Panel 5 Information Systems in Organizational Cultures: An Evaluation of Research Methods For Studying the Cultural Context of Information Systems Management

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Research on organizational culture has produced numerous insights into the role of symbols in organizational contexts. Researchers have generally focused upon one or more artifacts as symbols of culture and traced links between these symbols and deeper meanings and practices. The findings from organizational culture studies add value over more narrowly focused research efforts because they reveal the wider context of social meaning and describe the less tangible themes and interpretations lying beneath the surface of observable artifacts and symbols of an organization.

A cultural analysis potentially reveals important insights about the management of information technology. Information technologies may assume a variety of symbolic meanings beyond their intended purposes. For example, they may be seen as instrumental to corporate progress, or conversely, as a threat to human security. Cultural analyses can reveal these deeper meanings and help explain how technological artifacts are conceived, produced, and used within an organization.

The purpose of this panel is to evaluate alternative methods for conducting empirical research into the culture of information systems management. The panel showcases two recent studies of information systems management, completed by Michelle Brown and Line Dubé, respectively, as their doctoral dissertations in 1995. This panel is the first major opportunity for the broader IS community to learn about these studies and to meet the researchers.

Although each researcher uses an organizational culture perspective, they use different methods for collecting and analyzing data. Michelle Brown’s study uses ethnographic methods to develop an understanding of cultural assumptions related to information technology in two companies. Using grounded theory and ethnographic methods such as historical biographical interviews, direct and participant observation, artifact and document analysis, her study develops in-depth, cross-level case studies and insights. Consistent with ethnographic research, the language of the participants is used to craft the cases, drawing upon participants’ stories and interpretations of organizational events, artifacts and information technologies in their firms. Grounded theory methods were also used to develop themes and categories, moving from description and participant interpretation into theory building.

Line Dubé’s research uses stories as representations of the culture of a single organization. Stories focus on key events that have helped define and shape the organization and remain an important source of information for insiders and outsiders seeking to understand it. Eighty-nine stories were gathered from 38 informants using an in-depth case study strategy. Thirty-five content themes were used to capture the messages of the 89 stories. Similar content themes were then grouped into nine grand themes which describe the salient issues alive in the company’s organizational culture. The data analysis also interprets the stories and themes using the integration, differentiation and fragmentation perspectives on organizational culture defined by Martin (1992).
The panel is designed around a framework for evaluating organizational culture studies on information systems management. Daniel Robey will introduce the framework and its criteria. Michelle Brown and Line Dubé will explain their research methods and findings. Michael Newman will then engage the panelists and audience in a structured discussion assessing the ways in which the two research studies meet the criteria used in the framework. More general lessons for conducting cultural research on information systems management will be captured as the planned outcome of the session.

REFERENCE