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Organisational Mission Statements: a postmodernist perspective on the management of the IS/IT function

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Abstract - The mission statement embodies certain beliefs about the management culture of the organisation which can be examined and placed within underlying theoretical contexts. This paper examines postmodernism in this respect which, in addition to forming a critique of modernist approaches, posits alternative views about philosophy, organisation and subsequently IS/IT theory. The study applies an ethnographic case research methodology where data was collected from sixteen interviewees employed within a multi-national financial services group. In this way, the organisational mission statement was used as a vehicle for analysing the contribution of postmodern approaches to the management of the IS/IT function. The influential Ashridge Model was adopted to map the findings of the study which suggest three propositions for postmodernism in providing i) cultural context, ii) a textual or 'deconstructive' analysis and iii) an ethnographic empathy for further IS/IT research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Business requirements for successful IS/IT strategies increasingly demand changes in the way that we view the organisation as a whole. A holistic approach is commonly associated with earlier research through "systems" theory (1) and more recently "social" theory (2) (3). However, these challenges to organisational and IS/IT research continue to be regarded with some theoretical pessimism. Theorists allude to "crises of organizational analysis" (4), or even "Saving IT's soul" (5). Theoretical pessimism is supported by a poor record of success in IS/IT strategy where theorists are now frequently attacked as offering "fad management" solutions to business situations (6). The overrunning of time and

expenditure of IS/IT projects, and the failure of these management initiatives have sought to undermine confidence in dominant traditional approaches to IS/IT exploitation (7). A popular management initiative is the introduction of organisational mission statements. However, despite widespread adoption (8) (9), it is unclear what effect they have at an organisational level. The specific research questions attempted within this paper are identified as follows:

1. To what extent can an assessment of a mission statement implementation be informed by recent developments in cultural theory such as postmodernism?
2. In what ways can postmodern interpretative strategies inform discussion upon the management of the IS/IT function within an organisation?

This paper argues that an understanding of the philosophical determinants of existing management practices can help to build an awareness of the pitfalls of traditional approaches to the management of the IS/IT function. In this instance the organisational mission statement is the management practice under investigation where IS/IT initiatives can be informed by placing them within a postmodern "cultural" context. The methodology for this paper is to undertake a philosophical and practical empirical analysis which is intended to inform the ongoing debate on the relevance of postmodern theory to IS/IT research. It is applied using a case study involving a medium sized IS/IT company within a multi-national financial services group. In the case study postmodern contextualisation is used to examine and interpret the implementation of a mission statement within a specific company. Organisation and IS/IT theory are intentionally

intertwined in this paper. It is argued that the organisational context of IS/IT research is critical to the understanding of the effectiveness of the company as a whole. Vice-versa an understanding of effective IS/IT is increasingly critical to the successful functioning of organisations(10). Little research currently exists of postmodernist theory in the organisational and IS/IT literature (11 (12). This paper proposes to extend the sociological field of IS/IT analysis to include “postmodern” aspects of cultural theory. Postmodernism has in fact been used for a number of years within the arts and social sciences (13). Organisation theory has to a lesser extent assimilated many postmodern concepts (11) (4). With some exceptions (12), the application of postmodern cultural theory in IS/IT literature has been modest. Traditional modes of thought within science, IS/IT and organisation theory are characterised by a typically “modernistic” outlook (14). The modernist tends to favour certain rational, centralised, structured methodologies (15). However, a number of leading social and cultural commentators have proposed that the modernist framework has reached its boundaries, and new modes of conceiving society and the organisation are called for (16). This emerging framework is frequently termed “postmodernism”. These postmodern theorists indicate that modernistic approaches alone are no longer satisfactory due changes in the cultural contexts of events (17).

2. COMPANY MISSION STATEMENTS

There is a reasonable amount of literature on the subject of company mission statements. Management writers and successful company bosses spanning a broad timescale endorse both the concept and production of mission statements (18) (19) (20) (21) (22). The ITIL Service Management Framework even suggests that every new project starts with the formation of a mission statement. The literature reveals that organisational mission statements are regarded as a popular management tool (9) Campbell and Tawadey (23) Ashridge Model suggested the most comprehensive analysis and guide to mission statements. This framework will be used to explain what the mission statement is, why it is used, and why it is

perceived to be successful. The model divides the mission statement into four sections: Purpose, Strategy, Company Values, and Standards and Behaviours. The Purpose relates to the philosophy of why the company exists. Strategy is the commercial rationale and “a definition of the business domain”. Company Values are the “Beliefs that underpin the organisation’s management style”, paraphrased as “What senior management believes in”. Finally Standards and Behaviours are “instructions on how people should behave”, paraphrased as “The policies and behaviour patterns that guide how the company operates”. Campbell and Tawadey use this model as a template for the successful mission statements. They argue that organisational mission statements are important for a number of compelling reasons. These reasons are cross-referenced with the components of the Ashridge model. They propose that the mission statement is a motivator for the workforce, fostering commitment and belief in the jobs that people do. They argue that the successful mission statement results in belief, trust in the organisation, and meaning on top of pay. There are also benefits in improved communication. The mission statement assists in clearer communication of strategy, and helping to form identity through better understanding of self, others and the market that the company works in.

It is noted that the mission statement and the Ashridge Model are clear examples of the application of modernist theory through a rationalistic view of the organisation. It prescribes an ordered framework for the production of a successful mission statement which is itself premised on a belief in progress and cumulative knowledge about the organisation. Mission statements seek to reduce uncertainty in the workplace and most prominently are a very obvious attempt to form general rules about the organisation. The mission statement is, therefore, a centrally produced and managed information system. Also, the Ashridge Model targets setting a cultural agenda as a specific objective.

3. ALPHA TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

Alpha Technology Services (ATS), is a medium to large IS/IT organisation. Apart

from a very few third party contracts, the company provides IS/IT services solely to internal companies within the Alpha Bank Group. ATS employs approximately 2,000 members of staff. The majority of staff are located across six data and support centres across the UK. ATS provides certain key IS/IT services to companies within the Alpha Bank Group. ATS consists of various teams and departments structured around these key service areas. It runs four data centres in the UK, predominantly supporting mainframe processing. Alpha Bank has the second largest mainframe operation in Europe. Some mid-range systems are supported within data centres, and also at the client site. ATS maintains three “backbone” wide area networks linking the various Alpha Bank companies. ATS maintains these large-scale computer operations both within the data centres, and at support sites. ATS came into existence when two separate IS/IT service providers within the Group merged (Alpha Computer Operations and Alpha Network Services). This merger took place from mid 1995 to early 1996. Alpha Computer Operations had been mainly responsible for mainframe support and processing. Alpha Network Services, on the other hand, had been mainly responsible for networks and telephony. The mission statement for ATS is stated as follows:

Our mission is to become the chosen provider of those technology infrastructure services critical to our customers' success

The mission statement was implemented alongside six specific Key Result Areas (KRAs). The intention was to link each KRA back to the mission statement. The KRAs were to be used as a method of measuring the success of Alpha Technology Services. The KRAs were implemented using a process of “management by contract”. Projects and “business as usual” tasks that the manager was involved with were related to KRA objectives. Managers were contracted to meet these objectives. Managers in turn wrote individual contracts with each of their staff, relating each task back to the objectives outlined in his or her own contract. At roughly the same time as the implementation of KRAs, ATS formed a Business Excellence team. The Business Excellence team took on ownership of the

Total Quality Management (TQM) programme, the ISO9000 Quality Standards programme, and overall mission statement communications. The TQM programme had originally started in 1992 as a group-wide initiative, based on a packaged system of training manuals and implementation strategy marketed by a large external consultancy company. Company-wide ISO 9000 accreditation was sought (and achieved) by ATS in 1997. In order to reinforce the link between quality and mission, the ATS managing director issued the following statement in January 1996:

“Our mission is to become the chosen provider of those technology infrastructure services critical to our customers' success. This can only be achieved by an absolute and on-going commitment to Total Quality and Continuous Improvement from all people that work within ATS.”

4. METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Qualitative methodologies were used in data collection and analysis of the research topic. It was felt that the qualitative/ethnographic techniques employed fitted well with a postmodern approach to field research. Formation of the research methodology involved a substantive literature survey (24) (25) (26) (27) (28). The interviewees formed a cross section of Alpha Technology Services. The structural hierarchy of the organisation divides IT employees by eight pay grades: IT1 to IT8. IT1 roughly equates to director level, IT8 roughly equates to trainee level. The ultimate purpose of the data collection was to gain an insight into the implementation of a modernist type of initiative. For this reason, most questions were built around the Ashridge model for mission statements. Although the opening question was closed, the vast majority of questions were open. This was done in order to encourage the respondents to elaborate on their answers, and to avoid leading respondents to “yes/no” answers. However, it is emphasised that the semi-structured framework of the interview merely outlined points to be covered. Many other areas were also covered. Respondents frequently shifted quite widely from the research topic, for instance citing personal anecdotes seemingly quite tangential to the discussion area. These comments were all recorded and

analysed within the context of the data. When the interviews had been transcribed, each text was examined for themes and key quotations.

5. POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism can be applied in order to explore the theoretical context of the implementation of the mission statement within Alpha Technology Services. Fundamentally, the postmodernist will be suspicious of imposing a “grand narrative”, or over-arching statement on the purposes, strategy and beliefs of the organisation (29). The postmodernist will approach the mission statement in “deconstructive” mode. The production of the mission statement tends to imply shared understanding throughout the company. Some theorists (30) would argue that this is a hopeless task. The mission statement will always mean different things to different audiences or individuals. Each individual has an alternate context within which they view the mission statement, or indeed any signification. Paradoxically, the attempt to unify meaning within the organisation seems, in the view of many interviewees, to have highlighted the multiplicity of cultures within the organisation. The mission statement implementation within Alpha Technology Services evidences the recurrent postmodernist theme of the “vanishing author” (16). Within the organisation, it was unclear to each of the interviewees (even high graded personnel) exactly who created it, and even how the mission statement had been created. This distancing between author or authors impairs the communication processes involved with the mission statement. The fact that a small group of Executives actually devised the mission statement tends to highlight an apparent or actual distancing between senior executives and lower graded staff. To some lower graded staff, the authors of the mission statement are like an anonymous being, imposing values or “truths” on the masses of the organisation. Derrida (1978) terms this tendency to impose essential truth as “centring”. In this formation, the Executive board place themselves in the position as both “centre” and “ultimate referent” for the dominant discourse.

A key factor within the ATS mission statement implementation is that lower grades have no control over this particular discourse. The Executive board was cited by all interviewees as the owner of the mission statement, and only they have the ability to change the discourse. In this way the recipient of the mission statement (all staff below the board), are marginalised in the sense that they are “de-centred” from those higher graded staff who create the organisational “logos” or mission statement. Ambiguity over the identities of the creators of the mission statement has actually resulted in a closure of communication channels from the top to the bottom of the organisation within Alpha Technology Services. The data collection phase of the research application revealed that the senior managers were generally aware of the lack of “buy-in” from lower graded personnel. However, the mission statement implementation within Alpha Technology Services provided no scope for feedback or dissent. Most interviewees (whether low or high graded) felt that every employee was a stakeholder in the mission statement, yet employees were not invited to participate in the formation, implementation, or maintenance of the company mission statement. Another factor that emerges from the data collection is that there is no clear and consistent understanding on what the purpose or function of the mission statement is. Some interviewees felt that the mission statement was intended to align with the KRAs, some interviewees felt that the mission statement was completely separate from the KRAs. Views on the purpose of the mission statement ranged from “its an advertising slogan” (IT3), to “for people to benchmark to how well they are living up to their goals and objectives” (IT8), to “so that we can say what Alpha Bank is striving for” (IT4). One interviewee (IT7) felt that the mission statement should come after a “vision” had been formed, then later in the interview changed his mind. He concluded by saying: “My thoughts are I’m a bit confused”. One interviewee (IT4) felt that the mission statement was somewhat superficial: “It sounds good but there is not much substance behind it”. Deconstruction of the mission statement presents opportunities for “resistance” postmodernist interpretative strategies. The resistance postmodernist tends to emphasise the political determinants of the situation. If

there is a closure in communication between high and low graded staff, and if it is unclear exactly why there is a mission statement in the first place, then perhaps social or political analysis can help to define the motives underlying the formation of the mission statement. Evidently, the mission statement is part of a specific discourse. This discourse seems to have complex values across the grading structure. Both lower down and higher up there is scepticism. One interviewee (IT5) described this discourse as “business school” terminology, another (IT4) described the mission statement as “a management fad”. Higher up there was some degree of scepticism, but there was also acceptance of Certain cultural models and theories can inform these observations in order to explain events. Bakhtin’s (31) “dialogic” interpretation of social power dynamics can also be related to mission statements. In this view, the mission statement is a management tool that proposes a monologic discourse within the organisation. Since the company is made up of numbers of people, by definition the company has multiple discourses or polyphony of voices. Two alternative positions are considered in order to address this dichotomy.

1) *Position 1: Compromise:* The first position is based on a compromise between the conflicting monologic/polyphonic discourses at the organisational site. Within Alpha Technology Services there are varying levels of conformity or support of the authoritarian discourse represented by the mission statement. From data gathered within the interviews, this conformity is generally linked to seniority within the company. Criticism of the mission statement, or the authoritarian discourse, came from all levels of the organisation. However, there was little criticism per se of the motives for having a mission statement. Even those interviewees that were highly critical of the Alpha Technology Services mission statement believed that mission statements could be useful. There were many instances where the mission statements of other companies were cited, or alternative suggestions were provided. One essential finding was that, in an organisational context, almost all interviewees felt that there was a place for a mission statement. In this sense there was

mission statements as a management tool. Another IT5 characterised the mission statement a typical test within a recruitment context. He proposed that knowledge of the mission statement and KRAs were a way to progress within the organisation. This view of the mission statement is a long way from that envisaged by the Executive board that originally devised it. A parallel can be drawn to Orlikowski (1992) findings, from her interviews with Beta consultants using CASE tools. Working around or bypassing the company mission might be viewed, like Orlikowski’s Beta consultants, as not being a “team player” (28). The ATS mission statement is also used by this IT5 in a similar “workaround” way. strong support for the mission statement and the principles asserted by the Ashridge Model. Even those interviewees that were most critical of mission statements at the start of the interview expressed support for the concept of the mission statement. The question is: if mission statements are broadly supported across the company, why was the implementation a failure? One explanation is that whilst the directors have identified the need for an authoritarian discourse within the company, they have failed to take into account the implicit polyphony across the organisation. The data collected from the interview phase reveals both the polyphonic and monologic modes of discourses in the company. Therefore in subsequent mission statements and other projects, the directors might consider a more participative approach to implementation. In this case the top-down approach is tempered by attention to communication and staff feedback.

2) *Position 2: Radicalise:* The second position takes an altogether more radical view of implementation within the organisation. This view proposes that the structure of the organisation needs to change in order to adjust to the challenges of polyphony and postmodernism more generally. This proposal, a polyphonic re-definition of the organisation, has fascinating implications. In Alpha Technology Services this would mean an abandonment of the central establishment voice. Instead employees would be empowered to speak with their own discourse, making their own agendas explicit. This would make the mission

statement redundant. Alternatively each member of the company would have their own mission statement, if they so chose to have one. There would be no central validating authority to check for consistency. The criticism of this formation of the organisation is that it would result in chaos (16). The mission statement, Key Result Areas, management by objectives, are all mechanisms within Alpha Technology Services designed to keep every employee on track. Surely polyphony would represent a potential threat to this kind of

6. Discussion

Due to the work of a number of organisation theorists (11) (17) (32) models and examples are beginning to emerge for postmodern organisations. Popular management writers like Peters and Waterman (21) have also taken up the modernism/postmodernism themes. From the work of IS/IT theorists (3) (28) (12) (14) it is possible to draw a general picture of modern and postmodern IS/IT. It is argued in this paper, and by other theorists (17) that the reason for this “pull” towards open, flexible, individualistic systems is due to shifts away from the traditional rational-modernist paradigm. Some theorists consider that modernist models may have reached their limits, and new options should be considered in order to satisfy the changing requirements of contemporary organisations (12) (16).

8. Conclusion

In this paper it is proposed that the contribution of postmodernism to IS/IT and organisational research can be divided into three strands: A) *postmodernism as socio-cultural context* B) *postmodernism as technique: textual or deconstructive analysis* C) *postmodernist research methodologies: Ethnographic empathy*

A) *postmodernism as socio-cultural context*: A number of leading theorists propose that postmodernism has applications in terms of socio-cultural contextualisation. For example, Gergen (17) argues that modernism, the traditional basis for organisation theory, is actually in retreat. For Gergen, modernism has begun to lose its theoretical appeal due to cultural

order? Gergen and Whitney argue that this may not be the case. Rather, they suggest that there is the possibility of a “unifying disorder” (16). They draw parallels with recent developments in chaos theory that suggest that chaos actually results in a form of unity. In fact this is consistent with Bakhtin’s (31) original concept of polyphony. In his discussion of polyphony Bakhtin suggests that there is a dimension beyond anarchy and carnival. Bakhtin proposes that polyphony actually results in its own order: “a unity of a higher order”.

changes, or rather a change in the context of the debate. This argument is based on the proposition that modernism is out of synch with the “spirit of the times”. Gergen proposes that the emerging discourse of postmodernism has greater explanatory power than traditional bases of organisational theory. It has also been argued that a “mode of information” is supplanting previous modernist socio-cultural formations. If modernism is indeed incongruent with the cultural realities of contemporary organisations then the premises that support it need to be examined. Correspondingly, if a postmodern view of socio-cultural formations is thematically closer to the overarching paradigm, then its propositions may help to contextualise theory and empirical research.

B) *postmodernism as technique: textual or deconstructive analysis*: The second facet proposed by this paper is that postmodernism can offer new directions in critical theory. Clearly the postmodern mode relies heavily on a textual emphasis, or discourse analysis, which embodies multiple meaning. The result is a scepticism to traditional theory that is intended to subvert or resist modernist rules of homogeneity. The postmodern interest in unorthodoxy gives opportunities for theorists from other disciplines to make a research contribution thus enabling a multi-disciplinary approach.

C) *postmodernist research methodologies: Ethnographic empathy*: Thirdly, it is argued in this paper that a postmodern research methodology would tend to favour ethnographic methods. This assertion is made due to postmodernism’s textual

emphasis, its interest in the peripheral, and its reluctance to generalise. A number of researchers (16) (26) (27) (24) advocate ethnographic research techniques as fitting well within a postmodern context. Postmodernism is in essence a cultural movement and so in an etymological sense ethnography, “ethno” (culture/race) “graphy” (writing), would appear to be a natural choice. The ethnographic data collection process produces narratives, that are analysable as if they were texts. Also, the ethnographic approach is premised on multi-cultural perspectives of the organisation. The consequence of this approach is believed to offer a richer and deeper understanding of cultural norms within organisations which provide for more valuable insights into the management of the IT function.

Finally, it is proposed that there is scope for further development of postmodern perspectives within IS/IT and organisational research. The real test of the validity of postmodern perspectives for IS/IT research is applicability to practical business situations. In this paper the postmodern perspective has helped to define and understand an everyday business initiative: the organisational mission statement. Further studies will be required to test whether the postmodern perspective can help IS/IT researchers to define, contextualise and interpret events. This paper has sought to introduce some of the major concepts and approaches of modernist and postmodernist theory. Within the case study, and specifically in the context of organisational mission statements, some suggestions have been made on how to operationalise this theory in an organisational research context. It is argued that the application of both “postmodernist” or “modernist” perspectives can offer new insights into current organisational problems.

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