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USER RESISTANCE STRATEGIES AND THE PROBLEMS OF BLANKET PRESCRIPTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF RESISTANCE SUCCESSES

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Abstract

There is a growing body of research on resistance in IS projects, a good deal of which focuses on strategies for overcoming resistance. However, within this strand of research, it appears that there is a 'blanket prescription' approach that does not account for diversity in resistance reasoning. We offer a qualitative study of the response of diverse actors to a pilot of a custom developed client tracking information system, which brought about diverse covert and overt resistance activities. This empirical research is used to explore the heterogeneous user and how such a 'blanket prescription' to avert organisational-wide resistance went wrong and how resistance succeeded. This paper aims to contribute to the body of existing literature on IS user resistance by emphasizing the injurious continuous error of excluding such constructs as the heterogeneous user within user resistance research.

Keywords: User Resistance, User Participation, Organisational Change, Strategic Management of Systems Development.

1 INTRODUCTION

The issue of user resistance is a key strategic consideration in IS projects. Indeed, there has been a significant body of literature examining the complexities of user resistance in IS projects dating back several decades (Keen 1981; Dickson and Simmons 1970). Attention has been given to the reasons for resistance and strategies to resolve this phenomenon yet there is still no widespread conformity on how to successfully tackle this continuing issue (Hirschheim and Newman 1988). Whilst emphasis has been placed on investigating the link between user acceptance and user resistance (Davis 1989; Venkatesh et al 2003; Delone and McLean 1992; Wong and Tate 1994), much of this work ignores (or turns a blind eye) to the heterogeneous, situated nature of users (Lamb and Kling, 2003) and with that the further nuance of system purpose (Jiang et al 2000). Additionally there is a lack of attention to the potential tensions between different users affected by the development and implementation process which if addressed would focus the lens somewhat upon the heterogeneous user (Markus 1983, and Wong and Tate 1994). Yet, it seems reasonable to highlight that users reactions, intentions and behaviour may differ if a system type is mandatory, voluntary, hedonic and based on user characteristics such as level within any given organisational hierarchy (Marakus and Hornik 1996; Barki and Huff 1985; van der Heijden 2004; Jiang et al 2000; Butler and Fitzgerald 1997). With this in mind, our study is concerned with the idea that organisational actors involved in technological change are not a homogeneous group but rather a group of users belonging to distinct groupings, each with their own organisational agendas, personal agendas and societal worldviews. In this paper, against a backdrop of user resistance in an IS context, we aim to explore this further by drawing upon a case study of a pilot of a custom developed customer relationship management system. In doing this we point to the need to consider the *heterogeneous resistant user* and how a blanket prescription based strategy for overcoming resistance simultaneously proved problematic for change agents whilst it

became a conduit for successful resistance for various organisational actors. The paper opens by briefly considering the nature of user resistance within an IS context. This exploration was edifying in highlighting some problems and limitations of the resultant 'blanket prescription' strategies designed for overcoming resistance, and these failings are further discussed. In the following section we present an interpretation of the findings from a case study of the responses of diverse actors involved in an IS pilot project which brought about diverse covert and overt resistance activities. Finally conclusions are drawn which centre on providing insights into why a 'blanket prescription' strategy to avert organisational-wide resistance went wrong and how user resistance succeeded. In sum, we argue this is because the generic, prescriptive strategy for overcoming resistance deployed by the Managing Director (MD) did not account for the diversity in resistance strategies employed by various organisational actors.

2 USER RESISTANCE AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS

Users of IS often respond in different ways to technological changes (Dickson and Simmons 1970), ranging from total rejection, to a moderate rejection of some of its functionality (Markus 1983; Doolin 2004), demonstrated resistance (Hirschheim and Newman 1988), passive resistance (Marakas and Hornik 1996), or reluctant begrudging acceptance (Brown et al 2002; Jiang et al 2000). Resistance is therefore a reaction or a symptom (Hirschheim and Newman 1988), an indicator of users attempting to realign the change process, and if it is not considered it can undermine the system implementation efforts and result in failure. In a general context, resistance can be understood as the intentional acts of commission or omission that defy the wishes of others (Ashforth and Mael 1998; Newman 1989). More specifically, in an organisational context, we can view resistance as the activities or intentions through which those in organisations seek to oppose official and unofficial forms of control (Gabriel 2000, Newman 1989, Marakas and Hornik 1996). In an IS context, this might be exemplified as the negative behaviour of system users that may prevent system designers achieving their objectives and, ultimately, system implementation (Markus, 1983).

The study, and practice of, user resistance is diverse in nature, as we shall now explore further. Some recognise that any resistant behaviour to IS which exhibits itself in *overt* manner (Marakas and Hornik 1996; Keen 1981; King and Anderson 1995; Newman 1989) is generally thought to be dysfunctional (Newman 1989) motivated by crime or personal gain (Hirschheim and Newman 1988) oral defamation, refusal to use the system (Martinko et al 1996) and involves active sabotage and destruction of hardware (Martinko et al 1996). Marakas and Hornik (1996) further argue that users may engage in destructive behaviour in an attempt to regain a control over their environment so that they are not at the mercy of the new technology. Others recognise that resistant behaviour to IS can be passive and *covert* (Lauer and Rajagopalan 2003; Marakas and Hornik 1996; King and Anderson 1995). Here, the passive resister may resentfully accept the system, customising working practices, silently scheming to conspire in its downfall with a hidden agenda (Moynihan 2002). They may exhibit acceptance like behaviour and use this to mask acts of resistance. These styles of resistance are hard to detect (Newman 1989). Users may reluctantly accept (Brown et al 2002), divert and challenge imposed systems and rules (Doolin 2004), and purposely use a system in a minimal fashion (Martinko et al 1996). Thus, resistance can be overt and covert, active and passive.

The debate whether user resistance is either a positive or a negative construct is ongoing within the IS community (Friedman and Cornford, 1989; Wilson 1999; Grover et al, 1988). Some recognise the concept of resistance as being *functional*, positive, and a legitimate behavioural response to technological change (Hirschheim and Newton 1988), a rational response by a rational user to dysfunctional or flawed technologies that require redesign or restructuring (Davis et al 1992; Martinko et al 1996; Marakas et al 1996)). However is argued that it is also, most usually seen as a negative *dysfunctional* activity that requires eradication or neutralising (Hirschheim and Newman's 1989). As King and Anderson (1995) state, resistance is wholly in the eye of the beholder. The beholder is

usually those trying to deal with resistance, rather than those who are performing it. Resistance is typically seen as a problem of the resisters (Friedman and Cornford, 1989; Grover et al., 1988; Newman 1989) but Lyytinen's (1988) empirical investigation into IS failures is studied from a management viewpoint and Newman (1989) focuses the phenomenon through the IS practitioner viewpoint. Jiang et al (1997) also highlight the importance of taking into account other stakeholders perceptions in IS projects, arguing that 'failures associated with IS development, users and IS professionals do indeed have differing perceptions' (Jiang et al 1997:936). Thus, depending upon the perspective taken, resistance can be seen as functional and dysfunctional. Of course the reasons for the occurrence of resistance are similarly lacking homogeneity, IS related change is argued to embody a lack of familiarity, altering relationships, working patterns, and communication channels threatening perceived status, power and authority (Keen 1981; Grover 1988; Markus and Pfeffer 1983). Also resistance is often a response to the re-distribution of information, the breaking down of established monopolies equating to the dissolution of existing power structures (Keen 1981; Markus 1983 Katz and Kahn 1978), whilst, there is research that focuses upon reasons for resistance, the predominant reason is the resistor's pathological fear of change (Friedman and Cornford, 1989; Selwyn 2003; Hirschheim et al 1988).

Thus, there is a great deal of diversity in the way that resistance is conceptualised and enacted. Where resistance is seen as an issue that needs to be dealt with, then there are various strategies to overcome resistance are deployed. Jiang, Muhanna et al. (2000) report on a variety of strategies that researchers have identified to overcome resistance, which they classify into two groupings: participative and directive. Participative strategies are '*user friendly*' and focus upon training, building support structures, releasing adequate resources; architecting an optimistic environment. The directive strategies are practical '*business driven solutions*' and focus upon financial incentives for use of system, user rights directives, role modifications, power redistribution, top management support, job status modification, and job counselling but ultimately job elimination for those who do not want to learn to use the new system. We have yet to find prescriptions and methods for encouraging resistance! What is noticeable are the generic prescriptions and examples of non-specific guidelines and/or generic solutions for indistinct users (Keen 1981; Markus 1981; Moynihan 2003) with blanket strategies for predicting (Kettinger 2002), pre-empting (Martinko et al. 1996) and over-coming (Keen 1981) resistance. Yet, given so much diversity in the conceptualisation and enactment of resistance – it is overt/covert, functional/dysfunctional, and acted out for a myriad of reasons, then it is surprising that the strategies deployed are not as diverse. With this in mind, we now further investigate the problems of deploying blanket strategies for overcoming diverse acts of resistance, through a case study of a pilot IT project.

3 BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our case is an expanding Management Consultancy small to medium enterprise 'Jarman'¹ that at the time of this investigation was experiencing an accelerated growth, the company quadrupled in size, expanding from two-sites to a six-site operation with a national UK coverage. ICT investment was seen as a significant strategic issue - to support the expanding organisation. The IT project we discuss here concerns the pilot of a custom, in-house developed application to support and monitor the progress of a client through their process of mentoring and networking. This work is part of a wider case study of user resistance within the same organisation (Craig-Smith, 1990; Walsham 1995). We chose the single case approach as we agree with Darke et al's (1998) view that single cases allow researchers to investigate phenomena in depth in order to provide rich description and understanding. For this part of the case study, multiple techniques of data collection were used, the most predominant being participant and non-participant observation and formal and informal interviews. One of the

¹ to pseudonym

researchers was based on site full-time as a researcher for two years as part of a Teaching Company Scheme. Another researcher attended the organisation in support of the project at least one day per week for the two years – we were highly engaged researchers (Nandhakumar and Jones, 1997). We both observed and participated in the project from the requirement gathering stage and through to implementation and attempted use. This enabled very rich insights - as each version of the pilot scheme was presented reactions and responses were gathered. Once the pilot scheme became live, the mandatory activity was monitored on a daily basis in addition the accumulating diverse resistance strategies deployed. In addition historical documentation was made available together with unlimited access to the new client tracking system documentation. A thorough contextualisation exercise was enabled which lends this empirical data more depth as interrelationships and behavioural patterns could be observed. What this investigation allowed us to witness was the termination of the pilot scheme due to user resistance success. This study presents the opportunity to observe a multifarious user group resisting technology induced change and also provide empirical evidence as related to the utility of the blanket prescription so often put forward by those theories that conceptualise resistance as pathological, problematic and unnecessary rather than symptomatic, educational and useful. Attention has been exerted in developing the case data in more depth to ensure that readers may achieve a genuine empathy with the organisational actors involved. The authors are aware that this may result in allocation issues in other components of the research process to be perceived as ‘gently’ lacking for more description but in this instance the case data is highly relevant in justifying the overall argument.

4 CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Jarman is a management consultancy that works with senior executives to find them new roles when they have been made redundant. It does this through processes of mentoring and networking facilitated by a personal executive career consultant. This working relationship between consultants and Jarman is very informal with clients being allocated on an as and when basis. It is a mutually dependent relationship where the implicit and explicit connections blur because once the client procedure starts and the initial basic contact and contract details have been recorded and centrally stored, the continuing client information is stored by and kept externally with the consultant. The rationale has always been that client information maybe of a sensitive nature so should be stored securely but this procedure is becoming problematic as the company expands and the client base grows. In order to manage the existing process, regular updates (were supposed to be) submitted by the consultants (either by e-mail, written and sometimes verbally) to administrators for entry onto the client system. The process is and always has been problematic because of the tension between Jarman management needing progress data about clients and consultants not wanting to give too much information away. It was felt that situation required investment, not a simple financial infusion but time for changes to embedded ad hoc working practices. A decision was made, reluctantly but perceptively by the Managing Director to further develop the existing IT support and in doing so centralise and formalise the process. Once those changes had been established and accepted a second stage was planned, to enable consultants to securely enter client details directly onto the system. An enterprise wide package was being selected for implementation in a years’ time and thus, there was a twelve month window to undertake preparatory incremental change. A pilot scheme was set up, newly designed forms, training sessions, written guidelines and improved reporting functionality was added to existing client system. The team conducting the pilot were available on a daily basis for all the stakeholders involved in the client process and update the MD on a fortnightly basis. Our investigation centres on examining how a diverse user group reacted to the pilot which involved altering a decade of embedded working practices.

5 THE ORGANISATIONAL ACTORS

The users included a broad spectrum of staff from the administrative, through middle management and to director level. Each had agendas, concerns and dilemmas when confronted with mandatory involvement in the pilot project. Table 1 below details the organisational actors' roles with respect to the existing system and what was required of them throughout the pilot study and the hierarchical status that they hold. The timings of the pilot study were flexible because an objective was to alter embedded behaviour and it was mutually agreed that a rigid timeframe maybe too restrictive. However, the pilot was not a new idea sprung upon the actors, there was documentary evidence that discussion and meetings had taken place for over the last decade of how to capture client data. Senior Management were aware that opposition and confrontation would be the universal response to the planned changes. This was confirmed by the reaction of the actors involved in the requirement gathering stage and reiterated when the Administrator reported that from the onset the pilot was being avoided. In response the MD devised a naming and shaming strategy in an attempt to overcome resistance and ensure that the pilot would be a success. The naming and shaming strategy worked as follows. Under the direction of the MD, the Administrator was given a form by the project team which contained key milestones in the provision of service provided to clients. These milestones were linked to particular organisational actors. The administrator was instructed to report anyone who did not complete, or, inform her that they had completed any given milestone, as it should be. On a weekly basis this 'report' was made into a list and given to the MD. He would then circulate that list throughout the company, via e-mail, to all staff and external consultants thus naming and shaming people who were perceived as resisters. The strategy continued for 4 weeks and it was discontinued at this point as everyone had been named. The strategy had not worked as people were still resisting en-mass, the use of the modified system. We will now explore further why the strategy failed and the resisters succeeded by considering particular organisational actors responses to the naming and shaming strategy. In ease case we begin by explaining their role as related to the system and consider what they are resisting, why and how. We then highlight why the blanket strategy of naming and shaming didn't work.

| Organisational Actors | Current role with the existing system | Role in the pilot study |
|---|--|--|
| Administrator (supporting role to Sales Director and Consultants, no managerial responsibilities) | Role involved keeping database current, often required to answer analytical requests, maintain factually correct data for monthly board reports. They currently enter key data onto a database from paper forms, e-mails, verbal instructions and personally seeking data directly from clients | Monitor the usage of pilot system, report and collect instances of misuse. The role was to police all activity, naming individuals that did not conform which meant reporting more senior people to their superiors (Not a natural role but some enjoyed the power) |
| Management Director (MD) Reporting only to the Chairman of the Board) | Little input but as the founder was closely involved with the current design so demonstrated parochial issues | If Administrator was police then the MD was judge, jury and executor |
| Consultants Self Employed but highly respected a Managing Consultant representing them on the Board) | Supplying data to administrator via a paper based form which should be completed with the client on the first meeting (this then triggers the financial process and an invoice should be sent to the clients previous employer) | The pilot study was an attempt to change working practices by encouraging the release of client data, the timely inputs of data and ultimately exposure to new process of data entry but firstly paper based |
| Sales Directors (Reporting to a Regional Director but hold position on the Board, also Head specialist interest) | Their role is to conduct the introductory client meeting and start the New Client Form (NCF), which also includes the client's details and also <u>importantly</u> the product which has been sold. This ultimately determines the length of time, | Meet with the client and start the (NCF) must include client program. This is where they stop contact with the client (there are many instances of NCFs not being started so no one is aware that the client is requiring consultancy |

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| groups) | which band of research activities, the class of care | sessions |
|---------|--|----------|

Table 1: Heterogeneous user group

5.1 The Administrator

Historically, the administrator was the member of staff who usually inputted new client data into the existing database. The data came from a new client form that was completed by a consultant and handed to her. With the implementation of the pilot, additional data also had to be input into the system, and moreover, consultants were expected to input their own data wherever possible. The administrator resisted the pilot for a number of reasons because she had to input extra data into the system and her power base was being eroded. These were points of resistance because a) she had to undertake additional work and b) because, prior to the pilot, she was the only person in the organisation that had access to client data on the computer. The implication of the latter being, that her role might eventually be made redundant or changed significantly, particularly as related to the downgrading of her status. In terms of her resistance strategy, she vocalised, and exaggerated, the instances of incorrect data entry by others, and continually highlighted the fact that other people could cause big problems if they were allowed access to the system. Thus she created an atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the pilot. The blanket prescription of naming and shaming did not overcome her resistance activities because her role she wanted to put the data in so she was never going to be shamed. Indeed, she compiled the naming and shaming list, and this actually supported part of her strategy of resistance – to show that other people being involved would make the system fall down.

5.2 The Consultants

This group of actors were powerful members - being self-employed allowed them some protection from company protocols. New clients were matched with consultants based on their skills and expertise and they were paid monthly usually regardless of how often they met with the client, payment ending once the client became recruited. The majority of client data related to, collected during and required for the recruitment campaign was stored off-site with the consultants, they submitted monthly reports about their clients to the Administrator and she inputted the data onto the existing system, but this was on an ad-hoc basis, in different formats and any immediate client updates was usually only collected verbally. However, the pilot required all client-consultant recruitment activities, CV, networking, speculative letters, and such details to be captured and that all client meetings be logged centrally. The Consultants resisted the perceived monitoring, they did not want their client-consultant activities scrutinised. Currently **they** were managing the recruitment campaign, and they did not want to share their knowledge or expertise. They resisted the pilot because their powerful positions were under threat and they were also required to contribute to this threat by inputting the data themselves. Reasons for resistance were apprehension of a reduction in power and perceived status, a dilution of their knowledge, the current private client relationship was to become public and all meetings logged which may impact on their fees if the quota was not met. Moreover many of them anticipated having to do what they saw as the non-paid 'secretarial' work of inputting data into the 'final' enterprise system and this was not part of their role. There was also a real fear of the new technology, the consultants were predominately near retirement age and some were IT literate. Conspiring with each other, the Consultants became an imposing force, adding extra alarmed voices by highlighting inadequacies and shortcomings of the pilot and the new procedures, by questioning the confidentiality and security risks of centralising highly sensitive private data. The Consultants tactic was to ignore initial attempts to demand this information of them until they were directly asked or coerced into providing it (that is, potentially through loss of client contracts). However, the pilot scheme dissolved before this stage was reached in earnest. A further tactic was avoidance and distraction by creating a chaotic problematic situation when they seemed to be attempting to enter data

onto the system . This was helped enormously by the fact that Consultants had to share PCs with part-time staff members. Thus, they claimed they could not access the system when they needed to, and that when they did, it didn't work. They also began to demand formal training (which they new would take time and resource to organise). In addition, increasingly, the Consultants arranged meetings away from the office to further avoid confrontation regarding the pilot. The name and shame strategy failed predominantly because, the consultants could not be shamed into entering the data, because they were self employed (and in fact many also worked for one of Jarman's competitors). Thus, the consultants were empowered not to respond to this kind of coercion. Moreover, an added difficulty for the MD was that most of the consultants were nearing retirement age anyway, and so would not have been so worried had more extreme measures been taken, such as non-renewal of contracts. The consultants, in short, would not be intimidated because of the balance of power relations between them and those at Jarman.

5.3 The Sales Directors

The Sales Directors' roles in the client tracking process was to conduct an introductory meeting with the new clients and match them with a Consultant. This involved arranging a meeting at the company premises where they would start a new client record. Basic contact data was collected alongside the details of what service level the client purchased. This data collection was very informal, sometimes completed on a paper and handed to the Administrator for inputting. Sometimes it was e-mailed but in some cases the Administrator would be told to collect the required information on the second client visit as the Sales people were to busy at the introductory meeting. This might mean the client services team did not find out about a new client for some times leading to a delay in service provision. The pilot was supposed to deal with this problem. However, The sales team were Directors so there was an immediate resistance to the requests that formalised the structure of their work. Moreover, the anticipated extra workload of populating the pilot with mandatory data was completely frowned upon because of the additional work and the fact that many were not IT literate. A further issue was that the directors did not want explicit details of the deals made between themselves and the client being publicised via the system because although services were standardised variations in pricing and the configuration of the service was done at the client level based on what the sales director thought it would take to finalise the deal. This kind of knowledge was very much a source of power for this group. Finally, the sales directors deemed themselves above data entry activity, seeing it as secretarial work. Moreover, the were completely against the idea of being policed by a subordinate staff member. The Administrator who was appointed the person to 'police' the pilot was placed in a dubious position having to inform on her superiors to their superiors. The name and shame strategy did not work with the sales directors primarily because they were senior members of staff who felt they could legitimately resist. However, because these were senior staff their position was used to avoid being named and shamed by resisting covertly as well as overtly. These staff made the Administrator enter their data for them. Ironically, the Administrator was happy to do this as it supported her, in her resistance strategy. Yet, even if she had not been happy to do this, it is likely she would have done anyway – because they were her superiors.

5.4 Discussion

We have provided insights into the organisational actors' motives and mechanisms for resisting and also insights into why the name and shame strategy did not work. We show that there is diversity in what these actors were resisting, why and how. This analysis goes some way to explaining why the blanket strategy failed. In summary, the blanket prescription strategy did not allow for any demarcation of the actors involved in resistance activities nor did it attempt to facilitate an understanding of *why* these senior professionals, external Consultants and administration staff resisted. The case of the administrator demonstrates how a strategy for overcoming resistance might actually be

consistent with, and even reinforce a certain individual, or groups resistance strategy. The more people who were listed on the naming and shaming list, the better for the administrator as it supported her view that the system should be left to her. The underlying assumption was that the existing system worked, why change it? The case of the consultants shows how some groups may not respond to a particular strategy because they are not intimidated by it. Underlying a lack of intimidation of course, are a complex set of power relations which the name and shame strategy just did not take account of. This was also the case with the sales directors. However, the case of the sales directors also illustrates the fact that the name and shame strategy really was configured for overt resistance – the obvious behaviours associated with NOT using the new system. It did not account for covert resistance where the sales directors avoided being named and shamed by passing their work over to the Administrator. Combined, the cases also show how, intended or otherwise, diverse acts of resistance might reinforce each other. The sales directors passing their work to the administrator, the consultants' protests regarding the problems of the system and their demands for training all went some way to supporting the Administrator in her efforts to keep existing practices. In the end, all of the strategies worked as the pilot was withdrawn, temporarily at least.

6 CONCLUSION

Resistance is clearly a strategic consideration in any IS project and there is a pressing need to understand the area further. There is need for a broader perspective of this multifaceted phenomenon and a continuing insistence from academia that a better understanding of resistance will lead to enhanced, informed strategies for working with it (Markus 1983; Lauer and Rajagopalan 2003). Prior work recognised diversity in the conceptualisation and enactment of resistance, yet it appears that strategies for 'dealing with' resistance as prescribed in the literature, and deployed in practice (as our case shows) seem to lack sufficient attention to this. We have therefore investigated this matter further and have offered insights into the failure of a blanket strategy deployed to overcome diverse resistance strategies. The result being the 'failure' of a pilot project and claims of success for the resisters. How long lived this will be remains to be seen, the company in question is in the process of deploying the enterprise system. The purpose of this paper is descriptive rather than prescriptive which why there are no specific guidelines or recommendations emerging from the case study findings. However, in sum, it is clear that when attempting to answer the why and how questions of IS resistance, attention should be given to the heterogeneity of user groups and their responses to different aspects of IS development, which will only contribute to a richer understanding of the phenomenon.

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