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Progress and Peril in the Championing Process

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the process of championing, as it occurs over the course of an information technology (IT) innovation implementation. It begins by describing the case of a championed IT project, and goes on to identify three championing behaviors that emerge from it: *inoculated persistence*, *limited leveraging* and *discriminating outreach*. While most previous work has described championing behaviors which are unequivocally positive, we find that each of these behaviors are primarily positive, but come with caveats. We suggest that the primarily positive nature of these behaviors accounts for the commonly held view that champions help an innovation's progress, while the perils posed by the behaviors could explain why champions are sometimes implicated in spectacular innovation project failures.

Keywords

Champions, championing, information technology implementation, diffusion of innovations

INTRODUCTION

Possibly the first mention of the importance of champions was in Schon's (1963) classic article on military innovations in which he famously said, "the new idea either finds a champion or dies." In Schon's view, champions are crucial to the innovation's success because they take on organizational resistance through intense promotion of the innovation, exposing themselves to risk and going beyond the requirements of their jobs. Rogers (2003) research on how innovations diffuse in organizations suggested that the importance of champions lies in their role in initiating the innovation process and shepherding it through to completion. In the context of information systems, Reich & Benbasat (1990) found that the absence of a champion was a factor in inhibiting innovation adoption while the continuing presence of a champion was associated with innovation success.

However, the notion that champions are directly related to innovation success has not gone unchallenged. For example, although Markham (2000) found greater resource allocation for projects where champions are involved, he found no simultaneous direct effect on project performance. Taking the contrary view further, some have argued that champions are often responsible for spectacular innovation project failures. While conventional innovation research has focused on the factors in innovation success, other research has looked at what drives escalation of commitment to failing innovation projects and has found champions playing a major role in it (Newman & Sabherwal 1996). Royer's (2003) work on major innovation project failures argues that the strong belief of champions in their adopted innovations infects organizations, making termination of their failing projects extremely difficult. The situations described by Royer are a far cry from the happy triumphs typically attributed to champions.

Although the commonly held view favors the champion's significance in achieving positive innovation outcomes, the existence of strongly argued opposing views suggests that the process of championing should be looked at in further depth. As such, this paper explores the process of championing, as it occurs over the course of an information technology (IT)

innovation implementation. It begins by describing the case of a championed IT project, and goes on to identify three championing behaviors that emerge from an analysis of the transitions that occur as the project implementation proceeded. While most previous work has described championing behaviors which are unequivocally positive, each of the three behaviors found here are positive but have a modifying aspect to them which adds potential ambiguity to their effect. The subsequent discussion suggests that the primarily positive nature of these behaviors is what accounts for a championed project's progress, while the perils posed by these same behaviors could explain a lack of impact or, indeed, how failure may instead be the end result.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted using a case study methodology, with data collection focused on a single case, involving an innovation project with an important IT component. Since the goal was to learn more about the process of championing, the challenges champions face, and the tactics they employ to advance their agenda, the case study method was considered appropriate. As in this instance, a case study can prove to be of use when the research objective requires rich data collection, an understanding of a process occurring over time, and a desire to develop new theory about a phenomenon (Yin 2003). The primary method of data collection was through interviews. Data was also collected from a number of project documents, e-mails and presentations that were provided by the project team. Furthermore, additional data was obtained from the project website, as well as the archives of project e-mail lists going back several months.

PREVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

Before proceeding to the case, the findings are previewed here in order to facilitate a clear presentation. A temporal bracketing approach was used in analyzing the case (Langley 1999), and three project-related transitions emerged. A classification and characterization of the prominent activities of the champion in driving the project through these transitions led to the identification of the following three distinctive behaviors:

Inoculated persistence is a concerted effort to facilitate the project's progress or to increase it in significance, while attempting to fend off major criticisms of the project. The inoculating aspect, although typically strengthening the case for the project does also bring with it risks, in a way not dissimilar to the risks that accompany inoculations against disease.

Limited leveraging involves the champion building on work previously done (by the champion or by others) to get further ahead with the innovation implementation, but such assets or accomplishments are leveraged to a less than maximal extent in order to avoid foreseeable costs to the innovation project.

Discriminating outreach occurs as the champion looks to engage with parties in support of the innovation's progress, but does not do so randomly, instead deliberately choosing who to work with, and when to work with them.

Analysis illustrating the three championing behaviors follows each section that describes the transitions.

CASE SITE¹

Regarding the selection of the case site, it should be noted that while attending a conference on the topic of electronic health records, the first author viewed a presentation on an IT project being conducted to bring electronic record-keeping capabilities to agencies serving inner-city populations in the North American city of Easton. The presenter, Dr. Burt Newman, within moments of a rather austere Powerpoint presentation, quickly became a magnet for the audience's questions despite being only one of several individuals on a panel. His presentation had created a 'buzz,' and there was in it definitely something of the charisma, inspiration, and intellectual stimulation that has been talked about in relation to champions (Howell & Higgins 1990). When approached by the author to learn more about the project, Newman extended an invitation to visit the project office and to discuss the possibilities. Thus began a series of visits to the project office, as well as to the Haven, an urban health and social services center in Easton, and a major site of the software's implementation.

¹ All identifying information presented here, including names of projects, participants, locations and institutions, has been disguised.

The IT project is known as the Easton Electronic Record-keeping System (EERS), and is an effort to develop a system to integrate the client record across many urban health and social service organizations who frequently serve the same clientele. The goals of the system are two-fold. Firstly, it is meant to provide clients and service center staff with a single comprehensive record of their interaction, as well as of any particular characteristics, preferences or requirements of the clients, across both the social and health services units of all participating institutions. The second goal is for EERS to be a source of data at the population-level for policymakers to plan programs and allocate resources for the city's economically and socially disadvantaged citizenry.

TRANSITION 1: FROM THE TWO-AGENCY [DUO PROJECT] TO THE MULTI-AGENCY [EERS PROJECT]

Before the EERS project was proposed, work on a more limited integration project had been completed by Newman and his colleagues. The Database Unification Operation (DUO) was an effort to coordinate the medical service activities between only two institutions, the Easton City Hospital and the Haven. Newman's proposal for EERS included a description of the accomplishments of the DUO project, as motivation for the feasibility of EERS. At the same time, the application stressed that with respect to EERS, DUO had just been a pilot project that was now meant to be much expanded. Whereas DUO had only sought to integrate the activities of two agencies, EERS aimed to do it for multiple agencies. Bringing experience from DUO, as well as a solid group of partners (including Easton's Public Health department) to the table, was critical in assembling a convincing proposal. Newman recruited co-applicants on the proposal by contacting a variety of agencies that he had worked with over time, although no shelters were asked to be involved.

But the vision for EERS was larger than the few partners that had been recruited. Newman's proposal stated that EERS would integrate records for all the city's disadvantaged citizens, although it included only five agencies out of nearly 70 that would be required to achieve such an ambitious goal. Furthermore, the proposal insisted that lack of agency participation "would not force the project to stop," since EERS would be designed to expand to include those who wished to participate, as needed.

The proposal emphasized how DUO had served as a pilot for most aspects of EERS. On the other hand, EERS would be much more significant – DUO was a paper-based process whereas EERS envisioned IT-based automation. But, this could not be stated clearly in the proposal:

"The word 'IT' was interestingly... a bad word, so we tried not to use the word 'IT' anywhere. We just talked about infrastructure, even electronic infrastructure, forms, electronic forms... I would say that IT is a politically charged thing. For some reason it's different than paper. It's not considered the same thing in terms of implementing something... [We were told,] 'don't say IT.'" (Newman)

Despite such limitations, Newman was able to make a convincing case for EERS and project funding was eventually approved by the City of Easton for a period of one year.

Transition 1 Analysis.

Inoculated persistence. While Newman persisted with organizing for, applying, and eventually securing funding for the multi-agency effort that is EERS, he also stated that not all agencies need participate for the project to be successful. This can be considered an inoculating statement, since it preempts criticism related to the feasibility of implementing such a challenging, multi-site project. But it also runs counter to the declared aim of integrated record-keeping for all the city's needy citizens. Moreover, to meet the additional goal of collecting truly valid population-level data on those citizens, it is clearly necessary to get a large number of agencies to participate. As such, lack of agency participation should be of major concern. Nonetheless, the inoculating statement serves the purpose of paving the way forward for the project by minimizing likely criticism, even though it puts at risk the very aims of the proposal.

Limited leveraging. In the EERS proposal, the prior success of the DUO project is highlighted as an indicator of the feasibility of the proposed effort. However, at the same time, DUO is repeatedly identified as a "pilot" project with regard to EERS. Constrained by the requirement to not emphasize the IT automation features which would make EERS a significant improvement, calling DUO a "pilot" served to minimize its significance instead. In general, Newman strived to strike a balance, emphasizing DUO's success enough to show the feasibility of EERS but trying not to make too much of DUO lest it seem that there was not much left to do. The "pilot" label was used to downplay DUO's major success, although DUO

certainly was significant. To this day – several years later - the DUO processes are what integrate the Haven and Easton City Hospital, since Easton City Hospital has not implemented EERS at all.

Discriminating outreach. Considering the potential scope of the project's implementation, Newman could have reached out to many more organizations, but instead chose to recruit only those he had prior relationships with. For a project that is meant to improve care for the city's disadvantaged and to collect population-level data on them, it is most significant that no shelters were asked to be involved. On the other hand, there appears to be logic to the choice of those reached out to. Since EERS was much more medically-focused at its outset, shelters may not have been as interested or useful in moving the project forward. The outreach also seems to have been geared towards recruiting the most influential organizations as partners. For example, with the Easton Public Health department as a partner, collecting population-level health data would be facilitated by any programs it implemented at social service centers. Thus the discrimination in outreach seems to be based on Newman's prior relationships with organizations, as well as his assessment of a party's interest in the innovation's current scope and whether a party has the capability to provide useful support.

TRANSITION 2: FROM [NO IT INFRASTRUCTURE] TO THE [CHOICE OF HEROS] AS THE BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE.

With one year to complete a project which had been conceived of as at least a two year effort, Newman and his colleagues faced tremendous pressure to find an IT platform to build on right away. Newman's team identified an existing publicly available product, the Health Electronic Records using Open Source (HEROS) software, as a possible basis for meeting EERS' requirements.

A meeting with the creator of HEROS brought the possibilities into sharp focus. The platform's creator proposed that Newman's team take over the HEROS project altogether. But Newman decided to forgo that option, and instead chose to create EERS as an addition to HEROS, instead of an upgrade. But before finalizing the decision to use HEROS, he reached out to colleagues for feedback. He describes the approach to outreach as follows:

"We worked with people who we had no conflict with or disagreement with. We always identified people who wanted to do this [project] and progressed with those people. Then we went to the next level – that's all we did. We didn't twist anyone's arm, or fool people. We just worked with people that ... that didn't resist - who were interested [or] on board, already." (Newman)

Most of the physicians indicated that HEROS would be a reasonable starting point, but there was some opposition, particularly from an influential physician. Despite this, Newman's decision was to move forward with HEROS. Although he took action without "consensus-building," Newman does feel that it was after a process of "consultation."

Besides this, two other actions were later taken to validate the decision to go with HEROS. Firstly, a physician colleague was tasked with doing a "systems review" of similar projects in ten major North American cities. The results of the exercise, according to Newman, were clear: *"this was the most ambitious project of its kind – nobody was doing this."* The point being that no one else had anything better than HEROS that could be used to do the job. Secondly, a survey of users of EERS was conducted to gauge feelings about the system. Users indicated the EERS system benefited their work (90%) and stated a high preference for being involved in its development using the "open development/open source" method (92%). To Newman, the astoundingly high user satisfaction numbers provided additional validation for the open source approach with HEROS.

Transition 2 Analysis.

Inoculated persistence. Newman's decision to go with HEROS was crucial to moving the project forward, given the tight timeline. Future criticism of the decision was protected against by engaging in a consultation with colleagues and by conducting surveys that retroactively validated the decision. Although it was primarily his decision, and not a group one, Newman believes the "consultation" provides a defense for accusations that he made the decision carelessly, and the surveys vindicate any prior criticisms. On the other hand, the inoculating consultation and surveys did come with risks. The consultation activated the opposing opinion of an influential individual, while the surveys could have resulted in negative results. How Newman would have reacted to the latter is not known, but he did clearly disregard the former in order to move forward. Perhaps the fact that the surveys were under his direct control helped mitigate that particular risk – an examination of one survey's questions showed that every single question had a positive bias.

Limited leveraging. Leveraging the existing HEROS product was Newman's way of making rapid progress with the project. But one limit to the leveraging of HEROS becomes apparent in Newman's decision to be an add-on to it. When the creator of HEROS offered to let Newman take over the project, he quickly decided not to. Although it would have meant a great deal of the HEROS development community's resources could be redirected towards the development of EERS functionality, it also would have entailed the additional responsibilities of caring for the existing user base of HEROS. Perhaps in hindsight, the decision may have been different. Newman's choice to forgo potential resources has not been without consequences, considering that EERS continues to suffer from a serious scarcity of development resources.

Discriminating outreach. During this transition, Newman especially reached out to colleagues and the HEROS development team. Notably, those reached out to for consultation during the software selection stage were all physicians. Since HEROS was an Electronic Medical Record (EMR) software, Newman considered physicians most likely to have experience with an EMR and most likely to be the early users of the system. Beyond this, outreach was used in support of an inoculation strategy when colleagues were consulted on whether HEROS was an appropriate choice to make. But, just as Newman discriminated narrowly by consulting physicians alone, he more broadly discriminated in his choice of people to work with. Those who opposed the direction in which Newman was taking the project were not actively engaged, while those "that didn't resist" were much preferred.

TRANSITION 3: FROM A [HEALTH SERVICES] FOCUS TO A WIDER [SOCIAL SERVICES] FOCUS.

When the project was launched, EERS was very much focused on improving the coordination of healthcare services for the city's disadvantaged. Much of the work done to create the EERS software, from the EMR-oriented HEROS, had been a result of feedback from the physician users of the system. But as the implementation of EERS progressed to include, as users, those social services workers affiliated with the clinically-oriented programs at the Haven, the lack of support for their work became clear.

"The staff really ... felt that this was just for the doctors. They wanted to use it, but they felt it very heavily focused on medical use. So we did a lot of work on making it suitable for case management. A lot of changes took place in the software itself." (EERS Team Member)

To compensate for these deficiencies, Newman himself spent much time with the social services staff, to get their feedback on the system. As the needed features were added, the interaction between the social services staff and Newman tapered off.

Around the same time that the EERS project was being launched, the City department responsible for housing for the needy began work on a major IT project, the Easton City Agency Management System (ECAMS). ECAMS would cover a great deal of administrative functions for the department and improve operational efficiency. Its scope included collecting in-depth information on shelter usage and capacity, and monitoring admission and discharge of individuals between programs at shelters around the city. EERS differed from ECAMS in its focus on the medical aspects of services for the needy and its aim to integrate not only shelters, but hospitals and other agencies as well. On the other hand, there were likely to be some significant overlapping functions between EERS and ECAMS. The two systems would often be used by the same set of service workers, who would have to enter information about clients into both systems at registration time. For this reason, nearly three months after the start of EERS, Newman proposed to build an integrator to connect the planned ECAMS with EERS. But, the City's reaction to the ECAMS-EERS integrator proposal was less than supportive.

"We [the EERS team] were like, 'We clearly need to integrate with you guys,' and they [the City] were like, 'We'll think about agreeing with this in principle.' It wasn't even agreeing with it in principle, but thinking about agreeing with it in principle... They said, 'Put together a business case.'" (Newman)

The integrator component was proposed as an optional module that the City could choose to install to improve the efficiency of front-line service work, but could also uninstall so that ECAMS could continue to work independently of EERS. ECAMS was planned as a mandatory-use system for all shelter workers around the city, whereas EERS, not having the City's enforcement powers, would be relying on voluntary use of its IT system. So Newman's motive was to prevent a detrimental impact on EERS usage, should ECAMS be launched without any integrator component. However, at the end, the integrator proposal became moot, as the ECAMS project met several delays and had not started any significant development nearly 21 months after the proposal was made. Over this time period, EERS had developed significantly more social service management functions than it previously had. At this time, Newman proceeded to make a dramatic proposal – this time to have the EERS "e-infrastructure" become the solution for the City's ECAMS project, instead of simply integrating with it. At

the core of his argument was the fact that EERS had evolved to contain more than 40% of ECAMS requirements for its first two planned phases. Moreover, in response to the City's demand that the software be City-owned and not open-source, Newman proposed that a future EERS-ECAMS solution would be developed as proprietary, while the original EERS project would continue to operate under its non-proprietary mandate.

The new EERS-ECAMS solution has met with resistance from City officials, much like their earlier reaction to the integrator proposal. But Newman is persisting in his efforts to promote the solution. A supporter of EERS from another Easton hospital accompanied Newman to his presentation of the proposal to the City, and had this to say:

"He just kept to message - he's so focused on that message... So the city [officials said,] 'Well what do you do when there are problems and challenges and things you can't overcome?' And he said, 'We see them as requirements. We have to meet those requirements.' It was so neutralizing... I mean how do you come back to that? It was brilliant." (EERS Supporter)

Transition 3 Analysis.

Inoculated persistence. Since EERS is a voluntary use system, driving it to integration with the mandatory-use, social services-oriented ECAMS was the first strategy employed by Newman, to ensure EERS would be used. To disarm any criticism that it could negatively impact the usage of ECAMS, Newman positioned the ECAMS-EERS Integrator as something that could be uninstalled with no consequence to ECAMS. On the other hand, explicitly offering an Uninstaller as an inoculating tactic undercuts the purpose of the integrator – to consistently avoid duplicate work. Subsequently, when the ECAMS project failed to progress, Newman seized the opportunity to propose EERS as the solution to its requirements. If this succeeded, a new EERS-ECAMS would become the mandatory use system across all shelters, and tight integration with the existing EERS would be a given. Most interesting is the inoculating tactic used by Newman for this. When asked by the City bureaucracy, what he would do in the face of unforeseen challenges, his response was to simply treat them as "requirements." Although making such a blanket statement may be risky for Newman, it is difficult for anyone to argue with.

Discriminating outreach. To begin with, physicians were the ones Newman had reached out to, for feedback on the new EERS system. But as the system reached a point where it needed to progress past just clinical functions, social service workers were drawn in to use it and assess it. Over time, as the system's feature set stabilized, interaction with the social service workers gradually declined, to the point now where Newman rarely meets with them. Although one may attribute these changes to the project stage, the shift also illustrates how the set of those the champion actively reached out to changed, based on what he felt was important for the project at a given time.

Limited leveraging. When Newman proposed that EERS should be the platform to implement the City's ECAMS project, he suggested that it would be a new system operating under a separate mandate from the original EERS. Fully leveraging EERS would have meant building directly on the existing open-source platform, but the City would not accept anything less than full ownership. To get the project past this hurdle, Newman chose the strategy of leveraging what has been developed in EERS to date, but agreeing to limit its future development by creating a project with a new mandate.

DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The primarily positive nature of the three behaviors identified from the case is not surprising, given that IT champions have been described as individuals who "actively and vigorously promote their personal vision for using information technology" (Beath 1991). On the other hand, a contribution of this paper is to challenge the nearly exclusive positive bias in the characterization of championing behaviors by showing that there are caveats involved. If champions are successful because of their positive influence on an innovation project, they may also be associated with failures that stem from the risks they introduce through their efforts.

Some examples from the case help illustrate the point. By limiting EERS to an add-on module for the HEROS platform, Newman chose to forgo the full resources of the established HEROS project that could have been applied to his new effort. Later in its implementation, EERS suffered from major resource shortages, something that may have been avoided if Newman had taken over HEROS. With regard to the risks of inoculation, in persuading City officials to approve the usage of EERS as a platform for the ECAMS project, Newman accepted "problems and challenges" which were unknown at the time as "requirements" for EERS. It is easy to imagine how such a commitment to fulfill unknown requirements could put the EERS project in a difficult situation in future. Similarly, choosing to work only with those "that didn't resist" proved to be an outreach strategy that built momentum for the project, but it also ran the significant risk of ignoring contrary opinions that

may have been indicative of substantial problems. Indeed, the one influential physician who had opposed moving forward with HEROS had done so on the basis that Easton City Hospital may choose a different EMR for their own operations and thus not adopt EERS, an eventuality which did take place. This example provides some support to Markham's (2000) conjecture that "antagonists" or opposing champions may be good for a championed project because they provide the critical perspective needed to make continuous improvements to the implementation – assuming their message can get through despite the selective engagement exercised by the champion. Moreover, the fact that risks may be accumulating due to inoculations, limitations and discrimination, while the champion is pushing the project forward through persistence, leverage and outreach, suggests that a dose of mindfulness may be beneficial for the champion. Although Weick & Sutcliffe (2001) describe mindfulness at the organizational level, future research could consider how, when applied at the individual level, elements of mindfulness such as a "preoccupation with failure" and "sensitivity to operations," may help a champion avoid the pitfalls associated with aggressively driving the innovation forward.

A second new finding here is that championing behaviors can be seen as distinct, but not necessarily independent. The behaviors can feed on each other, such that the execution of one can lead to another. One example of this is the outreach to social service workers which resulted in the development of social services features in EERS. Shortly thereafter, the results of this specialized outreach (i.e. new features in EERS) became the subject of leveraging to provide support for a proposed EERS-ECAMS solution, by arguing that 40% of the ECAMS requested features were already in EERS. While prior scholarship has identified many championing behaviors, few have commented on the relationships between the behaviors. By studying such examples, it may become possible to foresee how certain future behaviors may arise from the past activities of champions. Moreover, as in the case when the champion inoculated the decision to move forward with HEROS by engaging in selective outreach to agreeable colleagues, we may find that one behavior can serve as the means of accomplishing another. Further research will look more deeply at how the three behaviors interact, and how the dynamics of interaction shape the effect that championing has on a project.

Finally, the results here also indicate how characteristics of the IT artifact can be affected by a championing behavior such as inoculated persistence. For example, the ECAMS-EERS Integrator proposal was inoculated using a proposed Uninstaller feature. Under different circumstances, an Uninstaller may have been an innocuous, standard feature of the software with limited importance. However, due to the championing behavior, it becomes a prominent feature, one requiring more elaborate development than if it had remained inconspicuous.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to gain further insight into the process of championing, by examining the championing of the EERS project. Three championing behaviors became apparent upon a close examination of the transitions that took place during the project's implementation. These three behaviors, viz. *inoculated persistence*, *limited leveraging* and *discriminating outreach*, are primarily positive and facilitate the innovation's progress. On the other hand, while the success attributed to champions may be related to the primarily positive nature of the behaviors, the risks inherent in inoculation, the limitations imposed on leveraging, and the discrimination in outreach may conceivably be at the root of the spectacular failures champions have also been associated with. Thus a major contribution of this paper is to provide a portrait of championing behaviors that goes beyond their overwhelmingly positive characterization to include those aspects which may, with further study, explain champions' involvement in failed innovation implementations as well.

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