12-31-2007

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CULTURAL BARRIERS/ENABLERS IN IMPLEMENTING E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, information and communication technology (ICT), particularly web based technologies, has created a more complex and challenging IT environment for governments throughout the world. As more and more activities are migrating from physical to virtual medium, users and employees have been faced with relentless pressure to use technology. Increasingly it has been acknowledged that one of the main determinants of IT success is organisational culture and consequently the purpose of this paper is to examine cultural barriers and enablers which have impeded or facilitated the implementation of e-government initiatives in Malaysia. In this paper, an anthropological framework based on the Grid and Group cultural theory of Mary Douglas is put forward as a more viable framework for understanding this issue in more depth. This framework identifies four cultural cosmologies- hierarchism, egalitarianism, individualism and fatalism. We argue that cultural cosmologies can have both enabling and constraining characteristics and that cultural pluralism in the enabling forms of hierarchism, egalitarianism and individualism is essential for the successful implementation and operation of e-government services. We illustrate these points through two case studies in Malaysia- one displaying constraining characteristics, which impeded IT implementation/use and the other displaying enabling characteristics, which facilitated IT implementation/use.

Keywords: E-government, organisational culture, anthropology, IT implementation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Increasingly government departments worldwide are recognising the importance of Information Technology (IT) to enhance service efficiency, streamline processes and become more business oriented (Bannister and Walsh, 2002). Inevitably, public organisations are finding it increasingly difficult to cope with such persistent and incessant technological changes. Unfortunately, the harsh reality is that the rates of technological advancements are vastly exceeding the ability of many public organisations to cope with such changes, often resulting in increased organisational inertia, managerial uncertainty and cultural resistance. Technology is now widely diffused to all organisational levels, fundamentally requiring not only a technological understanding, but also a greater understanding of the social, behavioral and cultural factors, which can impede or facilitate change, as users interact with technology.
As a consequence the implementation and use of IT in organisations can no longer be viewed as a linear process by which the organisation adapts to technological change or that the technology determines the organisational use of IT, instead it involves a complex understanding of the interaction arising between social and technological forces. Although the literature has applied many theoretical models for understanding the reciprocal nature of how the social responds to the technological, they are increasingly not without criticism. One of the major criticisms (Gallivan and Srite, 2005; Huang et al, 2003) is the lack of understanding of cultural issues, and how actors respond and relate to technology at the individual level.

Despite the importance of understanding how cultural factors influence E-government initiatives, research models/ frameworks remain scarce in this area. Most studies can be criticised for adhering to a static view of culture through the use of quantitative methodology, (Hofstede, 1980; Tan et al, 1998; Rose et al, 2003) and for assuming that all actors collectively share the same values, beliefs and norms (Avison and Myers, 1995). Instead, organisations are more likely to consist of a number of competing beliefs.

2. ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Many IS researchers (Leidner and Kayworth, 2006; Kaarst-Brown and Robey, 1999) have discussed the importance of organisational culture within the literature and to the study of e-government/public sector organisations (Burn and Robins, 2003; Margetts and Dunleavy, 2002). Although organisational culture is a widely studied topic, conceptual obscurities persist to destabilise the concept. Unfortunately, this has led to confusion and complexity in defining organisational culture (Leidner and Kayworth, 2006). For instance, even as far back as the 1950s, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) in reviewing definitions of culture found 164 different conceptualisations.

Two major research approaches to the study of organisational culture include “functionalist” versus “interpretative” approaches (Smircich, 1983). Functionalist approaches regard culture as a “variable”, which can be objectively measured, and is something which an organisation “has”. In comparison, interpretative approaches regard culture less as a variable and something an organisation “is” (Smircich, 1983). In the former case, culture is perceived as objective, and the main focus is on building generalisations across large samples. In the latter case, culture is more subjective, socially constructed and manifested through human consciousness and sub-group interactions.

Increasingly researchers (Avison and Myers, 1995; Murray et al, 2005) have highlighted the need for more interpretative studies/ frameworks to study the relationship between IS and culture. Despite, such recognition, most studies tend to take a functionalist approach to culture. From this viewpoint, culture is defined as something which is collectively shared by members of an organisation. Many IS researchers (Abdul-Gader, 1997; Kamel and Davison, 1996; King and Sethi, 1999) have been influenced by Hofstede’s (1980) definition of culture and conceptualise culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (Hofstede, 1980). Ein-Dor et al (1993) defines culture as “the totality of socially transmitted behavioral patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work”. Therefore the greater the shared values of an organisation, the greater or stronger the organisational culture (Deal and Kennedy, 1982).

However, one concern with these definitions is that they ignore the fact that organisations can consist of a range of sub-cultural values (Huang et al, 2003). Increasingly, researchers (Geertz, 1973; Gallivan and Srite, 2005) have highlighted that culture should not to be treated as an
object that can be objectively perceived, measured or classified, but requires interpretation and an understanding of how individuals socially construct meaning. Ford et al (2003) in providing a critique of the culture literature highlighted three major problems with Hofstede’s work. Firstly it assumes culture to be static over time, secondly culture is assumed to be homogenous and thirdly, it disregards cultural pluralism. Such frames of dichotomous thinking have the adverse effect of obscuring extensive interdependences between phenomena. In order to overcome these difficulties we have adopted the grid-group cultural theory from Anthropology for this study. Whilst the framework was developed originally for the study of individuals and societies, it has been adopted successfully to study a range of organisational issues by management academics recently (Tsouh et al, 2006; Hendry, 1999; Altman and Baruch, 1998).

3. GRID AND GROUP CULTURAL THEORY

The cultural theory originated from the work of the famous British anthropologist, Mary Douglas. Douglas’s contribution was to provide a framework for understanding the types of cultural diversity among African tribes. According to the theory one’s social relations may be defined by two dimensions: grid and group.

**Grid** refers to the extent to which one’s social position is restricted by externally imposed prescriptions (Thompson et al, 1990), such as the norms and classificatory structure of the society. For example, the caste system in India classifies Hindus into high class Brahmans and lower class ‘untouchables’ by virtue of their birth. Similarly in the ancient system of monarchy, the first born becomes heir to the throne. In high grid orientations, one’s social position will be greatly influenced by “fixing factors” including age, rules, traditions, regulations and seniority. In low grid environments, fixing factors are given relatively less importance.

**Group** refers to the extent to which “individual’s life is absorbed in and sustained by group membership”- e.g. membership of a church or any religious sect (Douglas, 1970). A person joined by others and confined to act in accordance with the collective interests of the group will be assigned to a high group rating. In low group environments, individuals will be less compelled to act in accordance with the interests of the whole group and in fact will be free to act whichever way he/she chooses.

The application of grid and group produces four ways of life: fatalism, hierarchism, individualism and egalitarianism (Figure 1).

![Figure 1- Cultural theory- adopted from natural symbols (Douglas, 1970)](image-url)
Fatalism (A) consists of strong grid and weak group. Individuals will enact values of apathy and incompetence towards IT. There will be an unwillingness to accept IT and doubt will be cast on the overall value which IT can bring to the organisation. Merely coping and surviving with existing IT systems will be the norm adopted by this type of orientation.

Hierarchism (B) consists of strong grid and strong group. This cultural orientation will favour control, power and domination. Communication will be through formal means. Everyone will know one’s place within the organisational hierarchy.

Individualism (C) consists of both weak grid and weak group orientations. Individuals will favour autonomy, individualism and responsiveness. Success comes to those who daringly take risk and experiment with IT. Idea generation and freedom to innovate are the hall marks of this cosmology.

Egalitarianism (D) consists of weak grid and strong group orientation. Such an orientation stresses the importance of fraternity, harmony and teamwork. Individuals will have a preference for trust, support and equality. There will be a high emphasis to ensure that employee well being is looked after.

Despite, Douglas’s contribution in providing a model for capturing human diversity, her model has been criticised (Thompson et al, 1990) for being static and for disregarding cultural pluralism. Other researchers (Schwarz and Thompson, 1990; Thompson et al, 1990) have further developed the theory to deal with cultural emergence, and pluralism. Thompson et al (1990) note, “the differences between regimes are to found in the differing configurations of this perpetual dynamic balance between ways of life”. Culture is in an ongoing position of disequilibrium. Cultural theory defines culture as consisting of three characteristics: social relations, cultural bias and way of life. Social relations are defined as patterns of interpersonal relations; cultural bias refers to values and beliefs; and lastly, a way of life refers to a mutually reinforcing combination of social relations and cultural bias. Social relations and corresponding biases do not unreservedly associate in a random way, instead bias “is closely tied to the social relations they help legitimate” (Thompson et al, 1990). Cultural bias and social relations are accountable and dependable on one another, reinforcing each other in complementary ways.

3.1 ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FOUR COSMOLOGIES

Fatalistic orientations display constraining characteristics and no enabling characteristics. Fatalist’s cognitive disposition favouring apathy may create a hampering environment to transcend throughout the organisation. Such an orientation may make an organisation unresponsive towards IT (Kaarst-Brown and Robey, 1999), such as widespread scepticism and resistance. Individuals will avoid alignment with other members, showing a lack of commitment and they see no sense in trying to learn about how to mitigate or adapt to IT. Uncertainty is typical of this cosmology as illustrated by the lack of motivation and organisational involvement.

In its enabling form, hierarchism can provide leadership and support for IT development, implementation and use (Doherty and Doig, 2003). According to Adler and Bory (1996) the abandonment of hierarchical values can make an organisation susceptible to malfunction and exposure to disruptive influences. It is pointed out that hierarchical edict of order, law, authority, power, respect and loyalty are still critical given today’s complex and chaotic IT environment.
In its constraining form, hierarchism, because of its ‘command and control’ approach, can “stifle creativity, foster dissatisfaction and de-motivate employees” (Adler and Bory, 1996). Too much reliance on hierarchism can lead to organisational stagnation and unresponsiveness (Mintzberg, 1979). It must be stressed that orientations dominated by power relations can make an organisation impervious to IT. This can result in a climate of false assumptions, lead to blunders of judgement, and create recurrent learning problems and scapegoating (Hood, 1998).

In its enabling form, egalitarianism enables a climate of trust, harmony and fosters a climate of acceptance towards IT (Hood, 1998). Egalitarianism can reduce the concentration of power and can enable a high degree of trust (Adler, 2001), commitment and knowledge sharing to exist between management and staff (Thompson et al, 1990), as well as the enhancement of an innovative environment (Fukuyama, 1996).

In its constraining form, due to its lack of authoritative and leadership values, egalitarianism can make an organisation difficult to manage and become inherently unstable in the long term. Furthermore, lack of leadership can create a climate susceptible to shirking, conflict, deadlock and may lead to the presence of different faction groups fighting/competing for the control of IT systems (Hood, 1998). In the short term organisations may be able to cope with internal disagreement between splinter groups, but in the long run experience difficulties in achieving organisational wide participation.

In its enabling form, individualism encourages a climate of innovation and creativity (Thompson et al, 1990) and enables the organisation to make competitive use of IT. Individuals will continuously experiment in the face of uncertainty and risk, and risks will be closely tied to opportunities. Individualism enables the spotting of opportunities other ways of life have missed. Individualistic members can shove off risks that they view as unlikely to bring any reward or benefit to the organisation (Hood, 1998).

In its constraining form, individualism due to its idiosyncratic qualities, may create a climate where individuals may abuse, misuse and exploit IT to their own advantage. Individuals may also become unwilling to co-operate with others and avoid teamwork and discussions (Thompson et al, 1999). This can lead to a culture of disagreement and conflict, ultimately resulting in total chaos and an organisation susceptible to breakdown (Thompson et al, 1990). Table 1, presents the enabling/constraining effects of each way of life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of cultural bias</th>
<th>Constraining factors of cultural type</th>
<th>Enabling factors of cultural type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fatalism</td>
<td>Can create a corrosive culture of apathy, incompetence and lack of enthusiasm.</td>
<td>No enabling characteristics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchism</td>
<td>Excessive trust in authority and expertise can lead to over confidence in think big IT solutions/technological fixes.</td>
<td>Provides oversight, leadership, review and reinforcement of vision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of management support, vision can lead to lack of staff enthusiasm towards IT.</td>
<td>Provides guidance and clarifies responsibility.</td>
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Cultural Barriers/ Enablers In Implementing E-Government Initiatives In Malaysia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Cosmology</th>
<th>Constraining Characteristics</th>
<th>Enabling Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarianism</td>
<td>Can foster unresolved conflict and internal strife.</td>
<td>Enables peer-group accountability and minimisation of excessive authority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vulnerable to deadlocks and disagreement between faction groups.</td>
<td>Provides mutuality, teamwork and reciprocity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Individuals may put individual interests before other organisational members.</td>
<td>Enables creativity, experimentation and IT innovation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can lead to lack of co-operation and lack of cultural affinities.</td>
<td>Commitment to spotting opportunities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1- Constraining and enabling characteristics of each cultural type.

Having identified the enabling and constraining characteristics of the four cultural cosmologies, we postulate that organisations will need a combination of three enabling cultural orientations (Hendriks, 1999) namely, hierarchism, individualism and egalitarianism for the successful implementation of e-government services. Each cultural orientation captures some essence of insight and attentiveness, which the other ways of life are blinded to. As Thompson et al (1990) note “because there is no way of life whose supporters can see in all directions at once, excluding adherents of rival biases generates nasty and destructive surprises…by rejecting the insight and vision of competing biases, the dominant way is bound to miss opportunities, to make promises that cannot be fulfilled, and likely to stumble into undetected pitfalls…including several ways of life leads to the seeing of unforeseen dead ends, avoiding mistakes and capitalising on missed opportunities”. Using case studies of two local e-government services in Malaysia we propose to test the validity of this hypothesis.

4. RESEARCH METHOD & DATA COLLECTION

The Malaysia E-Government implementation started in earnest in 1997 after the ‘Vision 2020’ was first unveiled by the then Prime Minister of Malaysia to achieve a fully developed country in the next 23 years. Since then, a total of 7 projects were outlined in first phase to implement the E-Government agenda. The governance structure of Malaysia consists of Federal, State and Local Governments. Clearly, given the time and resource constraints, it is impossible to make a comprehensive study of all the e-government services in Malaysia. We therefore focused our attention on two local government councils in Malaysia which are relatively advanced in the implementation of e-services to explore cultural issues. Local governments are responsible for the following major issues: (i) council tax collection (ii) waste collection, treatment and disposal (iii) planning applications and property issues and (iv) social services. Both local governments have approximately 180 staff, and Table 2 provides background information on each of the local governments.

We have adopted an interpretive case study approach for this project. This is because an in-depth understanding of cultural issues cannot be undertaken from a ‘distance’ (e.g through the use of questionnaire) since the social world is something which is invented and reinvented on an on-going basis by the actors and it requires direct engagement (e.g. interviews, observation etc) with the parties concerned. Data collection consisted of in-depth interviewing. All interviews
were semi-structured in nature, and involved middle and senior managers across various departments and levels. Twenty interviews were conducted (10 interviews with each organisation) and each interview ranged between 1 ½ -3 hours in length. Interviews were conducted over 4 months (June-September 2006), with approximately 2 months spent in each organisation. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed later.

Table 2- Background information on each local government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Local government A (Alpha)</th>
<th>Local government B (Beta)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of employees</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No of pc’s</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior management background</td>
<td>Council chief/ chairman and 11 senior managers.</td>
<td>Council chief/ chairman and 11 senior managers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As introduced previously, the aim of this paper is to study cultural barriers/ enablers which may impede or facilitate the implementation of e-government initiatives. We have adopted the grid and group cultural theory, as a theoretical framework to help us in this regard. At local government A a constraining cultural environment existed which impeded the implementation/use of IT. In comparison, at local government B an enabling cultural environment existed which facilitated IT implementation/use. Details are as follows:
5.1. Case study A- Constraining cultural characteristics

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that this organisation displays a high degree of fatalism towards IT. Staff members isolated themselves from IT and cast doubt about the overall value which IT would bring to the organisation. One respondent highlighted “there is a group of people who feel that they are forced to use computers … they feel computers are burdensome!” There was a high reliance on manual processes. IT was used seldom, and few managers opened their email accounts. Senior management often got IT support staff to check their email accounts. As one respondent highlighted “both the council chairman and secretary do not use email and their emails accounts have to be checked by IT support staff”. Staff were not motivated to work hard. As one respondent noted “what’s the point of working hard…here, you won’t be made redundant anyway!” There was an unwillingness to learn about IT, and a sense of resistance towards IT systems was evident across departments.

Constraining forms of hierarchism were also witnessed. Formal social relations, controlled movements and an atmosphere of physical distance between top and lower level employees persists in this organisation. Discussion of ideas were typically shrouded in secrecy and confined within the inner circle of business managers. There was little social interaction between IT and business managers. As one IT manager noted “when top management disagrees with our IT proposal, the whole thing has to stop; how I wish the top management could see things from our perspective!” At meetings most people sat in silence and did not question management. There was clear evidence of management control through the imposition of bureaucratic rules and regulations. Staff had restricted access to internet, and had to justify why they needed access to the internet before access was granted. Only senior management/ head of departments had privileged access to the internet. One respondent highlighted “only senior managers have full access to the internet…, other staff have restricted use of the internet…it is controlled by our IP address… only when there is an urgent request by the department to use the internet for email or business purposes, will other staff be allowed to use it!”

Individuals were not given the freedom to experiment and innovate with new and fresh ideas concerning technology. Staff showed lack of experimentation with IT. There was a lack of innovation, and commitment towards IT. There was no reward mechanisms in place to encourage and foster individualism. As one respondent highlighted “unfortunately our organisation doesn’t have a reward system for encouraging innovative ideas”. Ideas about IT were often “shot down” by management which greatly discouraged staff from putting ideas forward. One respondent shared “in the past, when we proposed an IP CCTV installation …it was shot down by the top management…this discouraged us from putting other ideas forward!” There was a lack of optimism about the prospects for continued growth and development through IT.

Constraining forms of egalitarianism was also witnessed. There was a lack of teamwork, and cooperation. Organisational members/ departments rarely communicated with each other through the use of email. As one respondent highlighted “the aim of the web-based system is to reduce the use of paper…. but overall there has been lack of cooperation!” It seems the organisation has cultivated a culture of blame and mistrust. As one respondent highlighted “at the beginning when email was implemented, management tried to send notices to head of departments and staff to inform them about incoming meetings. But, unfortunately some staff missed the meeting and they blamed it on not receiving notices”. Departments acted like faction groups continuously pitting against one another.

In a summary, then, organisation A is characterised by fatalism and constraining hierarchical cultural characteristics and an almost complete absence of egalitarianism and individualism.
Consequently the e-government initiatives have made little impact on the performance of the organisation.

5.2. Case study B- Enabling cultural characteristics

In this organisation, there was less of a control/command environment and indeed managers were very enthusiastic and supportive of IT. Enabling forms of hierarchism were witnessed. As one respondent highlighted “the council chairman and secretary support the use of technology and they want all the staff to be equipped with a PC each”. This was not surprising, given that many senior managers have IT backgrounds. Business and IT managers met weekly to discuss IT issues, and provided financial support and resources for IT development. One manager commented “top management give full support and commitment for IT development... they instruct and monitor the IT development”. This included both inspiring leadership and IT vision to promote IT awareness and sustained interest in migrating to virtual medium. As one manager highlighted “I always tell my staff, if you don’t use technology you will be at a disadvantage... I encourage staff to learn IT!”

Enabling forms of individualism were also displayed here. Organisational members were opportunistic and responsive towards IT. Individuals were given the freedom to experiment and innovate with new and fresh ideas concerning technology. Unlike organisation A, they weren’t constrained under a gridiron of rules of what they could and couldn’t do. Staff were rewarded through certificates and promotions for putting forward ideas. One manager highlighted “we encourage our staff to come up with ideas, and normally we either reward them with certificates or promote them to senior positions”. Motivation was high and organisational members emphasised self-reliance and personal commitment towards IT. One manager commented: “people are enthusiastic and show their own initiative”. Interpersonal communication was frequent, individuals emphasised the importance of knowing, and knowledge sharing to solve problems by the use of email and groupware applications.

Teamwork, trust and cooperation between departments were strongly valued. Organisational members shared a sense of organisational belonging, and there was a climate of openness and harmony during meetings and IT-related sessions. One manager pointed out: “decision-making is made democratically and collectively in meetings between the council chairman, secretary, staff, and head of departments”. Departments and organisational members frequently communicated to one another through the use of “Lantalk” (intranet) and all staff were readily informed and updated about internal corporate events. Teambuilding, training and creating and sustaining a group ethos was important here. “We have Total Quality Management (TQM) training for officers... one of the important elements of this training is team building.... we know the importance of working in a group!”

In sharp contrast to local government A, local government B seems to have managers who provide visionary leadership and resources for IT developments (hierarchical enabling characteristics) as well as prevalence of the enabling characteristics of egalitarianism (team work) and individualism (innovation and creativity). It is not surprising that this organisation has been very successful in implementing and operating their e-government services.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has raised a number of important insights to understanding the cultural enablers/barriers in implementing e-government initiatives in Malaysia. Culture theory was introduced as a more viable theoretical framework for understanding IT values and understanding the enabling and/or constraining effects of organisational culture, and how it can facilitate or impede IT
implementation. A highly constraining cultural environment existed at organisation A which impeded the implementation/use of IT. Organisational members enacted fatalistic values of apathy, passivity and fear towards IT. A climate of distance existed between management and staff. There was a lack of management support, vision, and commitment towards IT which failed to motivate staff to use IT. Some staff used IT to advance their own interests. Lack of teamwork commonly resulted in duplication of efforts and feuds between departments. In comparison, Local government B displayed enabling cultural characteristics, and had a proven track record in successfully implementing and using IT. Management was actively involved and supported IT development, which fostered a climate of innovation and creativity. Individuals were positively opportunistic, innovative and responsive towards IT developments. Idea generation was encouraged. Teamwork and reciprocity existed between departments and members, creating a sense of belonging and synergy to exist.

In this paper, we have attempted to understand the cultural barriers/enablers which may impede/facilitate Malaysian e-government initiatives using the grid-group cultural theory. In implementing e-government initiatives, managers should strive to reduce the constraining cultural characteristics and create a facilitative socio-technical environment by promoting the enabling cultural cosmologies. Thus organisations will need the leadership and co-ordinating strengths of hierarchy; trust, teamwork and knowledge sharing of egalitarianism and the innovative and competitive spirit of individualism for the successful implementation of e-government services. Although this study was conducted in Malaysia, the theoretical framework (Cultural theory) and findings are equally applicable to any other countries in the world.

REFERENCES


