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MYTH AND DISSYMMETRY IN THE USE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of myth, a dominant image on which an organizing vision may be formulated. It is proposed that organizational myths can be used to evaluate the nature and outcomes of information technology use in particular operating contexts, by permitting an enframing or disclosure of critical contradictions and tensions arising in such contexts. An analytical schema, the semiotic square, is described for clarifying oppositional and associative relationships between elements of work performance or IT usage, from the standpoint of mythical framing. The paper's proposition is illustrated through a case study analysis of customer service operations at a call center, pivoted on the discrepancies between the rhetorical formulation of the center's organizing vision (i.e., its myth) and the complex realities of IT-based work organization and performance. The deconstruction of a myth presents a relatively inclusive standpoint from which an analyst can take into account the contested nature of performance evaluation in IT usage. This approach also addresses the ontological basis of the significance (or value) of performance, which is seen to be constituted negatively. This study suggests that fruitful scope exists for investigating the way rhetorical forms articulate with IT use in the contemporary workplace.

Keywords: Organizing vision, myth, IT use, IS evaluation, contradictions, rhetorical, semiotic

Introduction

Organizational information technology practices have been linked to the ideational influences of institutional discourses occurring in industrial and professional communities. The concept of an *organizing vision* by Swanson and Ramillier (1997) advances information systems understanding in this area. An organizing vision refers to an institutional pattern or construction, rooted within the wider community of discourse of a particular industry or business domain, that is introduced into organizations as an encompassing blueprint for action and IT use. For example, the notion of customer relationship management (CRM) is a broad and widely used organizing vision that came into prominence in the 1980s, placing increased pressure on organizations to adopt new information management practices to improve service processes (Bjørn-Andersen and Turner 1998).

However, a key difficulty that may be seen to limit the study of organizing visions is the *rhetorical* nature of the stylized statements or slogans by which they tend to be formulated. Such slogans or statements, characterized by dramaturgical images or emphasis, are seen as expressing espoused rather than actual values, or as reflecting obvious interests (Schein 1992). They thus tend to be debunked or ignored by IS and organizational researchers as being empty of real significance. Since organizational visions frequently provide the rationalizing basis for IT adoption, the IS research field may, therefore, be hindered by lack of theoretical treatment from addressing the rhetorical dimension of organizational functioning.

In contrast, theorists from the fields of semiotics and communication studies have long maintained that the rhetorical definitions of intensions and activities by organizations need to be taken into account seriously (Burke 1962). Such symbolic language is

considered crucial to the mobilizing of organizational projects, shaping the way work practices are structured. Rhetorical formulations are thus seen to contribute toward instating a world they appear only to describe. Taking its cue from that perspective, and using theoretical resources from those fields, this paper develops the utility of studying the rhetorical nature of organizing visions in relation to IT use. A case study is used to illustrate its central proposition that organizing visions as encapsulated in rhetorical formulations offer a useful means to evaluate work performance around the use of IT.

Evaluating IT Use through Myth

A key theoretical contribution by the semiotician Barthes (1973) in the study of rhetorical practices is his concept of *myth*. His idea of myth bears no negative accent or evaluation and so is strictly different from its meaning in popular usage, where it refers to legends or false beliefs. Barthes conceived of myth as being a dominant social image or representation, derived from an ideology. Ideology (in a non-pejorative sense) refers to the complex, pervasive fabric of norms, meanings, and beliefs that are propagated by a social group, to sustain an intelligibility of functioning among its members, and preserve a stable sense of identity. While an ideology tends to be general, indefinite, and abstract, myth designates a relatively concrete social representation or image. Barthes' idea of myth is thus similar to an extended metaphor, helping members of an organization make sense of experience through a common frame of perception (Chandler 2001).

A myth is produced and reflected by practices of rhetorical discourse in organizations and social groups. Barthes stated that myths served to highlight certain features of belief or attitude at the expense of others, and to naturalize this understanding in recipients as normal or essential behavior: "Myth acts economically; it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world without contradictions" (p. 116). In other words, the function of a myth is to present an uncomplicated image of how things are or should be, and to draw on that depiction to portray what needs to be done to achieve that state. Barthes' idea of myth and the functions it serves is consistent with the characteristics of the rhetorical slogans or statements by which numerous companies formulate their organizing visions. These formulaic statements distill the essence of a set of activities into a dramaturgical phrase, in order to order the behavior of those to whom it is addressed (Burke 1962). Certain organizing visions may be seen to be grounded in myths.

The economy of myth veils the complexities or contradictions of socially situated activity so that shared action or belief might be more easily galvanized. Levi-Strauss (1963), an anthropologist, argued that myths represented the effort of organized groups or societies to correct or to hide their "constitutive dissymmetry"—the primary contradictions or tensions present within their social configuration. Giddens (1984) had stressed that the notion of contradictions was indispensable for studying organizations: "[It] expresses the main 'fault lines' in the structural constitution of social systems" (p. 193). While IT systems are internally free of logical contradiction, the study of IT use can and should embrace mythical or sociological contradictions. IS studies have evoked strong recognition of organizations and IT-based practices as being strained or threatened by incompatibilities and tensions. Thus, a significant need exists for concepts or analytical tools to treat IT use accordingly, from a standpoint of oppositional logic (Robey and Boudreau 1999).

The concept of myth hitherto described is amenable to addressing that need, immediately drawing attention to those contradictions that are accentuated or suppressed in particular forms of IT use, or exposed when an organizing vision is subjected to the tests of reality. Therefore, it is proposed in this paper that an analysis of the myths underlying organizing visions may be used to evaluate the nature of IT use and work practices in particular operating contexts by permitting an enframing or disclosure of the critical inconsistencies and tensions that arise in such contexts. This proposition enlists the use of an analytical schema, described next, for its illustration.

The semiotician, Greimas (1987), sought to systematically elaborate various relations of association, contrast, or contradiction that characterized the constitutive elements of organizational or cultural practices. He viewed contradictory relations as fundamental features of a "system of signification" by which the value of a particular set of activities is ordered: "By definition, a system's rules of injunctions describe compatibilities and incompatibilities (a system without incompatibilities would not be an ordered system)" (p. 52). He created an analytical instrument termed the semiotic square to investigate such relations. This figurative device is used in an analysis to indicate significant contrasts in a framework of selection or embedding. In line with this paper's purpose, it is adapted here for elaborating the way a myth (on which a particular organizing vision is rooted) might be used to evaluate the nature and outcomes of IT use within a specific organizational context. The canonical formulation of this schema is shown in Figure 1.

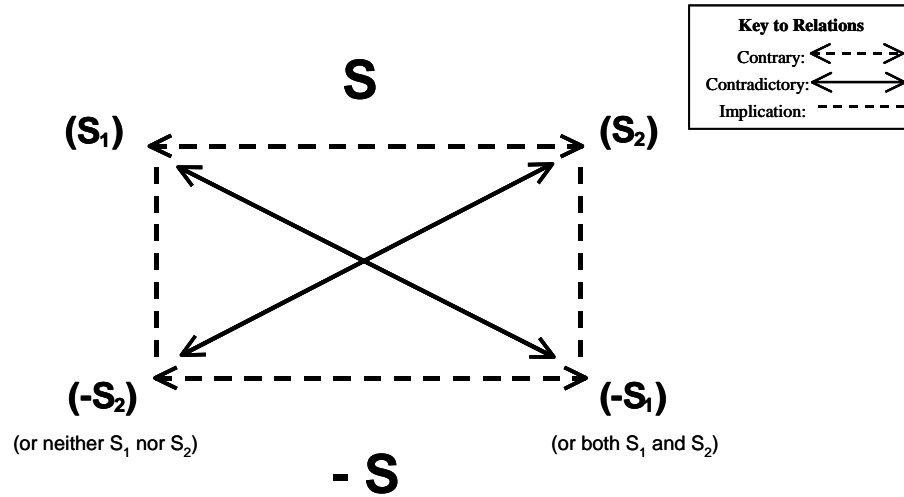


Figure 1. The Semiotic Square

(Adapted from A. J. Greimas, *Du Sens: Essais sémiotiques (On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotics)*, Copyright © 1987, Editions du Seuil; used with permission.)

This figurative device enables a more comprehensive analysis of binary oppositions, by permitting an enlargement of their implications. The upper corners of the square, S₁ and S₂, may represent the opposing terms of a particular concept, S. For example (see Figure 1), the concept S could represent the concept of “absence of colors” (Chandler 2001). The two opposing terms that make up this concept would be black (S₁) and white (S₂). The bottom corners of the square, -S₂ and -S₁ respectively, are generated by forming negatives, in a traverse direction, of the two opposing terms on the upper axis (S₁ and S₂). Thus, -S₂ would represent non-white, while its opposing position, -S₁, non-black. Both these bottom slots represent opposing positions of the concept -S, which might then perhaps suitably represent the concept “presence of color.” It can be seen at once that the opposing lower terms, -S₂ and -S₁, depict implicative positions not accounted for by the binary oppositions on the upper axis. For instance, in this example, non-white encompasses much more than black (i.e., a range of colors). Moreover, different types of logical relations are represented by the various axes (and the opposite member of each pair) of the square: (1) contrary relations—S₁ vs. S₂; (2) contradictory relations—S₁ vs. -S₁; and (3) relations of association or implication—S₁ vs. -S₂. Jameson (1987) elaborates the use of this schema, asserting its heuristic value for supporting interpretive research. It supplies a means to map out interrelated themes or diagnostic interpretations encountered in a study, thus helping to clarify or to generate understanding. He noted that logical accuracy in designating contrasting theme headings (i.e., nodal descriptions) is not as important as the insightfulness of the analysis.

Methodology

This inquiry was made using the variant of the interpretive case study method described by Walsham (1995), in which the formulation and elaboration of fresh theoretical perspective is undertaken through the dual use of case data for concept generation and empirical substantiation. This data, used to infer the relevance and test the applicability of the concept of myth for the role of IS evaluation, derived from an in-depth investigation of a call center’s operations, conducted in multiple site visits between February and May 2001. It consisted of 22 semi-structured interviews with managerial and subordinate staff, supplemented by nonparticipant observation of the work activities of customer service representatives, informal conversations with staff, and review of company documents (e.g., customer service logs, service manual). Inquiries focused on the challenges faced by staff in work duties and use of IT systems, and the factors behind the development of the center’s activities. This data was analyzed using the hermeneutic method (Butler 1998). It was iteratively scrutinized: (1) to inductively identify patterned regularities in the form of common themes, issues, or dilemmas, and (2) to assess and specify the use of appropriate concepts and schemas to illuminate those patterned regularities insightfully.

Illustration: Case Analysis

This section illustrates the application of the ideas introduced earlier. It first describes the nature and challenges of IT-based call center operations at HealthCare Corporation (a pseudonym), before undertaking subsequently to analyze these operations on the

basis of a myth central to the center's organizing vision. Healthcare Corporation (HealthCo) is a major retail firm in the United Kingdom that manufactures and distributes health and beauty products. It has a chain of over 1,400 pharmacy stores and outlets. Throughout its history, HealthCo's operating strategy has centered mainly on upgrading and expansion of its stores. HealthCo has traditionally operated along decentralized lines, with several broad categories of products and services independently managed by several business product units. It runs a successful customer loyalty card scheme, with 13 million cardholders. The Wellbeing Card allows customers to accumulate points from their purchases at HealthCo stores that can be traded subsequently for other products.

Prior to the mid-1990s, customer service responsibilities had mainly been devolved to the level of individual pharmacy stores. Stores were expected to deal locally with customer inquiries and complaints. In the mid-1990s, however, rising concern by the firm's senior management over shortcomings in the customer complaint-handling efforts led to a perceived need for centralized customer service activities. Call center operations were thus begun in 1997. By 2001, this center had 65 full-time staff, including 45 customer service representatives (CSRs) who handle calls or e-mail, and a 16-member business interface team performing coordination tasks linking the center with other HealthCo units. The center handles about 12,000 calls, 800 e-mails, and 1,000 letters per week (approximately 70 percent enquiries, 25 percent complaints, and 5 percent comments). CSRs undertake a range of fixed call-handling duties (e.g., general, wellbeing, and optician calls), and occasional duties often tied to marketing campaigns. They keep to prescribed time periods and other targets (e.g., average length of call, percentage of calls answered in 20 seconds). Problematic calls not closed within target times are passed to a few specialized CSRs, called information seekers, to resolve. These CSRs have many years of work experience in other jobs within HealthCo and their knowledge of work mores and information resources in those units is a crucial asset in their problem-solving role.

Organizing Vision and Work Environment

From the onset of its operations, the call center's management formulated an organizing vision for mobilizing a work environment of high-quality service provision. This was formulated in terms of a mandate of "surprising the customer": CSRs were to provide services that surpassed the expectations of customers. The first page of the staff service manual (see Table 1) displays this injunction, which the manager termed as the call center's fundamental performance aim. The company's founder had laid down a strong ethos of friendly, professional service, and surveys of customers consistently showed that these qualities of service were a major reason they shopped at HealthCo stores. The center's management was thus aiming to duplicate, in every call or letter dealt with at the center, that quality of "pleasurable interaction" experienced by the customers in stores. The idea of delivering a customer service that surprised and delighted was conceived as a means to embed and mirror this central aim. The management have sought to evoke this theme of delightful surprise in concrete motivational practices, centered on a popular staff reward and recognition scheme known as Magical Moments. Besides monthly and quarterly awards in this scheme, admirable acts of customer service by CSRs or other staff are rewarded by a "lucky dip" from a basket of sealed prizes in a corner of the office (wine, gift vouchers, cinema tickets, etc.)

Table 1. Customer Service Vision at HealthCo Call Center

<p><i>Surprising the Customer</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">– we strive to deliver exemplary customer service by demonstrating to our customers that we understand and care about what is important to them– our aim is to achieve a perfect balance between delightfully surprising the customer and supporting the HealthCo business objectives– this balance will ensure that HealthCo will be here for the customer in the future– we are key to HealthCo achieving the goal of "to be the world's leading retailer of products and services that help make our customers look good and feel good"
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Several staff members have described their work environment as reactive. The center's operations on a daily basis are marked by volatility, as it is difficult to anticipate what customers will ring up about. Correspondingly, recruitment of new CSR staff involves finding people who can not only cope but also thrive in such an environment. Candidates are asked for a contactable phone number when submitting applications. The recruitment staff always get in touch with them initially by phone to arrange interviews and ask them basic questions. Recruiters place particular emphasis on these contacts in assessing how candidates react and sound in a somewhat stressful situation (i.e., having the recruiter's call sprung on them), since this would be an incessant part of the job role. A similar parallel involves test calls to unsuspecting CSRs by project staff from other HealthCo units, during pilot trials of new services being hosted for those units.

Use of IT and Information Practices

The center's IT systems were seen by the manager as a critical resource: "Our customers call us about problems or enquiries where and when it is convenient for them, and they expect us to respond readily...our [IT] systems provide us the information and flexibility to meet and exceed their [customer] expectations." The CustomerQ system (i.e., a CRM database) is the main application worked on by CSRs, who use it for such actions as recording notes on customer calls and searching for details of previous customer interactions. Other IT systems include the Wellbeing Card database, holding information on customer card accounts; a mainframe-based warehouse inventory database; a Lotus Notes system holding procedural and policy documents; a corporate intranet; query software used by the interface team to form reports for HealthCo units; and a Lotus Approach database with information on the company's stores (i.e., layouts, offerings). These operations are underpinned by a telecommunications infrastructure, which includes ACD software.

The mandate to surprise the customer has taken the form of certain practices of IT use. CSRs are given the discretion to gladden customers when they call, or to recompense them for inconveniences or problems that they have experienced or complain about. If the customer has a Wellbeing Card (as is typical), then the common practice is to award extra points on the card (the points convert to exchange value for HealthCo products). The customer's account is retrieved from the database and points added to the card's total. CSRs are under guidelines to grant any number of points up to a total of 250, but they may exceed this if they feel the circumstances call for it (they need to justify it to their supervisor). Alternatively, CSRs can arrange for callers to be sent vouchers, beauty products, flowers, or other gifts using a function in CustomerQ.

In a practice called "news at 10" every morning, the information seekers compile written briefings on topics, issues, and events likely to be relevant in calls that day and disseminate these to CSRs in meetings. They also report on problematic calls resolved the day before. This daily information is also placed on the Lotus Notes system. In addition to these IT-based resources, the CSRs also rely on informal channels for circulating knowledge. Frequent sharing of experiences and advice among CSRs and supervisors occurs in regular team briefings, or in casual chats at breaks or periods of low call activity. The CSRs need to be equipped with a much larger range of information than that provided to customers (i.e., in catalogues, advertisements) to cope effectively with inquiries. The interface team regularly arranges for other units to provide samples of company products so that the CSRs can physically handle or experience them. This team also ensures that complaints are passed to relevant units and promptly addressed with actions of redress and notification.

Operational Challenges

The creation and implementation of the center had largely been an internal project by the customer service department, without significant participation by other units. Consequently, the interface team faced key difficulties in their role as intermediaries in the early stages. They were handicapped by a lack of formally instituted channels of communication and support from the business units. Such arrangements are necessary to facilitate timely, accurate information flows to deal with inquiries. The center's staff have thus had to exercise their own initiative to forge the crucial working relationships, as noted by an assistant manager: "We had to make sales pitches to key players in the business units. We told them the type of information we could provide and how we could prioritize it in terms of issues they could work on to get real benefits." Customer feedback and query reports derived from the CustomerQ system and distributed by e-mail and the intranet have been key forms of collateral in this process of persuasion: "The usefulness of the feedback and analysis we have provided them has built our credibility and gained us the support we need to do our jobs well." This feedback to corporate units has been used to effect tangible improvements in such areas as product packaging, enhancement of features, and withdrawal of faulty products. The center's staff had thus gained (and continue to seek) leverage from the use of IT outputs in efforts to secure vital working relationships and information flows.

The growth in scope of the center's activities has been driven by senior management's expectations that it demonstrate its value to other HealthCo units. The rise in workload has been fueled by temporary call-handling duties for marketing campaigns devised in collaboration with those units. These added duties are not always received favorably by CSR supervisors or staff. They are seen

to pose two kinds of problems. First, the support given has on several occasions badly stretched the center's resources. This problem lies with the difficulty of forecasting responses to those campaigns. An example cited by staff as typical was a recent scheme promoting discounted bookings of conference facilities. They had been told by the marketing department to expect 250 calls per week for the 6 weeks of the promotion. However, in the first week alone, well over 1,000 calls came in, resulting in a serious degradation in performance. These cases of overloading are a special worry for supervisors, who need to ensure performance targets are maintained.

The second type of problem involves task instructions pertaining to those schemes given to CSRs to observe during call interactions. These instructions are issued by marketing department staff responsible for the schemes. Such instructions have often been seen as running counter to the desire of supervisors and CSRs to rein in the direction and pace of interactions. Dissimilar outlooks line the seam of discord. To marketing department staff, for example, an instruction for the CSRs to ask customers a "simple" question at the end of each conversation, and to record the response in their system, seemed easy enough to perform. In practice, however, this task unduly prolonged the interactions. Customers typically did not react in the manner anticipated by the marketing staff. That simple question incurred other questions, clarifications, and comments. This outcome, repeated in thousands of calls, seriously affected the ability of CSRs to maintain their performance targets. Disgruntled CSR staff see such instructions as betraying poor understanding of the "knock-on effect" of additional tasks on their performance. Marketing staff are seen as not appreciating the difficulty of steering customer responses to elicit information.

While the center's management staff have been seeking ways to expand the portfolio of services, they have also been significantly concerned with controlling or reversing a consistent trend of rising phone calls and e-mail from customers. Substantial increases in staff effort and other resource outlays are required to cope with the service demands posed by this proliferation. These increased commitments are at odds with management's efforts to minimize its short- and long-term operational costs, and so a key aim has been to stabilize customer contact volumes. Ironically, the high quality of the service provided by the center's staff is seen by the manager to have contributed to mounting work commitments. It is perceived to have induced an inordinate preference among customers to contact the center with inquiries or complaints which they could or should, according to the manager, have directed to their local HealthCo stores, where they would be resolved more efficiently. The manager has been grappling with discriminating what ought to constitute the "stock focus" of CSRs. He felt this was important to determine, because if clear boundaries were not set, then CSRs might "stick their head above the parapet" too often—i.e., suggest too much willingness to assist customers with their inquiries or demands—and thus draw greater expectations and requests. This would engender a displacement of workload, as the center ends up dealing with inquiries that might have been resolved directly at the stores. Other factors may also be behind the increasing contact volumes. HealthCo is a household name in the United Kingdom especially in regard to health, beauty, and children's products. Members of the public aware of the center as a point of contact are thought to phone with queries on any products within those broad categories, simply because HealthCo is the first familiar name that occurs to them as a potential source of answers. Calling to obtain product advice or information, especially for older people, is much easier than physically visiting shops to make inquiries. The firm's reputation is seen as subjecting the center to rising casual inquiries as public awareness of it grows.

The center's management has thus devoted significant attention to finding ways of moderating the rapid growth of contacts. Mass customer awareness of the center derives mainly from such acts of publicity as the advertisement of the center's telephone number and its status as a point of inquiry on the back of every purchase receipt obtained at HealthCo stores. Recently, the management took the unusual step of significantly reducing the size and prominence of that contact information on the receipts. This was a discreet attempt to diminish public awareness and temper the rising calls. Another recent, more long-term measure to trim call volumes is the effort by the interface team to place an ever-increasing amount of information and FAQ sheets on the company's Internet site. CSRs are directed to inform callers of these self-service resources.

The awarding of free Wellbeing points has produced an unanticipated outcome. A rising familiarity among customers with this aspect of the center's practices has, according to common perception among supervisors, encouraged some customers to contact the center on the basis of expecting extra points or other compensation if they make complaints or express dissatisfaction. Such benefits do not exist when they deal with staff at local HealthCo stores. CSRs are aware of certain callers who make repeated complaints and exclude these from the issue of free points.

A key challenge in handling customer inquiries or complaints is having adequate access to information. The difficulties faced at the center are mainly due to the range and variability of issues by callers, and to required information not being available or appearing as discrepancies on the center's IT systems. The product information on the firm's legacy mainframe database, as well as information in the CustomerQ database, have both presented key problems of search and retrieval. A common fault is inadequate specification of details. The warehouse inventory system is a repository of data on a large range of items formerly and currently marketed by HealthCo. The data stored in this system is well suited for purposes of inventory control, processing, and

internal management reporting, but does not include sufficient descriptive detail for CSRs to effectively answer the kinds of queries raised by customers. The product data typically lacks details on such simple features as the shape, color, or dimensions (i.e., length, breadth, and height) of product items. It does not include information regarding the uses of the product, or other qualities that customers want to know in order to make assessments of suitability. This lack of details limits the quality of response CSRs provide. The problem of inadequate specification in the CustomerQ system has to do with the index categories by which the data in this system is organized. Some of the indexes have proved too general in their categorization, making it difficult to locate specific information for responding to queries. Efforts at reprogramming a wider range of categories by the center's IT technician had produced some improvement, but this was limited.

Another feature cited by the CSRs as highly lacking in the center's IT-based resources is digitized pictorial images of the company's products. Customers often make inquiries that could be answered much more easily if CSRs simply had pictures by which to visualize products being discussed. In addition, there are other IT-related problems, not involving the lack of information, that hamper effective work performance by CSRs. This includes frequent occurrences of slow network and application response times, and the use of too many software applications by CSRs. The lack of integration between various software packages at the center was cited by its manager as being a significant barrier to more efficient performance. CSRs are prevented from working faster in the course of handling calls by the need to frequently switch from one application to another, and to adjust to the different procedures of use of each application. Staff from the company's centralized MIS department had been called in to undertake improvements, but they have been slow to take action to address the shortcomings, being bogged down by other projects and IT problems in the company that had taken precedence over these difficulties. The center's manager saw this as an instance of the lower priority given by certain corporate staff to supporting the center's operations, because of the perception of the center as being merely a complaint-handling function. He felt that part of the solution to improve the center's IT systems lay in the need to raise the center's status in corporate resource-allocation decisions.

Many of the operational challenges faced by the center are seen by its management staff to stem directly or indirectly from its relatively recent origin as an operational unit in HealthCo—from “being bolted on late” onto preexisting processes and structures, as the manager described it. This late arrival was seen to have resulted in a mismatch between the center's requirements and the firm's legacy procedures and infrastructure. HealthCo's traditional orientation toward product manufacture, logistics management, and decentralized service outlets, and its strategic focus on stores, were seen as responsible for processes and resource allocation priorities among other units that impeded the improvement of the center's performance. Nevertheless, the center's management has been encouraged by a rising groundswell of recognition among other HealthCo units regarding the center's efforts. Feedback reports have effected tangible improvements. The interface team also plays a valuable consultancy role, providing advice to the business units (e.g., likely customer reactions; wording of public communications; choice of product features) using information drawn from constant exposure to customer perceptions, issues, and tastes.

Evaluation of IT-Enabled Service Performance

From analysis of the data on service work operations at the HealthCo call center, it was found that the value or significance of IT use and work performance was strongly shaped by the problem of maintaining control over customer service interactions. The prominence of this issue is attributable to the task demands and performance pressures associated with servicing a mass body of customers. An assessment of the complexity of maintaining control over the quality of IT-enabled service activities is obtained from an analysis woven around the myth of surprising the customer formed by management to express an organizing principle for promoting effective customer service. This evaluation is supported by the semiotic square depiction in Figure 2.

The effort by the center's management to control the performance of service interactions encompasses various measures of preparation in the delivery of customer inquiry and complaint-handling services. Some of these measures are deliberately concerted to promote high levels of customer satisfaction by realizing, in concrete terms, the aim of surprising the customer. Key instances of these measures are the use of software functions by CSRs, such as the bestowal of free card points through the Wellbeing database, and the ordering of gifts for customers through the CustomerQ system. The communication of complaints and feedback to relevant corporate units using reports generated by the CustomerQ system, so that actions can be taken to please or recompense customers, is another instance. The progressive expansion of CSR service duties at the call center is also contributing to this undertaking. It may also be perceived that the efforts of the interface team to establish effective channels of coordination and information exchange with other corporate units represents another facet of this dimension. The leverage gained by the use of IT mechanisms (e.g., intranet) and IT outputs (e.g., CustomerQ feedback, data query results) to demonstrate the utility of the center's activities to other HealthCo units is an act of surprising the customer (where the customer is, in this case, corporate units) aimed at creating a coalition of working partnerships based on mutual obligation.

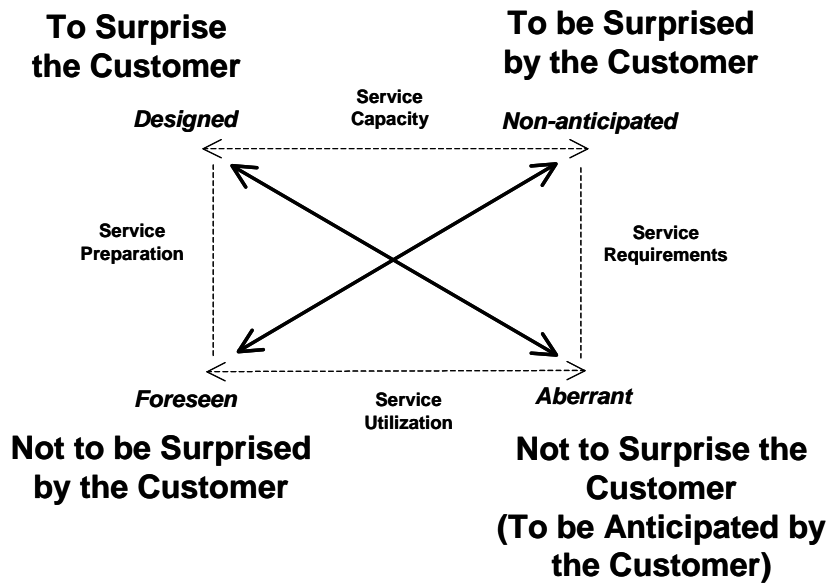


Figure 2. Shaping of Control Over Customer Service Interactions

Consistent with the preceding aim, but reflecting another dimension of effort to control the quality of customer service interactions, is the substantial scope of work activity at the center focused on ensuring that the CSRs are “not to be surprised by the customer.” This effort is aimed at anticipating caller issues and preparing CSRs with the necessary information and knowledge to respond effectively to customer calls. The efforts of the interface team to orchestrate adequate, timely exchanges of information with other HealthCo units, the CSR information practices (e.g., news at 10), and the ongoing attempts to improve the quality or efficacy of the center’s IT-based information resources, are critical to this preparation. This has required making available to CSRs information and retrieval mechanisms that are of sufficient breadth and detail to match the range and variability of customer issues so as to shift the responses of CSRs from a state of unprepared reaction, as manifest in time-consuming, ineffective replies, to a state of proactive readiness, characterized by accurate anticipation of customer issues and prearranged availability of information. On another note, the efforts of the center’s management to control the rate and volume of customer contacts is also geared toward not being surprised (i.e., overwhelmed) by customer requests and checking the demands placed on the center’s resources. This has involved such actions as the reduction in prominence of the center’s advertisement and the increased placement of information resources on the company’s Website to divert customer inquiries.

However, factors related to the internal context of HealthCo and the external customer environment are limiting the efficacy of these service preparations and producing tensions and inconsistencies in the center’s operations. Despite the effort to proactively prepare the necessary information resources and knowledge for CSRs to engage with customers, the CSR staff often end up being surprised by the customer (i.e., unable to respond adequately within a single call). This is due to the unpredictability of contact rates and variability of issues. The center continues to be surprised by sudden, unanticipated surges in contact volumes (e.g., marketing campaign on conference bookings). In addition, IT-related shortcomings, such as inadequacies in information resources on legacy systems (e.g., warehouse inventory system), shortcomings of functionality (i.e., limitations of search mechanisms, lack of systems integration, slow response times), and the low priority accorded by the MIS department to addressing these problems, are contributing to a significant insufficiency in service preparations. The inadequate access to information resources or information channels in the parent company also reflects the difficulty of operating the call center’s centralized inquiry or complaint-handling activities in a corporate environment mainly geared in its systems and procedures to decentralized activity and decision making.

Another dimension of service requirements at the center is in contraposition to the earlier described efforts to surprise the customer. The success of those deliberate efforts to heighten customer satisfaction have led to some unwelcome consequences: customers being seen to take advantage of or to abuse those beneficial arrangements, thus anticipating the center’s designs. These particular actions, seen to constitute aberrant or opportunistic behavior, include the displacement of casual inquiries from stores to the call center, and contacting the center rather than the stores to make complaints because of the potential to gain Wellbeing

points. Such outcomes appear difficult to control or abrogate, however, given that satisfying customers and establishing strong bonds with them is a fundamental priority of work organization at the center. The various elements constituting this dimension thus represent emergent situations in which the deliberate intensions and preparations of the center's staff are to a certain extent being undone in unexpected ways.

Thus, as seen in the above form of analysis, the call center's myth has been analytically unfolded into a matrix of oppositional and associative dimensions of significance, which is used to enframe and illuminate incompatibilities and tensions in IT-based service work performance at the center. A key inconsistency was seen to lie between the center's current state of insufficient IT resources and the level of access to customer-relevant information needed to mount high-quality service performance. A key tension was disclosed between the need to please customers on the one hand, and the need to control the rate and volume of contacts on the other.

Discussion: Dissymmetry in IT Use

The rhetorical slogan of surprising the customer represented the way the widely adopted organizing vision of customer relationship management had been operationalized as a myth: an attractive, simplified image to focalize and motivate the actions of staff. This image contrasted sharply with the reactive character of the center's operations, caused by difficulties of handling a large, unpredictable range and volume of calls. The above method of analysis reveals how such dissymmetry can be usefully framed and presented. A myth can be deconstructed—analytically unfolded to account for multiple zones of oppositional and associative consequence in IT use or work activity—to highlight the complexities of organizational functioning. The form of evaluation thus produced is not aimed at measurement, but at clarifying understanding or fostering insights.

The case analysis brought to the foreground key incompatibilities or tensions straining the call center's operations, but strictly from a standpoint of their relevance to its essential performance goal, as expressed by its myth. This approach may be seen as useful. Shulman (1999) claims that recent IS theories of action have offered rich insights on the structuring of IT-based work activity, but give little guidance on understanding what is *good* performance, and how it is supported by IT. The method demonstrated above permits the significance (or value) of IT use and work performance to be apprehended in direct relation to an organizing vision: not simplistically, but as a complex of multiple dimensions (e.g., value of awarding free Wellbeing card points is shaped concurrently by opposite polarities: delighting a customer vs. inviting opportunistic behavior). This addresses the problem of identifying the significance or value of performance (i.e., *good* performance) in three ways.

First, it is appraised from the viewpoint of a common frame of perception (i.e., myth) by which organizational actors structure experience. It is important for a researcher or analyst to deal with the disparate nature of organizations, which consist of different stakeholder groups with dissimilar perceptions or goals (Robey and Boudreau 1999). In order to inspire action, organizational myths depict a generally desired, uncomplicated state or aim that different constituencies with competing interests can broadly identify with and use as a basis for collective sense-making (Burke 1962). The deconstruction of a myth thus presents a relatively inclusive vantage point or posture from which to review the efficacy of performance and the contribution of IT. For example, in the above analysis, both the marketing and the CSR supervisory staff would agree with the aim of surprising the customer, but the supervisors' unhappiness at the additional duties proceeding from the marketing department is explained by their simultaneous desire to prevent unpredictable customer responses from disrupting their ability to meet computer-generated performance targets (i.e., not to be surprised by the customer).

Second, this approach does not dismiss as irrelevant the rhetorical formulations by which the value of performance may be understood or communicated in organizations. Instead, it permits the rhetorical basis of organizational performance to be treated as an integral part of an evaluation process by privileging it as a means of gaining perspective.

Third, the significance of IT use or work practices is seen as constituted by a matrix of *differential* valuations. This offers a way to deal with the problem of the ontological basis of signification, which has been the subject of past debate (e.g., Grint and Woolgar 1992). Significance or value is not seen as objectively given (or inherent) in an activity or artifact on its own. Nor is it viewed as purely a subjective construction or attribution of actors. Rather, the significance or value of performance is constituted negatively by its entrenchment within a network of differences. IT use is simultaneously entangled within opposing and associative frames of pertinence. The approach taken in this paper thus captures the dispositioning of value. It helps to extend current IS understanding toward an interpretive theory of performance.

The above analysis thus illustrates the proposition that a myth can serve as a useful basis for appraising the emergent reality or complexity of IT-enabled work performance. This method can benefit managers or IS practitioners in two ways. First, it may be used as a sense-making tool for evaluating existing practices or IT resources. A heightened appreciation may be gained of the way key elements or factors, in IT use and work activity, condition each other in a network of inconsistencies and dependencies. Organizational interventions can be guided by fresh insight. Second, this method can serve as a prognostic or frame-breaking tool when designing novel or innovative organizing visions or forming new practices of IT use and work activity. IS designers or organizational architects face a danger of being so engaged in formulating new arrangements that they fail to give adequate consideration to potential constraints, risks, or adverse effects. This may be averted by problematizing the organizing vision. By using the semiotic square to fracture an untested myth into its dialectical polarities, IS designers may be provoked into useful foresight or recognition regarding latent conflicts and incongruities in relational elements of organizing.

Conclusion

Rather than treating the rhetorical basis of organizing visions as trivial or insignificant, this paper has clarified and augmented its value for studying IT use by employing the concept of myth. The preceding elaborations have significantly developed, and the case analysis demonstrated, the utility of this concept for IS research. Drawing on an analytical schema, this paper has presented a novel dialectical method for evaluating IT use or work performance.

The treatment undertaken addresses a need for IS research effort to illuminate and specify the relationships between IT use and the rhetorical order in organizations. One area this study did not look at, but which invites future attention, concerns another function of rhetorical forms: to foster a common ground for groups with rival interests to form alliances. Rhetorical discourse contains broad statements with innate ambiguities, allowing different groups to maintain partisan interests fairly oblique to the proclaimed goals (Burke 1962). For example, the rhetoric accompanying the launch of a new IT system is received by different stakeholders on their own terms. The way that rhetorical discourse permits tangential interests to be pursued in IT projects or policy making is scope for future IS research. This paper has sought to promote inquiry in this incipient area, by showing that practices of IT use can usefully be studied under a semiotic profile.

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