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Toward a Theory of Emergent Leadership for Collaborative Information Systems Development among Social Enterprises

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ABSTRACT

Many social enterprises (SEs) are adopting collaborative strategies to overcome fragmentation and duplication in the social sector to effectively address the world's social needs (i.e. hunger, poverty, healthcare, education). SEs are increasingly utilizing IT to support collaboration. However, historically SEs have been slow to integrate IT into their organizations so little is known about information systems design (ISD) in SEs; even less at the collaborative level. Effective leadership in ISD is important to realizing desired outcomes. Current leadership theories do not translate easily to the SE context. We explore the collective leadership, emerging from the collaborative ISD process itself, as being relevant to SE contexts. We apply the neohumanist philosophy, and incorporate Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action, to develop a theory of leadership in collaborative SE ISD, in which leadership emerges from communicative actions in the ISD process. We offer a framework for leadership in collaborative ISD in social sector collaboration.

Keywords

Social Enterprise, Neohumanist Philosophy, Collaboration, Leadership, Theory of Communicative Action

INTRODUCTION

Social enterprises (SEs) recognize, evaluate, and exploit opportunities that result in social value – the basic and longstanding needs of society – as opposed to personal or shareholder wealth (Certo and Miller, 2008). SEs are a critical resource as they provide goods and services in areas such as healthcare, education, and environmental issues, which would not be adequately addressed if left to the actions of private markets and profit seeking firms (Dees 1998). These social sector organizations have contributed to global transformation by enabling the exploration of opportunities at distant locations, transforming their efforts into sustained global change, and by developing programs which impact a vast array of social needs, improve quality of life, and enhance human development globally (Dees, 1998; Drayton, 2006; Mair and Marti, 2006; Brewer et al., 2009; Datta and Jessup, 2009).

SEs are differentiated from commercial enterprises because they align their actions with a mission to create social value rather than engaging in commercial for-profit activities with the goal of maximizing profits (Zahra et al., 2009). SEs are characterized by dependence on unstable external funding sources (i.e., donations, grants, etc.), a transitory voluntary workforce, lack of formal infrastructures and organizational processes, and lack of stable IT infrastructure (Takahashi and Smutny, 2001). Many SEs are turning to both collaborative ventures (Vangen and Huxham, 2003; Takahashi and Smutny, 2002; Guo and Acar, 2005) and leveraging information technology (Merkel et al., 2007; Saab et al, 2008; Saxton et al., 2007) to overcome the unique constraints of the social sector landscape. Collaboration among SEs is critical, as no single social (need) domain can be tackled by any one organization acting alone (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). By leveraging IT to support collaboration, SEs can pool their resources to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of delivered services, realize new funding sources, greater legitimacy, share best practices, access to information, and realize seamless service to the communities that they serve (Takahashi and Smutny, 2002). Unfortunately the relationship between SEs and IT has been largely ignored by the IS research community (Datta and Jessup, 2009). This is an important void to fill as the development

of effective information systems for SE collaboration has the potential to positively impact social conditions and enhance the quality of life for millions of people world-wide.

In this paper we seek to address the need for ISD methodologies in the context of SE collaboration by extending existing neohumanist theories of ISD (Hirschheim and Klein, 1994) to the context of collaborative SE ISD. Specifically, we integrate Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) into current neohumanist theories of ISD (within the SE context) to address the necessary leadership required in collaborative SE ISD efforts. We seek to address the following question: *How can communicative actions in a neohumanist approach lead to effective emergent leadership for information systems development in SE collaborations?*

In this project we begin to identify the communicative actions that become the drivers for the emergent "leadership" which guides the activities of ISD in SE collaboration. Hence, a conceptual theoretical framework for ISD in SE collaborations is developed.

SOCIAL SECTOR ISD COLLABORATION

Collaboration is the exchange of information, altering of activities, sharing of resources, and a willingness to enhance the capacity of another for mutual benefit and a common purpose. It requires high levels of trust, time, "turfsharing", and involves risks and rewards, which when fully realized, can produce the benefits of mutual action beyond what any one partner could achieve alone (Himmelman, 2001). Organizations collaborate when they "demonstrate willingness to enhance each other's capacity for mutual benefit and common purpose by sharing risks, responsibilities, resources and rewards" (Himmelman, 2001 pg. 278). Moreover, stakeholders engage in an interactive process of communication and knowledge exchange, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to develop agendas and goals to promote action in the SE domain (Saab et al., 2008).

Currently, most SEs work independently to effectively tackle profound global challenges; however, the efforts of these organizations are fragmented. Independently, SEs are driven by a social mission to improve a social need. Collectively, many SEs share the same mission. By aligning their actions SEs have the potential to reduce duplication of effort, and improve efficiency and effectiveness of social entrepreneurism globally, through the sharing of information, resources, and best practices. By leveraging IT, SEs can communicate, organize their efforts, share knowledge and solutions across the social sector, and realize a greater collective impact on global challenges. IT-platforms that enable collaboration hold the promise of bridging the existing fragmented social sector landscape, which is the result of varying geographic, political, economic, legal issues, as well as access to processes and infrastructure. However, the unique resource constraints associated with SEs make it difficult to create sustainable information systems within those organizations, as well as within the context of inter-organizational collaboration.

The SE organizational context is characterized by an informal work environment that invites varying leadership styles (Takahashi and Smutny, 2001). Salaries in the social sector context are traditionally lower than those in private industry, but for many the freedom of an informal environment draws them to service in SEs. This can create a difficult environment for bridging leadership styles, operating procedures, and values.

It is suggested that effective communication and a unique form of leadership is necessary for collaborative SE ISD efforts. ISD is a social process that can serve as a viable foundation for the design and development of sustainable information systems that span the unique complexities of SEs (Kanungo, 2004). Given that traditional notions of ISD leadership do not adequately transfer to the unique context of SE collaboration, new concepts of leadership are needed to describe collaboration among organizations with different goals, constraints, and motivations.

EMERGENT LEADERSHIP IN INTERORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION

Current leadership theory primarily addresses leadership at the organizational level, and specifically the personal characteristics of leadership behaviors, situational variables that moderate effective leadership, and the relationships between leaders and employees or partners (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). The perspective that leadership - by definition - is concerned with a formal leader who influences individual members of a group in order to achieve specific goals, does not effectively translate to the context of inter-organizational collaboration. Inter-organizational collaboration is frequently characterized by ambiguity related to agendas, power, and organizational influences which characterize collaborative efforts. This context can hinder agreement about collaborative goals, especially when those involved take action without a clear understanding of expected goals and outcomes.

Feyerherm (1994) defines a collaborative group as contributing different forms of leadership, emphasizing the role of emergent and informal leaders who can merge the processes of collaboration and communication. By incorporating leadership into the collaborative process, the notion of leadership is decentralized. Huxham and Vangen (2000) extend the

concept of emergent leadership by arguing for a new form of leadership for inter-organizational collaboration - one that addresses shared relationships, power, and influence, and views leadership as a product of the collaborative process itself.

From this perspective, it is the structure and activities of collaboration that are central to motivating and leading the activities of collaboration. Huxham and Vangen (2000) define *structure* (processes, participants, etc.) as the mechanism by which agendas are created. The *activities* of the participants both create and drive the agenda. Finally, they identify *collaboration* as a structurational process that transforms the relations between the structure of the collaboration itself and the actions of the individual participants.

Huxham and Vangen (2000) describe four leadership activities that emerge from a process in which all members have a voice and seek consensus to shape collaborative agendas. From this perspective leadership largely facilitates the activities of the collaboration. The four activities include; (1) *embracing,* which is concerned with the inclusion of new members and informing them about the collaboration history, agenda and goals, while welcoming their contribution of new ideas, (2) *empowering,* a process of creating an infrastructure that pulls together a diverse range of members and enables all members to participate fully in the collaboration, (3) *Involving,* the process of overcoming hindrances to participation, and specifically addressing member inequality and related power issues, and (4) *mobilizing*, the act of making things happen through a sensitive exchange of the aims and aspirations of all members. This ensures that all of the organizations benefit from their involvement, therefore promoting involvement in the process of collaboration.

It is important to note that positional leaders (in any form) are often not able to drive agendas even though they have a designated leadership role, emphasizing the importance of emergent leadership which results from the collaborative process and communication between members. The process of communication shapes the agenda, actions, and responsibilities of collaboration, and from it emerges collaborative leadership. However, frequently in collaborative efforts there are deeply embedded and self-reinforcing power relations that can constrain action and progress. Therefore, power relations must be transformed in order to establish and achieve the collaborative agenda effectively (Himmelman, 2001).

Neohumanist ISD methodologies have been applied to complex design and development in for-profit organizational contexts, and specifically address power relations in ISD (Hirschheim and Klein, 1994). We propose that the neohumanist ISD approach can be extended to the SE context to address the gap in the current literature related to effective ISD in the collaborative efforts among SE organizations.

NEOHUMANIST ISD PARADIGM

Hirschheim and Klein (1994) summarize the neohumanist paradigm as one that "seeks change, emancipation, and the realization of human potential and stresses the role that different social and organizational forces play in understanding change as it focuses on all forms of barriers to emancipation – in particular ideology (distorted communication), power and psychological compulsions, and social constraints – and seeks ways to overcome them" (pg. 109). They extend Mumford's (1993) ETHICS approach and describe four fundamental components of an emancipatory ISD methodology, that must; (1) support active processes for individual and collective self-determination, (2) support processes of critical self-reflection and associated self-transformation, (3) encompass a broader set of institutional issues to eliminate information distortions related to social justice, due process and human freedom, and (4) incorporate explicit principles for critical evaluation of claims made throughout the systems development process (a guarantor).

Emancipation is concerned with achieving a genuine understanding. ISD is an inherently social process and therefore can provide a viable foundation for achieving mutual understanding and emancipation (Klein and Hirschheim, 1993). In the ISD context, project managers, developers, and other stakeholders pursue mutual understanding through interaction aimed at communication to acquire knowledge about diverse stakeholder perspectives. Communicative action, through rational discourse and the ideal speech provide a mechanism to gain a shared understanding about goals, agendas, planning, design, implementation, and maintenance of information systems (Klein and Hirschheim, 1993).

Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (TCA)

The roots of TCA and discourse ethics are found in the school of "critical social theory;" which proposes that meaningful human knowledge must not simply understand the world, but it must also change it. Critical social theory challenges traditions and conventional wisdom and counters the development of oppressive practices (Falconer et al., 2000).

Habermas (1984) explores how society is organized and addresses social justice in a world of social inequity. He seeks to reveal, through communication, the domination of technical, political, and scientific categories that shape our world and to address the distortions that emerge from social inequity and simultaneously conceal the inequities. He proposes that people have a "technical interest in knowing and controlling the world around them, an interest in removing distortions in our

understanding of ourselves, and an interest in being able to understand each other and join in common activity" (Benoit, 2002). Habermas offers theories of discourse ethics as the process of participation that allows people to express opinions, honor consensual agreement and focus on rational discourse to solve problems with moral content (Richardson et al., 2006).

In the context of ISD, the neohumanist philosophy supports user-driven specification and processes that replace or complement the traditional functionalist approach in a collaborative setting. Key stakeholders with potentially conflicting interests work together and develop joint models of their work processes in order to develop the shared agenda that drives the development of sustainable IT. By engaging in rational discourse throughout the ISD process, communication distortions are removed as the claims that are made throughout the development process are critically evaluated (Hirschheim and Klein, 1994).

Habermas offers the TCA as a process of communication that aspires to reach a common goal between individuals as communicative actions. *Communicative action* is communication, through language or other symbolic sign systems, in which actors participate in order to understand another actor or communicative partner (Lyytinen and Hirschheim, 1988). When engaging in communicative action the actor is not merely oriented toward their own success, but rather they pursue their own individual goals under the condition that they can reach a shared understanding or definitions of a situation and in doing so establish a common understanding (Habermas, 1984). Communicative action requires an "ideal speech situation" which assumes that all members are (1) allowed and enabled to take part in discourse, (2) question existing assertions, introduce their own assertions, express attitudes, desires and needs, and (3) are not prevented (by internal or external coercion) from exercising their rights to participate. Discursive action is a communication mechanism that tries to discover and weigh the arguments proposed for or against a message in terms of its clarity, truthfulness, correctness, and appropriateness. These four criteria define "validity claims." Discursive action is aimed at justifying any or all of these claims (Lyytinen and Hirschheim, 1988). Anyone at anytime can "cash in" on these validity claims and all speakers are free to investigate the claims of another (Benoit, 2002).

The redemption of validity claims makes discourse a vehicle for reflective learning and criticism which helps free the participants from inner compulsions, biases, prejudices, and false beliefs (Lyytinen and Hirschheim, 1988). Acceptance of the ground rules of communicative action, specifically the existence of validity claims, permits criticism of organizational processes that do not conform to these rules (Lyytinen and Hirschheim, 1988). This process lends itself to verification of the information communicated by individuals. Finally, Habermas proposes the emancipatory potential of discursive action in which individuals can bring ideas into the discourse and combat the domination of technical interests. The focus here is on a subjective, voluntary empowering action of individual members of society in bringing out individual, and thus social, emancipation (Richardson, et al 2006).

We propose that the neohumanist approach to ISD can be expanded from the organizational level of analysis to the inter-organizational level of the collaborative environment, and is appropriate for explaining the nuances of ISD within the SE context. As it pertains to ISD, Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action* (TCA) (1984) provides communication mechanisms to orient the processes and actions in collaborative SE ISD. Expanding TCA to SE collaborations holds promise in explaining actions that can lead to effective social sector ISD collaborations, as the relevant stakeholders often have conflicting interests but can benefit themselves and society by collaborating on the development of joint models, work processes, and supporting information technologies (de Moor, 2002).

FRAMEWORK FOR ISD IN SOCIAL SECTOR COLLABORATION

SE collaborations, especially those involving IT, are on the rise (Zahra et al., 2009). However, existing theories in ISD do not currently describe effective methodologies for the SE context, especially those within the context of collaboration. Leadership in SE collaboration has been described as having emerged from the collaborative process itself (Zahra et al., 2009). The collective actions of the members define agendas and motivate the actions that move the ISD process forward. To overcome deeply embedded power relations that frequently characterize collaboration, members engage in communicative actions that remove distortions and facilitate shared understandings.

Emergent leadership requires communicative actions to remove distortions in information sharing, beliefs, and goals. It is through communicative actions that the emergent collaborative leadership moves through the process of: (1) embracing new members by providing information to remove distortions in understanding, (2) creating a collaborative infrastructure of communication and thereby empowering all members equally, (3) involving each member in the collaborative process by providing an infrastructure that removes distortions which become obstacles to participation, and (4) mobilizing action by

continuing rational discourse that requires a critical evaluation of the claims made throughout the ISD process, thereby ensuring that all members benefit from their involvement.

Embracing

Leadership at the embracing phase includes efforts aimed at facilitating involvement by potential members who are willing and able to move the collaborative agenda forward. SE ISD collaborations occur in a dynamic environment characterized by high employee turnover, unstable resources, varying skill levels, resources, and technical and geographical constraints. When the collaboration is initiated, or new members join, a process of communication begins that is aimed at removing information distortions and strives for inclusion by bridging gaps in understanding. Members are provided with data (e.g. historical and process documents) which focuses discussions on shared values, goals and efficiency. Discourse promotes communication that facilitates involvement through actions aimed at trust-building and removing distortions. This sets the stage for a collaborative environment in which all participants have equal rights to raise issues and can focus on reaching consensus related to shared values, goals, and agendas.

Empowering

Leadership at the empowering phase involves creating an infrastructure which enables members to participate in collaboration. Communication processes require pulling together members with varying skills, backgrounds, experiences, resources, technical capabilities, and political and government influences across varying geographical areas. Collaborative ISD must support an infrastructure with processes and activities that empower all members to participate equally in discourse with the goal of revealing conflict and encouraging debate.

Involving

Leadership at the involving phase of collaboration is aimed at removing obstacles to involvement. The ISD process incorporates rational discourse aimed at removing obstacles to participation - such as power inequalities that emerge throughout the life of the collaboration-- by facilitating trust-building through an ongoing exchange of expectations. The result of the discourse is recognition of distortions, such as member unresponsiveness or information inequality, which may result in the realignment of project goals.

Mobilizing

Leadership at the mobilizing phase of collaboration is aimed at "making things happen" by influencing individual members to support the collaboration and ensuring that all members benefit from their involvement. The ISD process incorporates mechanisms for critical evaluation of the claims made throughout the process of systems development by way of a "guarantor of design". Through rational discourse, tensions are revealed through ongoing communication processes that enable members to represent themselves, resulting in sensitivity to the aims and aspirations of the individual members. This process ensures that all members benefit from their participation and reinforces incentives for involvement and action.

These principles map closely to the idea of an emerging leader in collaborative contexts. Communicative actions, when added to the principles of emancipation, provide an "action" mechanism for emergent leadership. Communicative action defines an environment in which participants in a discursive communication have agreed to seek the truth and accept the force of the better argument. The goal is for truth to emerge; therefore facilitating progress in the ISD process ISD requires mechanisms that promote shared understanding throughout the ISD process, and after implementation, in order to create a sustainable system. Communicative action becomes a part of each phase of emergent leadership in SE ISD, and at the same time meets the four fundamental requirements for an emancipatory ISD methodology.

Examples of possible communicative actions at each stage of leadership, that also meet the requirements of an emancipatory ISD methodology, are described in Table 1.

	Progression of Collaboration Leadership Activities			
	Embracing	*Empowering*	*Involving*	*Mobilizing*
ISD Requirements (neohumanist)				
Support collective self determination ▪ Emancipate from being treated as a means to an end	Existing SEs embrace new members into the ISD process by providing historical information (minutes, documents, process documents) so they can "learn the ropes". This communication promotes shared understanding so members can participate fully.	SE members implement processes to distribute relevant (contextualized) information well in advance of regular ISD meetings to eliminate information gaps and thereby empowering all members to participate fully	SE members collectively create and implement structures and processes that support discourse related to managing inequalities, emerging dominance by any one member, realignment of project goals, and finding ways to address balance of power, across all SE members of the ISD process	SE members develop infrastructure for the ISD process that facilitates collaboration (and not independent actions) so the inherent interdependencies of SE ISD collaboration result in a shared agenda, goals, interests, norms and ownership, that results in all SE members benefiting from their involvement (open access to the system, information, members, etc)
Critical Self-reflection (emancipatory) ▪ Self-reflection by planner on part of affected	SE ISD stakeholders engage in regular interaction to facilitate continuity, shared values, innovation, resulting in an evolving agenda that fosters involvement by all SE members.	SEs create and implement frequent and open communication mechanisms and information flow (email, online meetings, etc) that enables all members the opportunity to engage in reflection and action, resulting in the emergence of new ideas and hidden agendas	SE members engage in an open and honest exchange of perspectives (ideal speech) to reach consensus about the collective control of resources needed to sustain both the system and ISD collaboration beyond implementation; the goal being a sustainable information system	SE members facilitate continued interaction and debate for all members with the goal of revealing tensions between autonomy and accountability; the continued interaction seeks agreement and consensus resulting in a commitment to action by all members
Encompass a broad set of institutional issues ▪ Individual ethical needs ▪ Quality of work life ▪ Autonomy ▪ Participation links	Existing SEs foster collaborative activities (Skype meetings, experience sharing, etc.) when new members are not fully on board in order to remove distortions, promote autonomy and participation, as well as incorporate new ideas into ISD process.	SE members foster collaboration in the ISD process with the goal of pulling individual SEs with a wide range of different skills, backgrounds, and experiences into the ISD collaboration by ensuring a common language of design that all are comfortable with (regardless of ISD or technical experience).	SE members support distributed cognition in ISD process in order to transcend the sole influence of any one individual or organization by developing a framework for evolution in which all members of the SE ISD collaboration contribute in accord with their ability.	Incorporate the unique influences of each individual SE organization into the ISD process as these interdependencies facilitate ongoing coordination among members and results in sustainability of the system itself.
Incorporate explicit principles for critical evaluation of claims made throughout the ISD process ▪ Guarantor of Design	Existing SEs ensure continuity by incorporating new members of the ISD team into the ownership of the values and programs of activities already established	SE members elect an institutional representative that is relatively "disadvantaged" in terms of information, skills, resources, etc., in order to ensure equal power distribution across all members of the ISD effort.	SE members engage in ongoing discourse for sustained ISD that places the evolution of the system in the hands of all its SE members, ensuring joint ownership of the ISD process, and a sustainable system design that can evolve along with the SE collaboration	Rational discourse serves as the system guarantor by enabling equal access for all SE members to debate regarding decision making, accountability, and ensures actions are taken in ISD process

Table 1: Emergent Leadership through Communicative Actions for ISD in SS Collaborations

CONCLUSION

IS research has historically overlooked the relationship between IT and SEs (Datta and Jessup, 2009). This is an important oversight as "social considerations are of the essence in the application of new technologies, and these need to be fore-grounded in IS research – all the more so when these systems are applied for the betterment of poor and marginalized communities" (Puri 2007, p. 375). We begin to address this void by developing a framework for ISD in social sector collaboration, and the leadership that emerges from the collaborative ISD process. We extend current neohumanist ISD methodologies, and specifically Habermas' TCA, that have been applied in for-profit contexts to ISD collaboration among SEs. We identify communicative actions as the mechanism which enables the emergent leadership of the collaboration, and offer an emergent theory of ISD within SE contexts. Finally, we illustrate how communicative actions can lead to effective ISD in SE collaborations by providing an initial conceptual framework of communicative actions at each stage of the leadership process in a neohumanist ISD methodology. We hope that future research will further investigate and refine this framework.

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