Ensuring ERP Projects Achievement through Legitimating Practices

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Abstract

Even if ERP implementations represent a high-cost high-risk endeavor, organizations still invest precious financial, human and time resources in these projects. In this paper, we aim at uncovering how implementers’ practices affect ERP project legitimacy. The preliminary analysis of our results compares data collected from two cases studies: a North-American university and an Asian corporation. Our results reveal that, while legitimating practices must be enforced at both the organizational and individual levels, the path to achieve such legitimacy will likely be different from one context to another. While our results confirm that the pragmatic, moral and cognitive aspects of legitimacy are critical to ensure the achievement of an ERP project, our cases also suggest that the timing and saliency of a given legitimacy aspect will be different from one organization to another.

Keywords

legitimacy, ERP implementation, project management, case studies

Introduction

In both research and practice, much attention has been devoted to issues related to enterprise systems (ERPs) implementation. In the business world, ERPs represent the most important cost item of the IT budget of most organizations. Yet, ERP implementation results remain far from stellar, with failure rates exceeding 50%, even when implementations are supported by consultants and best practices (Hung et al. 2012). Despite ERP implementations represent such a high-cost high-risk endeavour, business organizations are still choosing to invest precious financial, human and time resources in these projects. A significant part of large and medium enterprises have implemented ERPs over the last decades (van Vuuren and Seymour, 2013). In information technology (IT) research, there is a wealth of papers that are focusing on issues related to ERPs (Seddon et al. 2010; Strong and Volkoff, 2010). The fact that ERPs now represent a standard in many industries seems to be an important rationale for enterprise system organizational investments and might contribute to explain such a paradox, because organizations are continuing to invest resources in these implementations despite their high failure rate. Indeed, research has shown that conforming to standards contributes to bring in legitimacy for organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Oliver 1991; Suchman 1995). While the importance of organizational legitimacy has been widely acknowledged in the management literature (Bitektine 2011; Suchman 1995; Tost 2011), in IS research, we still need a thorough understanding as to how IT legitimacy can be sustained all along the course of an IT implementation project. The main objective of our research project is to understand how legitimacy was achieved and how the implementers’ legitimating practices evolve during the course of an ERP implementation, and this at both the organizational and individual levels. To do so, we examine issues related to pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacies. The preliminary analysis of our results compare data collected from 2 of the 3 targeted cases studies: a Canadian university and a Thai corporation.
Conceptual Foundations

Neo-institutionalist theorists (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Oliver 1991; Suchman 1995) showed how organizational legitimacy depends on the way structures, processes and procedures are shaped in a way perceived as consistent with cultural patterns and widely accepted beliefs. Legitimacy is viewed as an ambivalent evaluative process of the “social fitness” (Oliver 1991, p. 160) of the way the organization behaves. With his integrative model of legitimacy, Bitektine (2011, p. 156) has stressed on the variety of stakeholders likely to judge an organization legitimacy: investors, advocacy groups and organization’s insiders. Employees of a firm also perceive its features, its structural attributes, and the results of its activity from both economic and social perspectives. Depending on the perceived legitimacy of strategic changes that are likely to modify existing cultural or value patterns, employees can adopt them more or less enthusiastically or exhibit dissident behaviors (Boiral 2003). In this sense, legitimacy is dependent of rhetorical strategic discourses between promoters and opponents of strategic change (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005). But the legitimacy judgment is not only about the objectives of the project but also about the way change is managed. If legitimacy has been acknowledged as an important issue in information systems, few research have adopted this alternative theoretical lens (Flynn and Du 2012). However, one can assume that when IT project legitimacy is sustained, users are likely to develop positive attitudes toward its implementation. Conversely, resistance may be viewed as an attitude resulting from the lack of legitimacy granted by users. Some recent studies have shown that legitimation had a significant influence on IS adoption and IT project success (Flynn and Du 2012; Hussain and Cornelius 2009; Kaganer 2010). This focus on the IT legitimation process is all the more important that a lot of IT implementations involve dramatic organizational changes.

To capture and make sense of the diversity of the IT legitimating practices used during an ERP implementation, this article propose to build upon the pragmatic, moral, cognitive typology of Suchman (1995) and adapt it at organizational and individual levels. As explained by Suchman (1995), pragmatic legitimacy is associated with how organizational stakeholders perceive legitimacy depending on their self-interested motives. Moral legitimacy refers to “a positive normative evaluation of the organization and its activities, where stakeholders perceive that they should provide their support towards such activities as it is ‘the right thing to do’. Cognitive legitimacy borrows mainly from institutional theory in that when particular activities become familiar and widely accepted in society (...) and taken-for- granted for success.” (Flynn and Du 2012, p. 214). This model was deemed relevant in this study, as it expands the traditional institutionalism perspective of legitimacy to encompass instrumental, psychological and societal dimensions (see Table 1 for details). Little research in IS has investigated how implementers enforce different types of legitimating strategies.

Methodology

To observe differences we conducted two case studies with organizations that have successfully implemented an ERP in very different contexts: a university in Canada and a corporation in Thailand. Because of the complexity of the organizational and social phenomena related to our research question, we chose a standard technique of qualitative data collection (Boyatzis 1998; Eisenhardt 1989; Miles and Huberman 1984). While we also rely on observation and document analysis (reports, request-for-proposals, commercial and technical documentation of ERPs, etc.), our research design is primarily based on semi-directive interviews and at this point, we have conducted semi-structured interviews with key actors (n=8; duration: 1-2 hours each) in both sites. Even if the number of interviews is small for qualitative research whom the objective is explicative, it remains in line with recommendations (6-8) of phenomenologists (Marshall et al., 2013, p. 13; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) for studies whom objective is to describe how a process evolved. Indeed, our respondents played an important role in the ERP implementation project, either at the governance (e.g. steering committee member) or at the operational level (e.g. project manager) and were the main ones confronted to the project legitimacy issues. While all the interviews were conducted in English, for the Thailand case, to reduce potential cultural biases in the interpretation of the answers, we solicited the assistance of a native Thai researcher, expert in cross-cultural management and Buddhist culture. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to facilitate data analysis.
In line with analytic inductive data analysis principles (Patton 2002), we began with a first round of deductive data coding. The initial codes were based on the categories derived from Suchman’s model and included pragmatic, moral, cognitive dimensions of legitimacy. Next we proceeded to a round of open coding and inductively identified new themes, for example saliency, values, conflicts, etc. During the overall process of data coding, as a team of 4 persons (whom the 3 authors), we reviewed and discussed the codification until we had reached a consensus; this helped eliminate any potential discrepancy (Larsson 1993; Bullock et al. 1987).

Findings

Table 1 summarizes the results obtained from the first two cases. The numbers indicate the orders the events raised; the “+” marks the influence level of each one on project achievement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of legitimacy</th>
<th>Canadian University</th>
<th>Thai Corporation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational level</td>
<td>Individual level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pragmatic (based on self-interested calculations of the audience)</td>
<td>(1)(++) Harmonizing processes across faculties</td>
<td>(3)(++) Facilitating individual tasks while reengineering remaining based on existing processes (graduate vs undergraduate departments)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral (based on societal welfare)</td>
<td>(5)(+++ Ensuring acceptability of the project for academics (non users) Ensuring congruency with with Medicine faculty Building upon the experience of the Editor in medical sector</td>
<td>(6)(++) Providing better services provided for students to end-users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive (based on wide belief and taken for granted considerations)</td>
<td>(2)(+) Exploiting best practices from other Universities.</td>
<td>(4)+ Involving champion users</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4)+ Involving champion users</td>
<td>(2)(++) Adopting a “certified IS”: SAP (instead of Microsoft solution) because it is the most well diffused around the world</td>
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Table 1: Canadian University versus Thai corporation legitimacy practices

**Canadian University Case Study**

This top-ranked Canadian University (here referred to as CU) includes 13 Faculties (Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Arts and Science, Dentistry, Education, Engineering, Law, Management, Medicine, Music, Religious Studies, Science, Environment). The ERP implementation project we are studying was launched in 2009 and lasted for more than two years. It included the implementation of finance, human resources and payroll modules, with major modifications to the original Banner solution that was chosen. The initial objective of the project, as described by the steering committee, was the willingness to harmonize data and procedures among the 13 faculties, as CU encountered problems in terms of data and administration governance over the whole campus. More than 200 users were concerned. At the outset, the aim was also to align CU practices on that of other universities in terms of IS integration.

Building upon the theoretical lens that we adopted, it seems that pragmatic legitimacy was an important aspect in justifying the project launched, given the importance of resolving issues related to non-integrated systems as well as redundant and inconsistent processes across faculties.

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1 Banner is an ERP for the education sector edited by Ellucian
“(…) one of the interesting things about this implementation was we were trying to eliminate or reduce the amount of work that was done in silos across the institution. We had separated systems for HR, for finance, for students; and that meant that in the old system if you were more than one of those roles you had to run around and update your address and personal” (Respondent 1).

An additional challenge for the steering committee was to convince that the chosen ERP was more appropriate than alternative IT solutions (vs. a software developed by the IT department for example). CU hired a project manager who had implemented Banner in two neighboring Universities, one in Canada and the other in the US. This decision was consistent with the belief that it was an opportunity to benefit from best practices in term of ERP implementation (cognitive legitimacy). In addition, given the “fragmented culture” (Kappos and Rivard 2008) of CU and the difficulty to harmonize processes, the steering committee decided to solicit the support of a large consulting firm (KPMG) because of their reputation in process re-design.

“(…) The culture is almost the reverse of transparency. (…) For example in admissions the information is private. One faculty didn’t want another faculty seeing what their information is like, who’s applying, what their information was, etc.” (Respondent 1) “The culture of McGill is totally opposed to transparency or efficiency values. In many ways it is as decentralized as units and centers of power exist. (…) At McGill though you’d have to negotiate with 13 faculties and even today when we work on new systems there’s a lot of negotiations that need to take place to get a process that all, everyone (sounds like) will common stand it out and will agree upon works for the whole institution.” (Respondent 4)

To support the internal team, for the actual implementation, the choice of another consultant firm that had a strong experience in ERP implementation, not only in the education sector, but also in medical sector was considered as a better fit with the culture of CU, where the Faculty of medicine faculty was a powerful player. This moral legitimacy was not based on the university values as a whole but on the ones of the most important Faculty, which was considered by the steering committee as one of the key stakeholders. It must be noted that the Faculty of medicine adherence to the solution was all the more hoped for by the project team given that it was the strongest bottleneck in terms of process specificities. Its cooperation was a required condition for success.

“Banner works less for example for some kinds of programs than others. Medicine because they have rotations rather than real courses you know medical residencies they don’t have courses at all. So, how do you register students? So we had to work a lot with the individual faculties to try and come up with workarounds to meet their needs” (Respondent 1).

Our interviews revealed that academics also played a role of moral legitimacy providers at the organizational level. Indeed some of the procedures were created from ages and some of them as embedded in the history of the university. As a consequence, from a cultural perspective, modifying a procedure was not only the business of administration but had to be validated by academics even if they were not concerned by all processes.

“(…) at McGill, procedures are sacrosanct and we often had to go to academic committees to say the new software doesn’t support how we do our business right now do we modify the software or do we modify our policies.”(Respondent 1). “(…) we always need to go to them and say this is what we’re proposing because you know it will make things much easier and it’s sustainable. But if academic committee decided no that’s against our policies and we’re not changing our policies then we had to come up with a work around.” (Respondent 2)

At individual level, the most conflictual debate about the way to adapt the system to cross-faculty processes concerned the differences between undergraduate and graduate programs.

“You had the undergraduate team who said ‘well you guys are just, you grad people are so different from us that we don’t even want to have to take that into account; you should just have to do what we have already decided’ and the graduate group who was looking at the undergraduate people on the team saying ‘but that doesn’t work, you don’t understand the world I live in.’” (Respondent 1)

Both the undergraduate and the graduate programs wanted their own existing processes to be implemented. While this underestimated issue created some challenges for the implementation team, its resolution was key in ensuring the adherence of the project by the end-users (pragmatic legitimacy).
Indeed, it ultimately contributed to facilitate their daily work by streamlining the work. Moreover, to ensure change acceptance at the individual level, the ERP implementers ensured to involve key users who were in a position of relying potential interests for end-users in each faculty (cognitive legitimacy). To give a feeling of the importance of these key users, the project team had created an “Enrolment Service” devoted to the recruitment of champion users (Finance Information System Specialists and Student Information Systems Specialists). Finally, the interviews revealed that other important arguments to make changes accepted at individual level were the ones about the quality of services delivered to students. The example of the on-line registration procedure was well illustrative of one of the moral legitimating practices used by the project managers in this instance.

“It was so easy to convince people that we needed a new system when you showed them what the student now had. (...) Everybody cares about the students you know we’re all here for the students; so that was really important. We all shared the value that the students needed to have a good experience when they came here. (...) You know a lot of students expected an online system not a telephone registration system. (...) that telephone system handled 40 people simultaneously okay. Now we’re handling hundreds of people simultaneously and the student they’re just expecting that. (...) The 24/7 service because people are trying to apply from around the world so their clock isn’t the same as ours. So I think that’s what we could count on that people wanted to do a good service to the student” (Respondent 2).

All in all, the analysis of the CU case shows how implementers favored several different implementation practices associated with all three types of legitimacy –pragmatic, moral and cognitive. It also reveals how these practices were enacted at both the individual and organizational levels and how they played a role in the achievement of the project.

**Thai Corporation Case Study**

The Thai corporation we labeled “TC” in this paper is in charge of water distribution across the whole country. The company developed several activities related to water storage, treatment, quality expertise, infrastructure maintenance, etc. TC decided to adopt the SAP solution in January 2011 and to implement the Accounting-Finance and Facility Management modules in the head-office and the five subsidiaries. SAP became the main IT system for 300 users in less than one year. The growth of the business outside Thailand was the triggering motive to adopt an IS solution consistent with the ones of potential partners, customers and suppliers. Indeed, at the international level, the company participates to cooperation projects with competitors from other Asia countries. The creation of the ASEAN common market in 2014 questions the new business boundaries of TC. In this economical context, the ERP project of the company was legitimated by the objective of implementing a standard IS to be able to adapt their IT infrastructure with potential partners. In this perspective, the project director relied on moral legitimating practices, focusing on the idea that, because the Asia common market adopting an ERP was the “right thing to do” in terms of decisive acts for the development of the company.

Given the context, there was a willingness to proceed with a vanilla implementation (without any customization) to maximize the standardization effect. Initially, the solution proposed by Microsoft was the preferred one because of its compatibility to existing applications and data transfer processes with existing databases. However, to sustain the legitimacy of the IT solution in terms of alignment, the implementers finally decided to support the SAP solution, even if it was much more expensive. Then, they promoted this choice based on the wide-belief that SAP being the most diffused ERP solution around the world, it was the one most likely to be used by potential partners (cognitive legitimacy). This decision could potentially have been de-legitimated by potential opponents to the project. For example, so far, only a minor part of the companies in Asia in water distribution sector are SAP or ERP fitted. Moreover, even if potential partners have, or would decide to adopt, the same ERP, the modules implemented can differ from the ones implemented by TC:

“At the outset, the decision was made to proceed to a ‘vanilla implementation’ like it is done everywhere around the world. This is why we decided to adopt SAP because of its leader position. Initially, I was not enthusiastic by the editor proposition because of the cost estimated. However, if in the middle-term we need to develop our business through partnerships, we must endorse standard processes. We are not here to change the world, but to be adapted to the world!” (the project director)

When the project was launched, the choice of the SAP solution was further legitimated by the need of the
company to have a financial and accounting system that would be more efficient and useful for decision making (pragmatic legitimacy). For this purpose, the Accounting-Finance module implemented was the cornerstone of the first phase of the ERP project. The enterprise system was expected to allow the implementation of an integrated database of accounting and analytical reports with the subsidiaries. This finance-centric justification for the project was in line with the way the company had evolved. Until 1997, TC was a public company. At this period it had sold its capital at the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET). While Waterworks Regional Authorities kept 40% of the capital, the rest was bought by banks and finance institutes. This marked a shift from the public sector culture of TC to a finance-oriented strategy. TC received several awards (in 2003, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2013) from the SET, Thai investor associations, for its performance and profitability for shareholders. In the same perspective, the company aimed to pursue its development abroad while, long-term quality services were less prioritized. For example, despite its R&D activity, TC was still not providing drinking water to the Thai population.

At the organizational level, the ERP project was nonetheless seen as legitimate because of the expected benefits in term of cost reduction, process optimization and harmonization of accounting and finance reporting with the subsidiaries. This pragmatic legitimacy was in part achieved through a symbolic act: instead of naming a manager from the CIO as project director, the board nominated the finance Director as project manager. The IT managers were subordinated to him with regards to the decisions that had to be made.

Surprisingly, at the individual level, champion end-users or key end-users were not considered “legitimacy providers”. In fact, the project director did not even perceive them as important stakeholders.

“We chose key users among middle-managers only. We only took into account their demands. Lower-level employees don’t have abilities to understand what the challenge is! We (ndlr: the top managers) only had to explain to them the company gave a one million dollar tool to their disposal, and it was not for nothing! We are the “big ones” and they are the “small ones” (ndlr: he represents a form of a pyramid with his hands), and we must remind them. They said (ndlr: he looked to the sky and imitated an employee asking a question to a superior): ‘Sir, why have we to work with this new software now?’ (ndlr: he looked to the floor speaking to somebody below him). ‘Hey! Now you have to work with SAP because it is the international standard and because we are telling you this is the right way’”. (the project director)

The change management style at TC took the form of an authoritarian management style giving the impression of “white collars – blue collars” relationship duality. However, our analysis of the Buddhist culture incites us not to consider this situation as a form of enslavement of employees feared by potential hierarchical sanctions or blames. Actually, despite their personal dissatisfaction, the ERP acceptance was associated more with the fact that the employees trusted top managers (moral legitimacy). This point highly refers to the “Bunkhun” (or “Katanyu”) principle of the Buddhism. “Bunkhun” is often translated as “thankfulness” and corresponds to the gratitude of Buddhists toward the ones providing help. Family members, professors, monks, elders, etc. represent the “building blocks of the moral order” (Niffenegger et al. 2006). Professional relationships are also governed by these symbolist rules. As representative of power and professional experience, hierarchical superiors are considered as “Phu Yai” (“big people”) and are worth of a similar gratitude of the “Phu Noi” (“little people”). Indeed, a kind of moral obligation between the two categories shades the asymmetry. “Phu Yai” have to provide assistance and support to “Phu Noi” in exchange of marks of respect. In other words, the legitimacy of a “Phu Yai” is function of his social role as well as his hierarchical position. In other words, from the employee’s perspective, the legitimacy of the project was directly linked to the moral legitimacy associated with the top implementers of the project.

If the moral legitimacy of the project ensured the ERP acceptance, this does not mean that users did not express any resistance. Until the SAP implementation, the employees of the finance department did not have to meet stringent deadlines, as managerial practices were less short-term oriented. The board of the directors made most of the decisions more progressively, in several steps, and employees had more time to put together the required data. It was common to extend reporting over several board meetings; decisions were being made after several months only. SAP imposed a detailed financial budget being established before a project activity could be created. The project director recognized that the most disturbing point for the end-users was the new frame imposed by more urgent strategic decision-making needs, which had to be enforced due to the growing competition.

Users acts of resistance were expressed using with a “Thai style” where resisting does not mean avoiding to
do what one has to do. One respondent explained that while employees did not ask for any module customizations, they were however expecting top managers to play their role of Phu Yai and give compensations for SAP usage, for example training, career plan, and/or financial incentives. These pragmatic legitimating practices, which were indeed enforced at individual level, represented some kind of moral counterpart to the Bunkhun principle shaping relationships between project stakeholders.

**Discussion**

This research and the above results are linked to a limited set of interviews that reflect solely the take of the managers. We do not pretend to fully embrace the concept of legitimation and all its possible variations and effects. However, by deliberately comparing two high-different case studies, our results are indicative that it can be possible to theorize legitimation as a necessary element for ERP project management.

The interviews we conducted reveal how legitimation was achieved and what were the legitimating practices carried out by implementers – at the governance and at the operational levels – during the course of the implementation of an ERP project. While several of these practices are consistent with what are considered project management best practices (Nelson, 2007; Wagner & Newell, 2004), some appear to be more symbolic and aimed at ensuring the adherence of the stakeholders to the ERP project.

Data collected show that the legitimacy of the project evolves during the course of the implementation. In some way, it reveals what we call a legitimacy trajectory. At CU, initially, implementers favored argumentation strategies that belonged to the pragmatic and/or cognitive legitimation categories. They first relied on organizational pragmatic legitimacy to convince stakeholders that the project was indeed needed (e.g. to streamline existing processes) and on cognitive legitimacy to demonstrate that they were intending to build upon best practices to ensure the success of the project. At the individual level, project managers made sure to demonstrate that the new ERP would contribute to facilitate the end-users’ daily work (pragmatic legitimacy) and involved champion users to add credibility to the process (cognitive legitimacy). However, at the organizational level, the global acceptance of the project by the stakeholders relied more on the moral legitimacy aspects, i.e. the fact that the implementers ensured that academics were adhering to the project (key stakeholders) and that the project recognized the special status of the Faculty of medicine. The moral legitimacy aspect of the project also played a role, although less significant, at the individual level. Here, it had been important to show that the implementation of the ERP would allow providing better services to students, an important fact in light of the mission of the organization; it contributed to end-users’ acceptance of the project.

Our second case study suggests a different legitimacy trajectory of the ERP project. The interviews we conducted at TC revealed that implementers initially used moral legitimating practices to convince the stakeholders of the appropriateness of the ERP project, in that there was a need to adapt the corporation to the Asian common market (ASEAN 2014). These arguments were reinforced by the symbolic actions of the project director, who selected an IT solution that was seen as the standard and which was well diffused one in that business sector. Here, the decision to go ahead with the vanilla implementation of SAP modules instead of the preferred one of Microsoft translates cognitive legitimacy, as the Microsoft solution was perceived as better aligned with TC needs, but less likely to be adopted by potential foreign partners. At the organizational level, implementers justified the SAP adoption decision by arguing that there would be improvement in the management of the subsidiaries. These pragmatic legitimating practices were congruent with the way the culture of TC had evolved from having a public service mission to becoming a more finance-centric business since the quotation of the company to the Stock Exchange of Thailand. At the individual level, implementers only considered middle-managers as legitimacy providers and enrolled them, instead of employees, as champion users given that the latters received very little consideration (cognitive legitimacy). Actually, moral legitimacy played a dominant role at individual level because of the Buddhist culture was contributing to shape behaviors. Indeed, from the employees’ perspective, the legitimacy of the project director (as “Phu Yai”) was linked to the legitimacy of the project itself and it contributed to ensure the ERP acceptance by end-users. Finally, the pragmatic legitimacy practices that were enacted played a relative minor role in the project achievement; they mainly consisted as compensations provided for the inconvenience of using the new system.

The legitimacy trajectories were different in each case and this put forth the overall influence of the socio-

Conclusion

This article highlights legitimacy concept as key element of ERP implementation. The approach we adopted shows that the different types of legitimacy, as defined by Suchman, are not exclusive but rather different modalities of a same process aiming to capture the stakeholders’ support all along the project. Recently, van Offenbeek et al. (2012) put forward that supporting a technology was different than accepting a technology, and reversely that acts of resistance toward a technology did not mean automatically its reject (Boudreau & Robey, 2005). In other words, users can consider an IT as legitimate while not using it, or can resist to its implementation while using it. In the last case, one risk is deviant usages likely to jeopardize the general adoption of the system (Leonardi and Barley 2010). The first case represents however a more suitable configuration of the IT adoption (Banville 1991; Flynn and Du 2012) and asks for a management of leveraging effects. We believe legitimation being one of them.

The high number of failing ERP implementations questions the reasonable acceptance or satisfaction level of users to expect toward such IT projects. Therefore, managers need to play with concrete or symbolic actions for the project being perceived by key actors as legitimate anyway. Our research insists on the interest of a higher attention to ERP legitimation than the existing literature in IS management granted so far. In this perspective, our “legitimation trajectory” represents a contribution illustrating the influence of socio-cultural context on the way to obtain the support of the project stakeholders.

References

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