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Interpreting IS alignment: A multiple case study in professional organizations

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Abstract

This paper centers on the interpretation attributed by organizational members to the information systems (IS) alignment concept. Its objective is to study IS alignment in professional organizations. Specifically, it reports on an interpretive study conducted in five Chilean organizations; four professional and one entrepreneurial, of which two are private and three are public. The theoretical background of our study is derived from three IS strategic alignment conceptualizations: *managerial, emergent and critical*. These concepts formed our theoretical framework that guided data collection and analysis. The study centers on the meanings organizational members assigned to IS strategic alignment, as well as their views on the barriers that hinder achieving this level of organizational integration. The analysis results are summarized in seven hermeneutic themes that point out the different connotations the organizations assigned to IS alignment. The significance of the findings are summarized in four insights that formulate theoretical and practical implications. These insights refer to: (1) the difficulties of achieving alignment for professional organizations, particularly public ones, (2) the limitations these organizations have in being agile, (3) the rationale for acquiring technology and determining IT skills, and (4) the imperative meaning that CIOs attribute to IS alignment. The paper concludes with a reflection on the limitations and relevance of the research.
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1. Introduction

The conformity or fit between IS and business strategy, also known as IS strategic alignment (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1999; Jarvenpaa & Ives, 1993; Luftman & Brier, 1999), has been a subject of study and interest not only for IS researchers but also for practitioners; hence the numerous alignment studies in our field.[1] For executives interested in obtaining value out of their information technology (IT) investments, alignment is perceived as critical (Palmer & Markus, 2000; Rockart, Earl, & Ross, 1996). Interest in IS alignment is also stimulated by well known cases of organizations that have successfully aligned their IS to gain competitive advantage (Applegate, McFarlan, & McKenney, 1999). Moreover, there is the belief that alignment can result in enhanced organizational performance (Sabherwal & Chan, 2001). Hence the concept of IS alignment has been of obvious interest in our field. As a result, researchers – particularly those in the positivist research tradition – have addressed questions dealing with the most suitable alignment model for organizations (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1999; Sabherwal, Hirschheim, & Goles, 2001) as well as the factors that enable or inhibit alignment (Luftman, Papp, & Brier, 1999; Reich & Benbasat, 2000).

According to Henderson and Venkatraman (1999) alignment is a desired state for most organizations investing in IT that is not always achieved, as it often entails a radical change in the way managers consider information technology. Consequently, an organization seeking IS alignment must undergo an intense communication process whereby the strategic goals of the organization and those of IT are shared with organizational members (Reich & Benbasat, 2000). In this paper, our objective is to grasp the meaning organizational members assign to IS strategic alignment as well as the rationale they attribute to alignment hindrances. Making sense of these meanings may help researchers and managers understand attitudes and actions related to IS alignment. To achieve our objective we conducted our study in the context of Latin America. Instead of concentrating on large billionaire organizations, as much of the IS literature has done (Hirschheim & Sabherwal, 2001; Reich & Benbasat, 2000), we decided to focus on professional organizations.

Professional organizations have as their final aim not to make profit but to serve the public and support the objectives of their professional members (Mintzberg, 1994). Typical examples of this type of organization are hospitals and universities. Given their structures and non-profit nature, professional organizations offer particular challenges in relation to strategic management (Mintzberg, 1994). In this sense, Ring and Perry (1985) have argued that models developed in for-profit organizations will not work in organizations whose purpose is not making or increasing earnings. Hence the motivation of our research: to inquire about the meanings members of professional organizations would assign to IS strategic alignment. We believe that an interpretive study of this nature will contribute to the IS strategic alignment body of knowledge by expanding its empiric content to professional organizations and by formulating new theoretical insights.

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[1] A bibliographic search in Academic Search Premier and Business Source Premier on the keyword strategic alignment reported 148 research papers.