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WHY DO WE NEED THIS? ROLES IN THE INFORMATION SYSTEM ACQUISITION LEGITIMATION PROCESS

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Research

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Abstract

In information system (IS) acquisition, one of the major challenges is to carry out required changes in the organization. One major problem is the lack of organizational support, user participation and competence. The process of gaining organizational support has been presented as the legitimation process. The legitimation process includes the actions taken by a legitimation seeker to gain legitimation from legitimation providers. In IS acquisition, the individuals’ behavioural patterns can be perceived as representing specific roles. Published studies combining these roles and actors in the legitimation process in IS acquisition are rare. Consequently, we will explore the roles in the IS acquisition legitimation process in two cases. As a result, we illustrate how legitimation appears in practice and provide a deeper understanding of how different roles act in legitimating IS acquisitions.

Keywords: Information system, IS acquisition, legitimation process, roles, case study

1 Introduction

Information system (IS) acquisition comprises the procedures that must be taken to acquire IS (Lee, Huynh, Kwok and Pi, 2003). An acquisition, i.e., obtaining an IS for an organisation, is frequently coordinated through projects that follow general IS acquisition process guidelines (Moe, 2014). In the process, different actors, such as innovators, project leaders, sponsors, gatekeepers and implementers (Heikkilä, Heikkilä and Pekkola, 2008), take various actions to lead, support, transfer information, influence or coordinate the process. These roles provide lenses through which to study the social aspects of IS acquisition and the process of doing it. Legitimation, which is defined as the gaining and granting of approval for something, is emphasised by an often asked question: ‘Why do we need this?’

Legitimation has been studied from the perspectives of organizations and society (Johnson, Dowd and Ridgeway, 2006; Ridgeway and Berger, 1986; Suchman, 1995). In the IS literature, gaining legitimation has been perceived as a process to obtain organizational support (Flynn and Du, 2012; Flynn and Hussain, 2004; Hussain, Taylor and Flynn, 2004). However, studies linking the legitimation process to IS acquisition are rare, even though one of the major challenges in IS acquisition is benefit realization—derived from the difficulties to evoke changes in the work processes with the new IS (Moe and Päivärinta, 2011). Through appropriate legitimation, different stakeholders, according to their role in the process, can be influenced. This alleviates the resistance toward the acquisition. The legitimation process can thus be perceived as a significant part of a successful IS acquisition.

As noted in the literature, there are two main actors in the legitimation process: legitimation seekers and legitimation providers (Hussain et al., 2004). Legitimation seekers are usually project authorities, e.g., project team or project leader, who seek support for the IS, whereas legitimation providers are the
IS recipients, e.g., business partners, users and top managers (Flynn and Du, 2012; Flynn and Puarungroj, 2006). In the legitimation process, legitimation seekers are treated as one regardless of how, when and by whom the legitimation is sought. Thus, in this paper, the actors in the legitimation process are viewed through the lenses of their IS acquisition roles. In the IS context, there are five roles: innovators, project leaders, sponsors, gatekeepers and implementers (Heikkilä et al., 2008). We adopt these roles and use them to understand how the legitimation process is perceived in IS acquisitions and which roles have an impact on the organizational legitimation. The paper considers the following research question: ‘How do different roles appear in the IS acquisition legitimation process?’ We examine two cases and identify the actors and their roles from the perspective of the IS acquisition legitimation process.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we present related literature and theoretical background information on the legitimation process and the roles involved in IS acquisition. Next, the research settings, including case descriptions and research methods, are reviewed. Empirical findings, discussion and conclusions are presented in following chapters.

2 Theoretical Background

The legitimation process ensures organizational support for upcoming changes. In this process, several actions are taken by the key actors. Next, we will present the legitimation process and roles in IS acquisition separately.

2.1 Legitimation and the Legitimation Process

Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions. Thus, the legitimacy of an IS acquisition can be defined as the organization’s general approval and favourable reception toward the acquisition, its target and the entity responsible for the acquisition. The legitimation process consequently seeks legitimacy for an IS by focusing on the social aspects of information system development (ISD) success (Flynn and Hussain, 2004). Suchman (1995) further argues that ensuring organizational legitimacy can be conducted with three different aims: gaining, maintaining and repairing legitimacy. Gaining legitimacy occurs at the beginning of the project, maintaining legitimacy when granted legitimation is damaged or weakened, and repairing legitimacy when the granted legitimation is withdrawn (Flynn and Du, 2012).

Hussain et al. (2004) have constructed a Legitimation Activity Model (LAM) which describes the legitimation seekers’ activities when seeking organizational legitimacy from the legitimation providers. Therefore, the LAM provides a description of the legitimation process. It is based on the Structuration Theory and the Activity Theory: The Activity Theory provides the processes of development carried out by human practices (Kuutti, 1995) while the Structuration Theory frames the social organization and its three dimensions of structure: significations, domination and legitimation (Giddens, 1984; Jones and Karsten, 2008). In this paper, we do not delve into the background details of the LAM, but examine different roles and their actions in the legitimation process to understand how different actors seek and provide legitimation for the various aspects of IS acquisition.

LAM has eight phases, and two are parallel with the others. The legitimation process can be seen as an interplay between the legitimation seeker and the legitimation providers (Flynn and Hussain, 2004), as illustrated in Figure 1.
In the LAM (Figure 1), the legitimation seeker is a person carrying out the legitimation seeking phases. The legitimation seeker constructs the target (Hussain et al., 2004), i.e., describes the IS characteristics and the predicted effects on the organization (Flynn and Du, 2012). By constructing the target, the legitimation seeker generates a desired legitimation structure, i.e., formulates the routines, beliefs, cultures and practices which underlie the target (Flynn and Du, 2012; Hussain et al., 2004). Then, the legitimation providers and their norms and legitimation structures are identified. The legitimation seeker explores the gaps in legitimation structures and norms between the target and the legitimation providers. Appropriate actions are planned and carried out to close these gaps (Hussain et al., 2004). Throughout the process, the legitimation seeker evaluates whether legitimation is granted by the legitimation providers, and if necessary, re-evaluates and corrects actions in the future rounds of the legitimation process (Flynn and Du, 2012). Strategies, legitimation providers and actions change among gaining, maintaining, and repairing the legitimacy. Although Flynn and Du (2012) have claimed that the LAM mainly describes the legitimation gaining actions, maintaining and repairing actions can be carried out simultaneously.

2.2 Roles in IS Acquisition

When examining roles related to IS, one must specify on which level the roles are discussed. Zhu and Zhou (2008) have identified multiple layers of roles related to IS, depending on the perspective: from the viewpoint of programming and modelling all the way to the perspective of human users. The highest layer in the hierarchy of roles is the layer of social roles, which relates to the role theory (Zhu and Zhou, 2008). Role theory defines roles as ‘characteristic behaviour pattern’ (Biddle, 1986). In this paper, the focus is on individuals playing specific roles that influence the IS acquisition, and thus the viewpoint is on social roles.

*Procurement* is another term used alongside the term *acquisition*. In some cases, the two words are used almost synonymously. Procurement means, in general, the technical process of actually getting a
needed service or product. Acquisition\(^1\) tends, sometimes, to have a broader, more strategic meaning (‘Procurement-Defense Acquisition Glossary [DAP’], n.d.). In this paper, we chose to use the term acquisition to emphasize the broader and more meaningful role of the IS for an organization and the significance of the process by which the system is obtained for an organization.

Individual actors’ roles in innovations, implementations and new technology adoption influence the success of the action (Howell and Higgins, 1990; Kimberly and Evanisko, 1981). The most commonly identified role is champion (Beath, 1991; Esteves and Pastor-Collado, 2002). Champions are acknowledged in decision-making (Boonstra, 2003) and even as success factors in IS projects (Beath, 1991; Esteves and Pastor-Collado, 2002). However, other significant roles exist as well. Heikkilä et al. (2008) have identified five roles in the business networks: *innovators, champions* (divided into *project leaders* and *sponsors*), *gatekeepers*, and *implementers*. *Innovators* are creative individuals who act in innovative ways on behalf of the organization, not only in specific designated tasks (Welbourne, Johnson and Erez, 1998). *Gatekeepers* are boundary spanners who gather information and influence both internal and external actions for the organization (Nochur and Allen, 1992). *Sponsors* grant the top management support, and they help the project overcome difficulties (Heikkilä et al., 2008). *Implementers* coordinate the actual implementation but also influence the organization’s expectations and perceptions of the upcoming implementation (Adam and O’Doherty, 2000; Heikkilä et al., 2008).

These roles and their main tasks in IS acquisition are found in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Business Networks</th>
<th>Main Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Innovator</strong></td>
<td>Launches the basic idea</td>
<td>Ensures that the focus is on the big picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project Leader</strong></td>
<td>Organizes and enthusiastically promotes the project through critical stages</td>
<td>Leads requirement specification, tendering, vendor selection, agreement negotiations and implementation of project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sponsor</strong></td>
<td>Grants top management support and helps the project overcome difficulties</td>
<td>Grants top management approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gatekeeper</strong></td>
<td>Ensures information flow among various parties</td>
<td>Identifies needs, explores possible vendors and solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implementer</strong></td>
<td>Coordinates the implementation</td>
<td>Influences users’ impressions of the acquisition and the new system</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1.* Roles and their main tasks in business networks and IS acquisition (Heikkilä et al., 2008).

The importance of the *champion* in the IS context has been acknowledged (Beath, 1991; Esteves and Pastor-Collado, 2002; Roure, 2001). However, Heikkilä et al. (2008) divide the role into *project leader* and *sponsor* as *champions’* actions and responsibilities can be various. All these roles have to be

\(^1\) ‘The conceptualization, initiation, design, development, test, contracting, production, deployment, logistics support (LS), modification, and disposal of [...] systems, supplies, or services (including construction) to satisfy [...] (defined customer) needs.’ (Procurement-Defense Acquisition Glossary [DAP’], n.d.)
played by individuals for a successful outcome (Heikkilä et al., 2008). However, published studies related to IS acquisition roles are rare. This argues the need for further research and motivates our current study.

3 Research Settings

This case study includes two cases, one from a social services organization in the public sector and the other from a global industrial company in the private sector.

3.1 Case A: Social Services, Income Support Division’s IS Acquisition

Case A is the income support division of a municipality. The division processes all the income support applications from a specified geographical area. Executive personnel consist of immediate superiors and application handlers. The division acquired, with the help of the municipal IT department, a system for submitting and handling electronic income support applications.

The IS acquisition originated from legislation that requires the municipalities to offer their services electronically whenever possible. Additionally, the municipal council committed to providing the services electronically. The division conducted a large survey of its customer base and discovered that most of the customers think positively about applying for income support electronically. The project manager stated that ‘It is interesting that 91% indeed said that they are interested to patronize electronically.’ Furthermore, handling applications electronically was expected to create significant savings for the division.

The acquisition was launched by the division’s director and the assigned project manager from the IT department. In addition, the project team included users and a superuser, i.e., application handlers. The selected vendor was well-known to the client as the previous system had been purchased from them.

Figure 2. Case A Actors and Organizations.

Figure 2 shows how the parties communicated. The project manager communicated with the division superiors and the superuser, and they communicated with the users. The project manager communicated with the vendor and transmitted the division’s requests. ‘He [project manager] does his own filtering and evaluates which development ideas could be implemented’, stated the person assigned to work with the vendor. The vendor was not in direct contact with the users during the acquisition phase of the project.
3.2 Case B: HR Department’s IS Acquisition

Case B is the human resources (HR) department in a large, global industrial company. The HR department includes multiple specialists who have been assigned to different groups according to their main focus, e.g., calculation of wages or bonus programs. The group managers are called concept owners. The HR department acquired a new global, cloud-based HR system from an internal IT department.

The IS acquisition was driven by the urgent need to standardize HR processes and to integrate numerous separate systems universally used in HR tasks into a single system. In addition, the existing systems were becoming obsolete and expensive to maintain.

The HR department launched the idea of acquisition under the leadership of the HR department’s IS head. They explored the vendors and systems in the HR field and identified possible partners and systems. Before the acquisition was formally decided, the company encountered significant changes in their organizational structure. The HR acquisition was put on hold. Later, the IT department raised the idea of the HR system acquisition again and took the lead in the acquisition project. Based on the HR’s annual task listing, the acquisition had a tight time frame to be implemented within six months.

Consequently, the IT department decided to rely on their close ICT provider partner. IT department employed a program manager outside the organization to lead the project. The acquisition was controlled by the IT department, but the development was done in cooperation with the HR department’s different groups and the provider. The actors and organizations are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Case B Actors and Organizations

Figure 3 shows communication connections among the involved parties. Acquisition management was located in the IT department with the program manager. Technical configurations were done by the HR department’s groups and the provider’s project manager. ‘Personally I have nothing to do with our IT people. But our [HR] project management has been discussing with them. So yes, this is in a way IT’s acquisition. Our own IT has not been participating in these specifications and configuration related work,’ stated the concept owner. In fact, the HR department did not appear to have any ownership of the acquisition. This seemed challenging, especially from the provider’s viewpoint. The client organization members also had other ongoing relations with the system developer. Thus, they had separate relations with the account manager with whom they agreed on system licenses. The provider act-
ed as an integrator. Inside the IT department, the CIO and portfolio manager were responsible to the executive board for the acquisition, and the program manager was employed by the portfolio manager to act as project manager.

### 3.3 Research Methods

The study is a qualitative and interpretive case study (Klein and Myers, 1999; Walsham, 1995) with two cases. The previously presented literature was utilized as a lens through which to view the roles and the legitimation processes of the cases. However, in parallel, we discerned emerging roles and actions in the process.

The data was collected via in-depth interviews. The interviewees were selected because they were the major actors in both cases. Initial interviewees were appointed by our contact person, and the following interviews were selected by purposive snowball sampling (Teddlie and Yu, 2007). The interviewees are listed in Table 2 by organization and position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case A Organization</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Division</td>
<td>Division’s Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division</td>
<td>User and superior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Department</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendor</td>
<td>Person in charge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case B Organization</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT Department</td>
<td>Portfolio Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Department</td>
<td>Program Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Department</td>
<td>Concept Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Department</td>
<td>Head of the Departmental IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Interviewees according to organization and position.*

The interviews, targeted to understand the cases in-depth, were at the point when both cases had progressed to the implementation phase. Thus, this study focuses retrospectively on the acquisitions. All of the face-to-face interviews were approximately one hour in duration, and they were recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

The data were analysed by using the interpretive approach as the literature supplied a method to detect the roles and legitimation actions. The data were coded when the roles and legitimation actions appeared. Both cases were first analysed separately by two authors. Later, the results were dissected jointly by all the authors.

### 4 Empirical Findings

Next, both cases are presented separately.

#### 4.1 Case A: Social Services, Income Support Division’s IS Acquisition

The acquisition of an electronic income support system was initiated by multiple needs and sources: the legislation required that *There is an act on electronic services and communications in the public sector*, (project manager); the municipal council had committed to it, *The council members required*...
us to take action in utilizing electronic solutions’, (division director); the customers were demanding it, ‘We had multiple customers who had been asking why they cannot send applications electronically’, (a superior); and the income support division’s director was IT-driven and interested in investing in it, ‘I had been waiting for this, and I knew that this needed to be invested in. I was indeed enthusiastic’.

The acquisition was launched by the division’s director and a project manager from the IT department. Both were enthusiastic and motivated to carry out the acquisition. They benchmarked the possibilities of the electronic application handling system and contacted the vendor with which they had a close relationship. They informed the organization about the upcoming acquisition, ordered a system presentation and invited users to consider if the system would be helpful in their work environments. ‘When the presentation was over, these workers, who were reflecting the system against their work practices, gave us feedback. And then we were like “Oh shoot! This won’t work for us”’, stated the division director. Thus, the acquisition was halted until the system was redeveloped to correspond to the division’s needs. ‘We did not buy any chargeable development work. We perceived that this is a product, which the vendor is committed to develop’, the project manager explained. The vendor developed an appropriate system in a year and a half. ‘[Municipal name] has been waiting for us to develop and finish all the needed features from their perspective, and then have taken the product on their procurement list,’ noted the person in charge on the provider side.

When the acquisition was reinitiated, the project team was composed of the same people previously involved. In addition, they assigned two civil servants (application handlers) to the project. The project also had separate steering and design groups. The steering group included the division’s director, municipal management and representatives from the vendor. The design group, which was closer to the project work, included the division’s director, project manager and the division’s superiors. The project manager was a strong project leader throughout the acquisition. He acted as liaison between the division and the vendor, and he had the resources and competencies to fulfil this role. ‘In these [municipal] acquisitions, the project manager is always that kind of person, which you can really call not only a specialist of the substance but also of information systems,” said the vendor representative.

Throughout the acquisition, the project manager and other design group members collected and shared information among all stakeholders. ‘When they [workers] asked, I translated it to a plain language’ stated the division director. At the same time, they legitimated upcoming changes and engaged personnel to the new system. The division director explained: ‘I engaged our units’ superiors. In addition, I asked feedback from them: What does this look like, does this help, or does it just complicate the practical work, and what should be done?’ The superiors informed their employees and collected opinions. ‘Of course they asked what is this supposed to be and why is it coming, but when I told the reasons, they were all okay, all right—I sometimes asked opinions of what they think and what should be taken into account. Even though they have not been in the design group, they had the opportunity to be involved and they knew what was going to happen’, said one superior. In the end, the whole organization was committed to the new system. The project groups were competent and active. ‘For sure, some would have probably preferred to do something else, but they were still committed’, reported the division director.

However, the system was only partly implemented in time. Some features did not work properly in the customer environment. Their implementation was delayed. An application handler actively trained system users and ensured that everyone participated in the training. If not, she separately trained the ones who did not participate. She also acted as the primary support person when the actual use of the system was initiated. ‘That this worked out this well was more or less due to the fact that we had this kind of application handler’, said a superior. ‘On the perspective of implementation success, an important factor is, that right after the beginning, there is a support person available immediately when users are handling the customer process”, the project manager pointed out.

The acquisition was launched by the division director and project manager from the IT department. These two individuals played the role of innovators. Even though the division’s director did not partic-
ipate actively in the acquisition project, he was a member of the steering group ensuring that the new IS satisfied the initial needs. His position in the organization ensured the support of top management. Thus, he acted as a sponsor, too. The project manager actively led the acquisition and acted between the vendor and the users, i.e., he played the roles of project leader and gatekeeper. He shared information between the parties, but at the same time, filtered it appropriately. The superiors who participated in the project shared information with the users and gathered opinions, i.e., acted as gatekeepers between the project manager and the users. The project manager led the implementation phase, but the application handler trained and assisted the users. They each exerted a powerful influence on the implementation phase. In addition, the superuser influenced the way the users perceived the upcoming IS throughout the acquisition. Therefore, both played the role of implementers.

4.2 Case B: HR Department’s IS Acquisition

The acquisition of a new global HR system derived from the obsolete and scattered existing systems. The organization was using outdated technology and local differences occurred. The IT department, which led the acquisition, argued for the acquisition by invoking the financial savings, uniform processes and the advantages to the superiors. The decision to invest in the company’s HR systems had been made five years before the actual acquisition began. After the decision, the organization faced significant changes in its structure. Large investments were too expensive to carry out at the time of the relaunch. The portfolio manager put it this way: ‘When listening to our general director or analysts who report how our industry is doing nowadays, I believe that this size investment, five to seven million, would have never been launched’. The IT department, which had relaunched the idea of acquiring a new HR system, split the investment into three releases in order to gain the approval from the executive board. They negotiated investment approval for the first release and negotiated approval for the remaining two releases. The IT department demanded features which generated the most advantages to superiors around the organization in the first release. ‘Five years ago, the roadmap was very IS specific. Now we showed with it the advantages to whole organization. With that we strove to prove to the contrarians that this is a big investment but also worthwhile for real’, said the portfolio manager. The acquisition was approved by top management.

When the initial decision to invest in HR systems was made, HR outlined possible systems and vendors. When the acquisition was relaunched again a year later, the IT department took the lead. The acquisition had a very tight schedule, derived from the anniversary clock of the HR processes. Thus, the IT department perceived that the best chance for success was to rely on a close partner. ‘The RFP [request for proposal] work was bypassed, which is certainly not the way a project generally heads off, especially if the customer has participated in the RFP round and is thus committed to the project. We were forced to choose a partner who had worked with us earlier because it allows us to start the project faster’, explained the program manager. The HR department had mapped out and described all their processes. They assumed that the new system would be configured purely based on these documents. The head of the HR department’s IS described the situation: ‘We had expectations, because we had been doing it for so long, and for our part we were so damn ready. We had everything modelled, and we had all swim lines about who does what in processes in our PDFs’.

The ownership of the acquisition was designated to the HR department. Yet the project was led by the IT department. In addition, the program manager was employed outside of the IT department. When the acquisition was relaunched with a tight schedule, the IT department requested the provider of the selected system to be their close partner. The IT department negotiated the agreements and requirements with the provider and system licenses with the vendor’s account manager. HR expected to receive a complete system. They assigned no personnel to the project. However, the IT department assumed that the provider and HR department configured the system and acted in concert. The shortages in the information flow were especially challenging to the provider’s project manager. ‘I don’t see that the messages have been transparent either for HR or for us. For instance, about what has been done or agreed in the agreement phase. Maybe that, for example, what is our responsibility, what is as-
sumed to be the IT department’s responsibility and what is HR’s’, the project manager complained. From the provider perspective, there did not seem to be a project owner, or somebody in charge of the entirety, in the HR department, although there was a person responsible for HR IS in the steering group.

The project was divided into three iterations. The first iteration started with the details. The provider project manager and consultants did not have a system prototype from which they could demonstrate the system’s features and details. Instead, they had a list of potential features on a spreadsheet, which they went through point-by-point with the HR people. The customer side did not understand the list they were asked about, and HR personnel participating in the project got frustrated with the provider’s project manager. ‘HR was completely lost: “Now we are asked already what kind of tapestry we want, when we don’t know is it a bathroom or living room”’, according to the program manager. The relationship between the parties suffered greatly in this first iteration. HR employees refused to work with the provider and began to withhold information from his personnel. The program manager in the IT department received threats and was blamed for the work she had done. The IT department felt that the HR department was a very difficult partner for collaboration. The program directed stated it bluntly: ‘I do not know what they were aiming for, but you can clearly see that “I don’t know you, I don’t trust you”. It was shown in their behaviour’.

Because of these conflicts, the IT department was forced to request a new project manager from the provider. The new project manager was a person whose working habits differed significantly from the previous one. ‘He [project manager] has run those stairs back and forth, visited every room. It demanded personal devotion, what our other project manager couldn’t do’, said the program manager.

The new project manager was familiar with the client organization and already knew some of the HR personnel from previous projects. He led the project in totally different manner. He recalled that ‘We stated that, yes, this is in a way a message, as if in hockey changing the goalie. It was an awakening’. The new project manager succeeded in getting the HR department to participate in the project again. Some strong individuals arose among them. ‘If somebody does not take the flag as Jeanne d’Arc and leave for barricades, how do you get the masses with you? We had few rounds but eventually few big characters took the lead’, the portfolio manager recounted. All this resulted in the project staying on schedule. Nevertheless, some personal relationships suffered and the willingness to cooperate in the future is unknown.

The idea for the acquisition was initiated in the HR department. However, the acquisition was re-launched by the IT department. Thus, both HR and IT departments, and more precisely the head of the HR department’s IS and the CIO, played innovators. The project lead was firmly located in the IT department. Thus, project leader roles were played by the program manager and the portfolio manager. The missing ownership in the HR department was perceived as problem from the provider’s viewpoint. It can be argued that there should have also been a project leader in the HR department. The program manager ensured cooperation between the HR department and the provider, but did not actively participate in the configuration work. She acted partly as a gatekeeper by ensuring the information flows, but was not active enough in sharing and collecting information. She, as well, coordinated the rollout and influenced how the users perceived the upcoming IS project. Thus, she also played the role of an implementer.

5 Discussion
In the beginning of an IS acquisition, the actions to seek legitimation are emphasized, as shown in the cases when the initial ideas were launched. Consequently, innovators and sponsors take actions to create and gain legitimation for the initial idea. Innovators use various strategies in seeking legitimation. In Case A, the need and legislative pressure provided strong arguments for the innovators. In Case B, the IT department innovators broke the large investment into smaller releases, thus gaining top management’s support with financial arguments in addition to functional needs. In both cases, the target was constructed by taking into account the underlying assumptions and expectations. In Case B, the
innovators split the large investment into releases to decrease the investment costs in order to gain the executive board’s approval. These actions can be perceived as constructing a target, identifying legitimation providers, understanding norms and closing the identified gap between the legitimation structures. Innovators are often users of the IS; thus, they seek, maintain, repair and provide the legitimacy for and from the line organization and other users. Additionally, in the later phases in IS acquisition, the innovators ensure that the focus is on general guidelines. They maintain the legitimation by concentrating on initial goals. This is evident in both cases, but in different ways. In Case A, the other innovator was the division director. He gained legitimation from a superior, whereas the superiors gained legitimation from the users. In Case B, the IT department’s initial innovator did not maintain or take into account legitimation from the HR department; thus, the project was from the start heading to a dead end.

In IS acquisitions, project leaders and active gatekeepers are often designated to the acquisition after top management support is granted. Consequently, they are not as visible in the beginning of the acquisition. However, gatekeepers may also be self-determined. They might take major actions in seeking legitimation by sharing and collecting information outside the organization at the beginning of the acquisition process, as in Case A where the later designated project manager aided the division director gain municipality approval for the acquisition on behalf of the IT department.

The project leader leads and manages the acquisition project through challenges and obstacles by enthusiastically and aggressively promoting the project. Thus, the project leader maintains and repairs legitimation throughout the project after its initiation. The project leader maintains and repairs granted legitimation from every stakeholder: top management, line organization, project team and all business partners. For example, in case B, the project leader was seen to be a legitimation seeker. When the former project manager had weakened legitimation in the HR department, the new project manager had to actively contribute to repairing and maintaining it. The project leader can be perceived as an obvious candidate for a legitimation seeker. However, the project leader cannot act properly if the information flow among the parties is obstructed, as shown in Case B when the former project manager tried to lead the configuration. Thus, the role of gatekeeper appears significant. Legitimation seeking and management require appropriate communication among the participants, and a diverse set of techniques is needed to understand cultural and nonverbal meanings and meaning-laden actions (Suchman, 1995). Therefore, gatekeepers, who ensure that the information flows among the parties, are significant not only in legitimation seeking, but also in maintaining and repairing legitimation throughout the life of the project. In Case A, the gatekeeper role was designated to the project manager who filtered the information appropriately and ensured its flow among the parties to foster efficient cooperation.

The implementer is emphasized in the rollout phase of the new IS. The implementer maintains and repairs legitimation in parallel with the other roles. The implementer does not have as active of a role in the IS acquisition as is the case in other roles, but his or her influence cannot be ignored as is vividly shown in Case B. Implementers influence the ways the organization perceives the upcoming IS and required changes, but their actions are rarely visible or deliberate. Thus, the implementer may not be a significant actor in the legitimation process, but the role has influence, which is often accentuated or hindered by the other roles. Table 3 lists the legitimation actions taken by different roles.
Table 3. IS acquisition roles and actors in legitimation process.

As shown in Figure 1, the legitimation seeker’s actions are emphasized in the IS acquisition legitimation process. However, some roles may also appear as legitimation providers, in parallel with legitimation seekers.

The actions that seek to maintain and repair the legitimation process vary in the different roles. Innovators launch the initial idea which is often generated from apparent needs within the organization. The acquisition is launched almost directly after the need is identified if the innovator is high in the hierarchy and can provide top management support. Under the circumstances, the innovator plays the sponsor role simultaneously. Other sponsors reinforce the acquisition with financial arguments, organizational needs and by presenting streamlined processes to the top management. Project leaders use various arguments and actions for the IS acquisition success depending on the situation and context. The project leader, together with the gatekeeper, or the same individual playing these roles concurrently, ensures legitimation from the stakeholders by taking appropriate actions and sharing information among the involved parties. For example, in Case B, the project leader repaired the organizational legitimacy of the IS acquisition by making personal contact and communicating with all key users on the client side. The implementer maintains and repairs the legitimation primarily in the implementation phase of the new IS. The actions and results shown for the client organization are vital for the legitimation.

6 Conclusion

In this study, we have identified different roles in the IS acquisition legitimation process. We noticed that different actions and arguments depend on the legitimation seeker’s role in the acquisition. It was evident that in Case B, the acquisition project would have failed without the project manager replacement and without the active contribution to repair and maintain the legitimation among users by the new project manager. Thus, the project leader role is emphasized as a legitimation seeker throughout the acquisition project. However, other roles are also significant. The innovator seeks initial legitimation for the IS acquisition and maintains and repairs the legitimation among users. When the innovator is also a user, the role also provides immediate legitimation. The sponsors seek legitimation through top management support, especially in the beginning stages of the acquisition. The gatekeeper ensures the flow of information and, thus, seeks, maintains and repairs legitimation while encouraging appropriate communication among the involved parties. The implementer’s actions are emphasized in the implementation phase where the actions are crucial in maintaining and repairing legitimation.
Our study was conducted as a multiple case study with only two cases. The results should be viewed with certain considerations. Both cases are from the same country, which means that cultural aspects may vary in other contexts. Also, in both cases, there was an obvious need for the new IS. Legitimation seeking may have been easier than it would be in organizations where the upcoming change is refused. Consequently, the study should be replicated in different IS acquisitions and contexts.

We deliberately decided not to concentrate on specific strategies or actions in the legitimation process. These aspects indicate the need for further research. Especially in IS acquisitions, the user participation and information communicating and sharing are said to affect the success of adapting new technology (Lynch and Gregor, 2004; Orlikowski and Gash, 1994). It can be argued that these aspects are linked to the legitimation process as actions and strategies by the legitimation seeker. Therefore, specific actions and strategies in legitimation seeking argue for future research. Our focus has been on the legitimation seeker and was derived from the active roles contributing to seeking, maintaining and repairing legitimation. However, the legitimation process also includes legitimation providers, which have not been studied in the context of IS acquisition. Thus, future research could also focus on those who are the major legitimation providers in IS acquisitions.

In this paper, we have taken the actors in Hussain et al.’s (2004) legitimation process with seeking, maintaining, and repairing actions to a more specific level and context: IS acquisition. In the previous literature, the key actors in the legitimation process were limited to legitimation seekers and providers. However, in the context of IS acquisition, innovators, project leaders, sponsors, gatekeepers, and implementers act as legitimation seekers, thus expanding the legitimation seeker’s actions. This expands the LAM to a broader set of stakeholders. Our theoretical contributions are twofold: a deeper understanding of the legitimation roles and activities in IS acquisition and a larger inclusion of the actors in the LAM. Understanding the legitimation process helps practitioners in IS acquisition. With that understanding, they may be better equipped to answer the simple and legitimate question of ‘Why do we need this?’

References


Why do we need this?


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Why do we need this?


