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Implementing E-government in Lagos State: Understanding the impact of cultural perceptions and working practices

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ABSTRACT

The public sector's adoption of Information and Communication Technologies is often seen as a way of increasing efficiency. However, developing public e-Services involves a series of organisational and social complexities. In this paper, we examine the organisational issues of implementing an ERP system, which was designed and developed within the context of Lagos State's e-Services project. By doing so, we showcase the impact of organisational cultural perceptions and working practices of individuals. Our findings illustrate the strong role of cultural dimensions, particularly those pertaining to religion and multi-ethnicity. Our study provides insights to international organisations and governments alike towards project policy formulation within the context of ICT-based initiatives and reforms that aim to bring forward developmental progress.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade the capabilities of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have become even more apparent, with an existing general belief that ICTs can contribute towards increasing efficiencies, productivity (Landauer, 1996), and transparency. This has led to lower costs and the sharing of knowledge and resources with a wider base (Weerakkody, Omar, El-Haddadeh, & Al-Busaidy, 2016). Particularly in developing countries, ICTs are viewed as beneficial for the provision of services that can reduce the digital divide between rural and urban areas (Madon, 2004), and for facilitating the social inclusion of marginalised groups (Walsham & Sahay, 2006). Along these lines, Non-Government funded organisations, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, provide developing countries with primarily financial resources for the delivery of ICT-based products and services (Avgerou & McGrath, 2007).

Today, ICTs are viewed to have a tremendous potential for the public sector (Heeks, 2001), paving the way towards electronic government (e-Government) and the provision of public e-services. ICTs allow citizens and businesses to interact with the government, the dissemination of information, and the support of commercial relationships with private sector organisations, among other things (Ciborra, 2005). In developing countries, an issue that is frequently mentioned is that of the public's trust in the government (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005). In African countries specifically,

governments are seen as having a high level of corruption risk, with particularly Nigeria being criticised for lacking transparency, an overall anti-corruption plan for its defence sector, and for significant opaque, off-budget expenditure (Transparency International, 2015). In this regard, research suggests that ICTs implemented in public e-services can significantly promote openness and transparency; thereby reducing corruption instances (Bertot et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, the implementation of public e-services necessitates a certain degree of reliance on individuals from within and outside the organisation in question. There is a well-documented failure ratio of IT projects resulting from failure of ensuring stakeholders' involvement and acceptance (Ebbers & van Dijk, 2007), and overemphasising the technical aspects of a project while downplaying the human and organisational ones (Symon & Clegg, 1991). However, studies within the Information Systems (IS) research, have shown that the development of systems and technologies need to take into consideration global, societal and communal attitudes and that, especially for cross cultural IS development teams, the existence of different cultures may lead to "different views of the relevance, applicability and value of particular modes of working and use of ICTs which may produce conflict" (Walsham, 2002, p. 360). Furthermore, the implementation and development of information systems in developing countries are often considered challenging given the lack of funds, expertise, human resources, commitment and lack of knowledge and information (Bass & Heeks, 2011; Williams & Boren, 2008). Such challenges frequently

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cause a design-reality gap, where the design of a system is undertaken by external consultants with little concern for contextualising the overall development to the specific country (Guha & Chakrabarti, 2014).

Recognising that there are different issues associated with systems implementation in developing versus developed countries, and the existence of minimal research exploring and understanding the organisational and social aspects associated with the implementation of an ERP system for the provision of public sector e-services in Nigeria, we were motivated to pursue research in this area. For this reason, the purpose of our research was to *understand the interplay between the implementation of a project for the provision of public e-services in a developing country and the working practices of the involved actors*. We specifically investigate an automation initiative in Lagos State, Nigeria, which entailed the development of an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system for the delivery of government provided e-services. Through the lens of Institutional Theory and the concepts of culture, and working practices, we examine how the conflicting interests of public sector employees and those of external consultants affected the overall implementation of the project.

We find this particular study of interest for a number of reasons. First, the implementation of public e-services projects in developing countries does not necessarily follow the same trajectory, nor does it lead to the same benefits as in developed countries (Ciborra, 2005). Therefore, there is a need for a bottom-up approach, grounded in the context of developing countries. By doing so, we can examine the impact of cultural and social factors, with the latter being rarely and collectively discussed in relation to public e-services (Kamel Alomari, Sandhu, & Woods, 2014). Second, existing studies investigating the Nigerian context are mostly focused on the country's e-government readiness rather than on issues relating to the implementation of e-government projects. Third, e-government studies that examine the cultural dimension usually build on Hofstede (1980), who describes culture and national culture through polar opposites (Heeks & Bailur, 2007). We consider 'national culture' to be problematic, and even more so for the African context, where "ethnic and cultural groups can exist across many nations" together with "cultural and ethnic differences within nations" (Myers & Tan, 2003, p. 15). Lagos State is characterised by many different cultures and tribes within and across the State and its public sector, and to overcome such diversities, we build on Schein's organisational cultural perspective for our understanding (Schein, 1985).

To provide a background to this study, we initially provide a review of the concepts of public e-services development, culture, and working practices. Next, we describe our research method and then offer a description and analysis of our findings. The paper closes with a discussion and the conclusions of our study.

2. Theoretical background

Within the context of e-government research, among the most influential applied theories, one finds agency theory, actor network theory and institutional theory (Goldfinch, 2007; Heeks & Stanforth, 2007). Agency theory seeks to determine the most efficient contract between the involved parties, where the principal outsources some work to an agent. In this regard, agency theory is typically applied when the aim is to identify and resolve the issues between principal and agent. Resolution could be sought for issues in the form of conflicts between the interests of the two parties or inability to monitor and verify the outcome of the agent's doings (Eisenhardt, 1989a). Second, Actor Network Theory posits that actors, irrespective of their nature, are all equally important for the social network they comprise. In the case of information technology, people, organisations, software and hardware, and infrastructure are all part of a coextensive network of human and nonhuman elements (Walsham, 1997). It considers the relative position of the actors in their network, as well as "the power that

emerges from dynamic configurations of these actors" (Höchtel & Parycek, 2014, p. 264). Finally, Institutional Theory is more focused on the social structure of organisations and considers the processes through which rules and norms become established across an organisation and become guidelines of human and social behaviour. It looks into how such rules become diffused, adapted or fall out of use, and how they can lead to wide consensus across the organisation or lead to conflict and change (Scott, 2004).

In this research, our aim is to understand the interplay between the implementation of a project for the provision of public e-services in a developing country and the working practices of the involved actors. Therefore, neither Agency Theory, nor Actor Network Theory could help us meet our objective. Agency Theory requires access to both the principal and the agent in order to examine whether and how an efficient contract between the two could be formulated. However, for this study, access to the principal was not possible (i.e., the Governor of Lagos State, Nigeria). Actor Network Theory places an emphasis on tracing how and why some networks stabilise on the basis of aligned interests, but ultimately it restricts the investigation within the particular local context. It is necessary to adopt a much wider stance to take into account the elements that influence cross-cultural teams, and ultimately to understand how certain rules impact behaviours, practices and govern organisations (Reed, 1995; Walsham, 1997). In contrast, Institutional Theory captures the influence of context on ICTs and on the design and implementation of IS for the provision of public e-services (Luna-Reyes & Gil-Garcia, 2011). Its strength lies on its holistic focus on examining the many different structural factors that pertain to "[i]nstitutions', 'structures' and '(organisational) forms'" (Meijer & Bekkers, 2015, p. 241), while investigating the interaction of the organisation with its internal and external environment (Weerakkody et al., 2016).

In the next section, we introduce the key concepts used in our research. Our study builds on the concepts of institutional theory, culture, working practices and regimes of work and control, and the ensuing discussion positions these within the context of developing countries, as we embrace Ciborra's approach that the development of e-services in developing countries cannot be treated in a similar vein as in developed ones (Ciborra, 2005). In such cases our understanding needs to be 're-constructed' following a bottom-up approach so as to observe the interplay of the various actors involved in the automation initiative.

2.1. Institutional theory and the public sector

Institutions are often seen as guidelines for human action that constrain the behaviour of individuals. They are thus considered to be rules that draw upon cultural principles, social norms, and mental models (Luna-Reyes & Gil-Garcia, 2011). With regards to technology, Institutional Theory assumes that the various ICTs will become institutionalised within the organisation and become part of the employees' routines. Similarly, it assumes that there will be a continuous interaction between these ICTs and the organisation's employees and other stakeholders. Gradually, this ongoing interplay will lead to new organisational structures and routines, and to the institutionalisation of the various ICTs (Weerakkody et al., 2016). Therefore, in our case, the technology is used as a backdrop to understand the organisational changes and working practices that may occur for the implementation of an ERP system that was used for the e-government initiative in Lagos State.

Beyond this continuous interaction, there are three different mechanisms that make institutionalisation possible: the coercive (or regulatory), the mimetic, and the normative. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that the coercive (or regulatory) draws upon political and legislative influences, while the mimetic may be put in action during uncertainty, drawing upon other systems' practices. Finally, the normative builds upon prevalent norms within the organisation's sector (in this case, the governmental sector).

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