERP literature. We examine the role of these key enablers using an intensive longitudinal case study of a company that implemented an ERP system in three phases. Table 1 summarizes results of our case study, in which we evaluated the outcome of each phase and the presence or absence of the hypothesized necessary conditions. Our analysis reveals that strong and committed leadership is essential to the success of an ERP implementation initiative; however, the presence of open and honest communication and an empowered and balanced implementation team cannot be empirically established as “necessary conditions” for ERP implementation success (as implied in the literature). This finding provides future ERP researchers with a puzzle regarding the three enablers that is worthy of further investigation.

Our paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we develop the propositions regarding the three social enablers. In Section 3, we discuss our methodology. In

Section 4, we describe our case study and test the propositions developed. In Section 5, we discuss some implications for future research.

2. Social enablers of ERP implementation success

In this section, we review the literature to discern testable propositions regarding the role of the three key social enablers identified. At the outset, we would like to mention that the ERP literature does not provide precise definition of the “constructs” (i.e. the enablers) used in our propositions. For example, none of the sources on ERP that we came across specifically delineates what leadership means (or involves) in the context of ERP implementation. While this may seem disconcerting at first, a review of authoritative texts on leadership [4] reveals that “[t]here are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept,” and that leadership may be conceptualized based on “nucleus of tendency, personality in action, induction of compliance, influence relation, power differential, persuasion, influence act, influence on goal achievement, . . . status position, . . . reinforcement, and initiation of structure,” all of which may be applicable in an ERP implementation setting. Similarly,

¹ We also consider the BPR literature, because ERP implementation usually involves BPR [17,27,34,37].

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