Understanding Subcultures and Change Dynamics in E-Government: An Empirical Study of a Local Government in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Governments worldwide are faced with a rapidly changing business environment, with reform and modernization at the forefront of many agendas. One country which has embarked on a significant programme of E-Government transformation is Malaysia. A key goal of E-Government transformation is to harness the potential of information communication technology (ICT), particularly web-based systems, to improve how governments function internally and externally (Moon *et al.* 2014). While ICT offers the potential to revolutionize how governments operate, the extent to which ICT is being used effectively to support E-Government services, particularly at the local government council level, has been brought into question (Wong *et al.* 2010). One important factor, which can act as an enabler or barrier (more often the latter) to E-Government, is organizational culture. Increasingly, researchers (e.g. Choudrie *et al.* 2010; Zhao and Khan, 2013) have suggested that a lack of effort in understanding organizational culture is a key reason why many E-Government change programs encounter problems. Regardless of the budding literature emphasizing the importance of understanding the relationship between organizational culture and E-Government, research on understanding different subcultures, and the dynamic of change, which influence the ability to manage and implement E-Government projects, still remains an area to be explored in more detail.

To address these issues, grid and group cultural theory is used as the theoretical framework for this study (e.g. Douglas, 1990; Thompson *et al.* 1990). Central to the theory is the idea that culture can be understood in relation to three key concepts: *social relations*, *cultural bias* and *ways of life*. The theory assumes that particular combinations of social relations and cultural bias give rise to ways of life, and acknowledges that one's position can be recognized by using two dimensions: *grid* and *group*. The grid dimension denotes the extent to which an individual's existence is constrained by externally enforced conditions (fixing factors). The group dimension refers to the degree to which an individual is circumscribed by the actions of the group. The crossing of these two dimensions – grid and group, produces four ways of life: *fatalism*, *hierarchism*, *individualism* and *egalitarianism* (figure 1). Fatalism (high grid/low group) represents an environment where members feel their independence to be controlled by others, and feel excluded from group activities. Consequently, such an outlook can promote apathy and cynicism. Hierarchism (high grid/high group) denotes an attitude endorsing rules and regulations. Individuals will know their role and position in the organizational hierarchy. Power and control are intrinsic to this way of life. Individualism (low grid/low group) is characterized by autonomy and less by group values. Individuals will look out for their own distinct needs, rather than act within the collective interests of the group. As a result of independence, such environments can give rise to self-interest. Egalitarianism (low grid/high group) denotes an environment where emphasis is placed on the importance of strong interrelation bonds between members. Concern for the group and equality will be highly valued.

As part of an ongoing research project investigating cultural issues in E-Government projects, we report the findings of one local government council in Malaysia and its adoption of an E-Government project (E-Services) over a 10 year period. A multiple methods approach, consisting of in-depth interviews, documentary analysis and observations, is used for the investigation. 21 in-depth semi-structured interviews, at two different stages in the project, were conducted across departments and levels to explore cultural issues surrounding the implementation and management of E-Services. Documents (e.g. government reports, minutes of project meetings, and other internal documents) were also analyzed. Observations were also conducted to decipher the organizational culture, and consisted of observing meetings, normal work practices and ICT use. Using coding derived from the workings of cultural theory to analyze the findings, three dominant ways of life are identified – namely, hierarchism, fatalism and individualism, which help explain the subcultural differences and change dynamics over time, which affected the ability to implement and manage a major E-Services project.
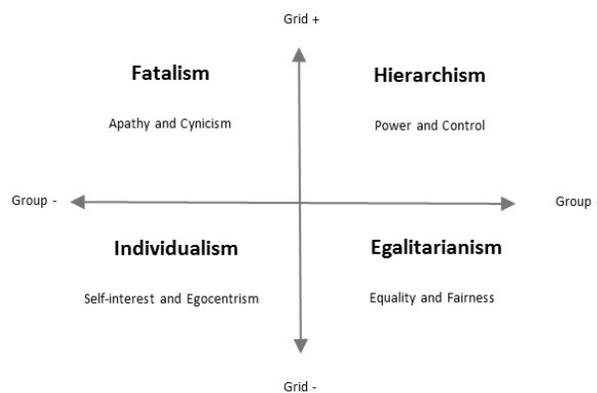
Figure 1: Grid and group cultural theory

The findings illustrate, particularly during the early stages of the project, the emergence of a highly constraining cultural situation, fostering a non-conducive environment which impacted the ability to implement and manage the E-Services project. This included the fatalistic values of users, the power-driven and controlling tendencies of the project team (senior management group), as well as the individualistic (self-interest) behavior of IT consultants. The fatalistic mentality of the user subgroup resulted in passivity throughout the project and there was a general unwillingness of users to abandon their traditional modes of operating. Values of power and control espoused by the senior management subgroup inhibited two-way communication and discouraged users from taking part in the project. The study also found that the individualistic tendencies of IT consultants promoted the development of self-interest behavior, leading to many of them not fully committing to the E-Government project, as well as a climate lacking in social cohesion. Nevertheless, the study did reveal some weakening of these constraints over time.

An important point raised in this study is that culture at the subgroup level can have a powerful effect on E-Government project attainment. The study acknowledges that organizational culture should not be viewed solely as relatively static or collective in nature, nor should it be treated as something which can be easily fashioned by senior managers; instead, culture is something which is differentiated, dynamic, and emerging in nature. Culture comes into being by associations with others; it is through the flux and flows of behavior and social action that culture forms expression. Using the grid and group cultural theory framework, practitioners and researchers can identify subcultural differences at play which influence E-Government projects, as well as understanding the dynamics of change over time. Further studies will be conducted in local government councils to test the robustness of the theoretical framework further.

Keywords

Electronic Government, Organizational Culture, Qualitative Research, Cultural Theory

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