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Change Implementers' Resistance: Considering Power and Resistance in IT Implementation Projects

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Abstract

Resistance is normally characterized as a set of behaviours located in and belonging to change recipients. Such behaviours are seen to thwart the legitimate aims of both change strategists and the change agents who implement systems and the associated organisational change on the strategists' behalf. However, results from our case study research indicate that resistance can be a property not only of change recipients' behaviour, but also of change agents and change strategists. The resistance behaviours identified included the failure to follow a prescribed corporate method and template, a refusal to help or listen, a refusal to fix known problems, the display of an adversarial, confrontational, and/or condescending attitude, subversiveness, a poor work ethic, and a refusal to meet requests. This paper argues for a revised conceptualization of resistance as a behaviour that can be demonstrated by any IT project stakeholders, that cannot be divorced from considerations of power in the IT project context.

Keywords

Resistance, IT project management, power, systems implementation

INTRODUCTION

IT innovation and business transformation is an essential component of organizational life: IT-driven change is part of the fabric of the modern organization, and is both essential and inescapable. Thus, successfully implementing new IT, and successively upgrading and refining IT, is critical in contemporary global business environments. But the reality is that we are not always successful in implementing new IT, with 73% of IT staff and 82% of business staff respondents believing that IT projects were always or usually doomed right from the start (Geneca 2011), while many IT projects fail to deliver the expected benefits and some fail completely (Brouwer 2011). Given that resistance is argued to be a major contributing factor to these vexing outcomes (Jiang et al. 2000), developing a better understanding of the phenomenon seems to be one way of improving IT implementation project outcomes. Thus it is not surprising that there is now a considerable empirical literature on user resistance in IT projects, which has served to build our knowledge in this area.

However, what is striking about this literature is that a one-sided view and interpretation of resistance behaviours evident in IT projects, that of the change agent (CA), appears to be the main perspective represented. Resistance

is largely portrayed as a set of behaviours demonstrated by the change recipients (CRs), which thwart the attempts of the CAs to implement the desired IT and organizational changes necessary to deliver value from the IT investment to senior executives, the change strategists (CSs) in the business (Nord and Jermier 1994). While the perspective of the CA (perhaps better described as a managerialist perspective (Lewis 2011)) on what constitutes resistance in others (the CRs) is common and normalized, any discussion of how behaviours come to be characterized as resistant is missing from our knowledge base currently.

Our aim in this paper is therefore to examine the behaviours of all participants in an IT implementation project with the intention of exploring the idea that resistance is not simply a property of CRs, but that other key stakeholders in change initiatives could also be regarded as displaying resistance behaviours. Specifically, we aimed to investigate whether behaviours that could reasonably be described as resistant were evident also in the behaviours of change agents throughout an IT implementation project.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we review some of the key literature on resistance from both the Organizational Development (OD) and IT literatures. Following a discussion of our research approach, and the case study we investigated, we provide empirical evidence to support our view that resistance cannot fairly be viewed as emanating from one party only in change initiatives. From this, we discuss a number of theoretical and practical implications.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

There is no universally agreed definition of resistance to change (Ford and Ford 2010), and indeed, it is surprising how many papers written about resistance actually do not attempt to define the concept (Agocs 1997). However, generally conceptualisations include the notions of opposition or objection from those affected by the proposed change, challenges of various sorts to those with authority to implement change (Bartunek 1993), and a reluctance or unwillingness to embrace change (Lewis 2011). In an IT context, Hirschheim and Newman (1988:398) defined resistance to change "*as an adverse reaction to a proposed change which may manifest itself in a visible, overt fashion (such as sabotage or direct opposition) or may be less obvious and covert (such as relying on inertia to stall and ultimately kill a project)*". A more recent definition is that of Ferneley and Sobreperez (2006) who argue that resistance occurs in a context where compliance with the directives and wishes of change agents (CAs) by the change recipients (CRs) is expected, but not completely evident. Enshrined in these definitions is the notion that resistance is associated with the reactions and behaviours of CRs. Resistance thus becomes characterized as an obstacle (Piderit 2000), something that must be managed, minimized, neutralized and overcome by CAs (Klaus and Blanton 2010), and in the main, is thus negatively portrayed. From this perspective, CAs are often viewed as the somewhat innocent victims of these dysfunctional, somewhat irrational behaviours on the part of CRs (Ford et al. 2008, Thomas and Hardy 2011). This is by far the most common portrayal of resistance in both the IT literature (Laumer 2011) and in Organizational Change/Development literature (Thomas and Hardy 2011).

However, resistance is not always portrayed in a negative way. There are studies that acknowledge that resistance can be both 'rational', and serve a positive function for the organization, such as complaints that enable flaws and shortcomings in systems design to be recognized and remedied (for example, Markus 1983, Hirschheim and Newman 1988, Ferneley and Sobreperez 2006), or questions posed about the assumptions and understandings of CSs and CAs, and in such circumstances, can be viewed as an 'energy' which in fact leads to better outcomes (Ford and Ford 2010). Thus negative responses to change in these cases are seen as motivated by positive intentions (Piderit 2000). The concept of 'positive resistance' (Ferneley and Sobreperez 2006) however is not itself uncontroversial. Agocs (1997:918) argues that resistance should be conceived of as a process in which organizational members (acting individually or in groups) refuse to be influenced by the ideas and evidence of those who advocate change, and thus argues vehemently that: "*it should be clear from this definition that debate, criticism, or disagreement do not constitute resistance. On the contrary, rigorous critique intended to produce better understanding and solutions is a valuable contribution to analysis and action toward change in organizations*". Thus, according to these arguments, the term 'positive resistance' could be seen as something of an oxymoron, in which 'real' resistance can scarcely be viewed as positive, and positively intended feedback in order to improve a situation should not be regarded as resistance. Indeed, Watson (1982) warns that resistance should not be confused with reluctance, while Lewis (2011:195) advises against judging "*anything short of immediate and absolute enthusiasm and compliance*" as resistance, noting that it is unproductive not to allow for feedback and critique that might lead to better solutions being proffered, greater clarity in objectives, and so on. In this paper, we will not be regarding anything that serves as leading to better solutions or providing critique and feedback as resistance.

Resistance is clearly a complex phenomenon, with differing perspectives on how it should be characterized. What is evident in the literature however, is that resistance behaviors are identified and located in someone else:

resistance is presented as a one sided behaviour, with resistance occurring or located in CRs who (usually) behave unreasonably, irrationally, and find barriers to obstruct change (although we acknowledge the potential for positive dimensions). Almost universally, the literature adopts the CAs' perspective, and this focus thus locates resistance 'out there' in the individual or group (the CRs). Such a view therefore sees solutions to resistance as 'finding' or 'identifying' the source of the resistance in the individual(s) or group, and then implementing strategies to deal with or overcome that source (Klaus and Blanton 2010). However, the literature is silent on whether resistance is solely in the province of the CRs, or whether other observed behaviours from parties involved in the change process (such as CSs and CAs) could equally well be judged as evidence of resistance. Thus, one wonders whether only certain behaviours when observed in CRs constitute resistance, or whether it could be that CSs and CAs demonstrating similar behaviours could also be deemed to be resistant within the broad organizational context of change.

Another commonality in much of the literature is implicit or explicit expectation of compliance on the part of CRs to directives of CAs. We agree that resistance results from within an organizational context in which compliance is expected, but would suggest that because of this expectation of compliance, defining and theorising resistance cannot be divorced from considerations of power (Agocs 1997, Thomas and Hardy 2011). There can be no notion of compliance, as explicit in the Fernley and Sobreperez (2006) definition, and implicit in the Hirschheim and Newman (1988) definition, if there is no exercise of power. If we consider resistance from a communication theory perspective, Lewis (2011: 203) defines it as the "*outgrowth of social sensemaking and social influence processes among stakeholders*". This definition incorporates the notion of power (social influence processes), explicitly acknowledges resistance as a social process amongst groups, and recognizes the importance of sensemaking leading to assessments of proposed change projects amongst groups involved in these initiatives, all of which seem apposite to a consideration of IT implementation projects. Further, it does not adopt a managerialist perspective, meaning that potentially, resistance is not a property of CR behaviours only nor that CSs and CAs should enjoy the privileged position in being the ones passing assessments as to whether or not a behavior constitutes resistance. Rather, it offers the potential for resistance behaviours to be exhibited by any groups involved in a change process, and thus opens the possibility for multiple perspectives to be explored in a study of resistance. Thus we argue that there may be a need to redefine and reconceptualise resistance in the context of IT projects.

Our interest in the research reported in this paper was to explore the idea that resistance is not simply a property of CRs, but that other key stakeholders in change initiatives could also be regarded as displaying resistance behaviours. Specifically, we aimed to investigate whether resistance behaviours were evident in the behaviours of change agents throughout an IT implementation project. The focus in this paper is different from other studies that examine resistance in IT projects, in that we were interested in examining possible resistance on the part of the CAs, and whether or not this could be seen to have contributed to the poor outcomes in the failed project we studied. Our research is thus also responding to calls by Thomas et al. (2011) to OD researchers for more research into resistance by CAs, and whether this contributes to the failure of change initiatives such as this ES implementation.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research reported in this paper is a longitudinal case study (Stake 2008) of an Enterprise System (ES) implementation (details in the next section). Our involvement commenced in early 2007, when the initial ES implementation project was in deep trouble. Our data collection ended in February 2010, after an implementation, a return to the previous legacy system, two aborted subsequent implementation attempts before the system was finally successfully implemented late in 2009. The case study method enabled us to research an intensive study of a real-life, contextual and bounded phenomenon (an ES implementation) and was instrumental in that it enabled us to research a number of dimensions of resistance to change in this particular IT project context (Stake 2008).

The research is deliberately positioned in the social constructionist paradigm, acknowledging that participants in this study create their own interpretations of reality based on their experiences and knowledge of the context that inform their actions in an on-going dynamic process (Burr 2007). This enabled the researchers to acknowledge the existence of multiple perspectives and hence multiple 'truths' as to what transpired, and underscores the importance of context in locating these perceptions and interpretations (Burr 2007). Such an approach is argued to provide a reliable and valid method for extracting the interviewees' perceptions of reality (Czarniawska 1998). Data was collected via semi-structured digitally recorded interviews. The researchers then posed more structured questions in an attempt to identify views on issues of particular importance to this research. In all, fifteen participants were involved in this case study, a total of 19 formal interviews were conducted of between 45-60 minutes, and there were numerous short telephone and email exchanges with three of the participants. Participants have been de-identified to maintain confidentiality, and the following convention adopted for

labelling: A1-7=Australian CorpeX implementation project team member (the CAs in this case), N1-7 = New Zealand employee of Company Y who had involvement in the ES implementation project (the CRs in this case), and C1= Consultant, who was involved in aspects of this implementation project. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and subject to a directed approach to interpretation (Hsieh and Shannon 2005)).

In this paper, our interest was in the reports of behaviours of participants other than the CRs and the potential that these behaviours could be regarded as resistant. In the main we relied on the accounts of participants from which we interpreted a view of resistance behaviours. To be regarded as a resistance behaviour, the question we posed ourselves in analysing the accounts was this: if this behaviour had been displayed by a CR, would a CA have reasonably concluded that the CR might well be demonstrating resistance to their change initiative? For example, we previously discussed the expectation of compliance in arriving at an assessment of resistance. So, if a CR failed or refused to adopt and use an organisationally prescribed method or practice, would that have been viewed by a CA as potentially being evidence of resistance on the part of that CR? We assert that it most likely would be regarded in this way. Thus, in analysing our data, when multiple accounts from both CAs and CRs reveal that the CAs failed to follow an organisational prescribed method, we classified this as indicating that this behaviour could be classified as 'resistant'.

In our analysis of the transcripts looking specifically for accounts of behaviours that might be construed as evidence of resistance on the part of CAs, we developed categories, each one indicative of a type of behaviour that could be argued to represent resistance. In making this assessment, we relied on more than one account of the incident/behaviour, and we endeavoured to consider contextual features in making our assessments. The data was examined independently by two of the authors, and then collectively, and we combed through the categories and quotes until agreement was reached. The outcome was 7 categories of resistance behaviours demonstrated by the CAs (*failure to follow a prescribed corporate method and template, refusal to help or listen, refusal to fix known problems, display of an adversarial, confrontational, and/or condescending attitude, subversiveness, a poor work ethic, and a refusal to meet requests*). In addition, there was one category demonstrated by the CSs (*refusal to act on known system performance and infrastructure issues*).

In describing the events of the case in the next section, we have endeavoured to recount events as neutrally as possible.

CASE STUDY

CorpeX is a large (approx. US\$15 billion annual net sales in 2011), global, US-based specialist chemical manufacturer and distributor, operating in about 60 countries worldwide. Throughout the late 1990s and 2000s CorpeX had adopted a strategy of growth through acquisition. Following acquisition, CorpeX proceeded to bring acquired companies into the single instance corporate global ES, which provided a number of efficiencies and much improved management and performance reporting. Prior to this case, there had been 14 successive successful implementations across Australasia. The acquisition of a successful, small New Zealand (NZ) business, Company Y, in mid-2006 triggered the usual procedure of bringing Company Y into the existing single instance of the ES. A small, experienced team from CorpeX Australia planned and drove the project, relying to a considerable extent on local managerial and IT staff in Company Y to manage the details of the implementation. However, before long significant difficulties arose. Staff at Company Y voiced doubts about the new system, its functionality, and about the project team. Eventually, with little mutual cooperation, the new system went live in early 2007. It quickly became apparent there were many unresolved issues and the new ES was blamed for rising costs and falling productivity in Company Y.

Three months later, the General Manager (GM) of Company Y spoke with the Asia Pacific Vice President of CorpeX, who then sought the support of the CIO in the US Head Office to remove the system and return to the legacy system. The CIO commissioned a review of the newly implemented system in Company Y that resulted in a temporary return to the legacy system whilst a new implementation strategy was developed for implementation at some future time. The local CIO (A1) developed a business focused IS/IT strategy and communicated this regularly to Company Y, to ensure they developed understanding of the big picture, their own role in it, and how the regionally integrated system could help them and the broader organization achieve their objectives. 1 July 2009 had been agreed as the new (2nd) "Go Live" date. Just two weeks out from this date, the GM of Company Y, in private consultation with the Regional VP, successfully lobbied for the further postponement of the cut over to the new system. Once again he was successful. A new (3rd) "Go Live" date was set for 1 October 2009, but following a similar course of events, the planned implementation was again aborted. A 4th date was set for late November 2009, and Company Y finally went live on CorpeX's ES, nearly three years after the initial failed attempt.

RESISTANT BEHAVIORS OF IT PROJECT KEY STAKEHOLDERS

If we consider the accounts overall, some things stand out. Firstly, the 'within-group' accounts (i.e. the accounts of the Australian team or those of the NZ team) are remarkably similar, suggesting that 'story-telling' within the group had been an essential part of the group sensemaking activity throughout the change process, and likely served to actually start to shape the unfolding change process (Thomas et al. 2011). Secondly, in the main, the accounts from members of each group were largely devoted to recounting their frustrations and disappointment with the deficiencies of the other group and in so doing justifying their own reports of their actions. Thirdly, the stories that emerged from the Australian and NZ group were in many ways quite divergent, revealing sharp difference in perspective in the meanings apparently ascribed (second order realities) to events and behaviours evidenced (first order realities) to the point that it was possible to believe that one was hearing stories of two different change initiatives. The seven categories of resistance behaviours demonstrated by the CAs (*failure to follow a prescribed corporate method and template, refusal to help or listen, refusal to fix known problems, display of an adversarial, confrontational, and/or condescending attitude, subversiveness, a poor work ethic, and a refusal to meet requests*) will now briefly be discussed in turn.

Failure to follow a prescribed corporate method and template

CorpeX had developed a well-established method and template for these ES implementations, which addressed both technical, and more importantly social and emotional aspects of major change. As A2 noted, since the template "was tested across all businesses and was rolled from site to site", he was confident in their "well-established process for doing it [ES implementations]", and expected this project would be "just an extension of the last couple of roll-outs". The problem was that the CorpeX AU team did not follow this template. A1, involved from the time of the review of the first implementation commented "to be honest, sitting there thinking "Wow, how did this ever happen? How did we go live?" We seemed to have some fundamental problems with the way this project was set up". The template specified the need for early strategies to ensure engagement from the acquired business being brought into the corporate ES, appointment of appropriate leaders in various aspects of the implementation, and appointment of someone to the vital role of managing data integrity issues, none of which was done in this case. We argue that this can be construed as resistance from the CAs towards the CSs (who required and expected the use of the corporate template), as evidenced below:

"CorpeX had done quite a poor job at explaining why we needed to do this...people had no understanding whatsoever on what we were trying to achieve in the first place from an integration or enterprise systems standpoint...we [AU] need to walk away from this. We haven't done a good job in putting it together" (A1)

"there didn't seem to be anybody that was actually organising it. There were guys in AU who seemed to have been given the task of trying to make it happen but I would say they were relatively junior level...I don't think they were the right level or type of person to be running the project" (N1)

"I was surprised CorpeX doesn't have a standard template for doing implementation...there did not seem to be standards...there were a whole lot of checks that weren't done...we should have had a step "Verify the data"" (A3)

Refusal to help or listen

A number of participants commented on the fact that the AU team had failed to listen or provide adequate help, and this was especially damaging when NZ concerns about being ready for the cutover appeared to fall on deaf ears. Comments that seem to support a view of resistance from the AU team include:

"We had quite a number of occasions when we [NZ] internally met and came up with lists of things that we could see were not covered. We'd try to get this taken on board by the people in [AU] but we were not being listened to." (N1)

"We had some communication with the [AU] implementation team, but a lot of what happened was they implemented everything and then took off... we didn't have any help or at least it felt like we didn't have any help to get it done. (N5)

"They [NZ] proposed that the implementation shouldn't be done until January because that would be a quiet time..that was just seen as stalling tactics...[AU said:] "Just go do it!" (A3)

Refusal to fix known problems

There were many occasions in the transcripts from all participants in which evidence emerged of a refusal on the part of the AU team to fix known problems with the ES implementation, many of which were subsequently implicated in contributing to major problems during the first go-live with the ES.

"We realised very early on about this bug...I then sent a file to reverse...and correct it. It would have been fine except that an individual [AU CA] decided that "No, we weren't going to apply those corrections"...Really, really important but that's what he decided to do" (N1)

"at the end of the day it's planning, you're doing the checks to make sure that people understand what the gaps are, that those gaps are being addressed and checking that, and that didn't happen...just wasn't there" (N2)

"Well [NZ GM] had a checklist from the first implementation and he brought it out, went through his checklist and said "Have all these things been covered off?" and quite a few of them hadn't been...some were misunderstandings and others there was a gap, they had not been completed and the upshot of that was the project was delayed" (N2, speaking about the lead up to the second implementation)

When one of the AU team members was asked why they had not attempted to address many of these problems, he replied *"Well to be honest, we basically just kept moving on. We knew we had a job to do and we knew we were getting nowhere...so we thought, "well, we'll just keep striving forward" (A6).*

Display of an adversarial, confrontational, and/or condescending attitude

The interviews revealed many occasions where the AU team displayed attitudes that could hardly be described as helpful to the progress of the change initiative.

"At the 'Us versus Them' meeting..." (A3)

"They're a clicky little group" (A6)

When questioned specifically as to whether or not such behaviours might have contributed to the problems encountered during the implementation project, A6 responded *"I don't believe so, no. I think we all had a professional attitude...as far as I'm concerned we did the right thing".*

Subversiveness

During the period following the first implementation, the New Zealanders made a number of claims about the damage that the ES was doing to their business, amongst which were claims of needing to add additional staff (and thus cost increases), falling productivity, stock outs, dissatisfied customers, and so on. It appears that some of these claims may have been exaggerated (for example, claiming that NZ had had to add 20 additional staff, where in reality it may have been closer to 5, and so on), and it would seem that the exaggeration served to advocate for the NZ position, to highlight the severity of the problems encountered and to garner political support for their case. This is in keeping with what Argyris (2000) describes as Model I theories in use (being in control, winning, being seen as acting rationally, and so on). The Australian reaction was to suggest that there was little (or no) evidence to support the NZ claims, arguably typical of behaviours from CAs in apparently attempting to discredit the CRs (Lewis 2011). Yet in the data, we found evidence that members of the AU team did, in fact, have knowledge of some of these issues (A1 below says there was no evidence of pricing problems, whereas A5 acknowledges those problems). Their claims of no evidence were thus deemed somewhat subversive.

"it became clear there was no evidence, there was no understanding. It felt more to me like a staged production... It felt like, you know, a set of demands and then some quite inaccurate data on why we need these set of demands...I can remember when we discussed things like incorrect pricing and here's a classic example where literally my ears pricked up straight away. I'm like "wow, this is serious...We then asked for hard evidence...and no one could give us any evidence. It was all hearsay, it was all "well our customers are hurting", "our customers aren't paying invoices", "our customers are receiving double invoices", "our customers aren't receiving stocks and we're not charging them". Every time we went into anything deeper to try and find out what was happening, it couldn't be backed up" (A1, referring to the NZ claims of problems with the ES after the first implementation).

"the pricing side of it was a disaster. They had to employ someone full time to be raising credits...There was a hell of a lot of customer dissatisfaction because of that." (A5)

"Training sessions would be set up and no-one would turn up and the excuse was, "Too busy doing my job, I haven't got time to come and learn about this...[This was interpreted by AU as resistance on the part of NZ]...Part of the problem is they have lost a lot of people over the last few years so everybody was very, very busy all the time" (A5)

Poor work ethic

Evidence of resistance is often attributed to poor work, an unwillingness or reluctance to perform tasks, and so on. In this case, there was evidence of this from the CAs. It should also be noted that their actions in not using

'genuine' test data (see quote below) is also further supporting evidence of their failure to adopt the prescribed template.

"We started doing some online training...we gave NZ some access to the Australian test system...we didn't load it up with NZ data, because that's a lot of work" (A2)

Refusal to meet requests, "Oughtituding"

In addition to the refusal to fix some of the problems that were known about the ES, the AU team at times displayed reluctance to meet requests coming from NZ, or even to engage and have a discussion about why the request might have been important.

They'd insisted from day one that they have an RF system... we planned not to implement an RF system" (A6)

Accompanying refusals to accede to reasonable requests was often an expression of "oughtituding" (Agazarian and Gantt 2000:114), indicating that NZ 'ought' to do things the way AU did, 'ought' to comply, 'ought' to see the new ES in a positive light, and so on. Oughtituding is argued to be evidence of a restraint on goal achievement or of resistance to change (Agazarian and Gantt 2000), in that rather than thinking creatively about how a change might be accommodated, it demonstrates a force against change.

"an example of basically "You should do it this way in Oracle because that's the way [AU] does it," and we had a lot of those things...that was just an example of basically where they [AU] said "Well, you must do it that way," and there wasn't really any consultation of "Well, how do you [NZ] do it currently?" or "This is how we do it, but maybe the system can accommodate the way you want to do it." (N5)

"I definitely think that the attitude of some people has got to change. This attitude, "Oh I don't work for CorpeX, I work for Company Y" they've got to understand that they're part of a large organisation. Even the week before...a rep told me he worked for Company Y, I said, "No, you work for CorpeX", "No, I work for Company Y". I said, "NO, Company Y is owned by CorpeX, we're all CorpeX, we're one big happy family". They've got to be told that they're part of CorpeX now. We're going to implement some software that's used globally and it's worked successfully globally so please don't have this attitude that, "No, you're not part of CorpeX" (A6)

Refusal to act on known system performance and infrastructure issues (CSs)

Throughout the transcripts a repeated theme was about poor system performance and inadequate infrastructure that affected NZ. The AU team acknowledged this, and it appeared at first to be more evidence of resistance on the part of the CAs.

"Being honest...the bandwidth wasn't acceptable for NZ... "Once the system got loaded up...their desktop experience was pretty bad, in terms of being slow... so it was not really usable" (A2)

"The other thing I think that was happening at CorpeX at the time was we were having a number of issues around the region with Oracle and with our computer systems and the speed as well" (A7)

However, C1 threw light onto this issue, commenting, *"Head Office knew perfectly well about the infrastructure issues and the network issues which resulted in terrible response times. They just thought NZ could live with it for a year or so. AU become the meat in the sandwich in that one" (C1)*. Thus, given the failure of Head Office to act to remedy this serious issue, we felt justified to claim we had evidence of resistance behaviours on the part of the CSs in the USA.

DISCUSSION/THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This case study has proved very rich, and we were able to gain access by invitation from the AU team (the CAs). They painted a vivid canvas for us of the resistance behaviours they had encountered from the NZ team (the CRs). Without doubt, CRs in this case study did demonstrate resistance behaviours, but we have also provided evidence in this paper that at least some of this apparent resistance had positive intentions, was a genuine attempt to bring attention to known problems, to get assistance, to critique the process, and so on, or what Ferneley and Sobreperez (2006) would term 'positive resistance'. Earlier we argued that this should not be regarded as resistance at all. But our analysis of the data also reveals evidence of behaviours on the part of CAs and CSs, which we argue, had they been evident in CRs, almost certainly would have been deemed resistant by the CAs. Our data clearly demonstrates behaviours in the CAs argued to characterize resistance in the literature (such as displaying disagreement, refusal to act and oughtituding, refusal to adopt corporate templates, avoiding responses, a confrontational and condescending attitude, lack of responsiveness, and so on) none of which could be said to be motivated by positive intentions, and hence which we classified as evidence of resistance on the part of the CAs in the main, but also, the CSs.

Our findings thus suggest that resistance is not uni-directional (in CRs directed towards CAs, as judged by CAs), but needs to be conceived as multi-directional (arising from the interactions between CSs, CAs and CRs in this case), better stated as evident in or arising from the interactions of stakeholders in organizational change initiatives, supporting the definition of resistance adopted for this research argued that it is an outgrowth of social influence (Lewis 2011). This being the case, then arguably theorising about resistance cannot be divorced from considerations of social influence, or power. There are many definitions of power, most of which include the notion of being able to influence others in some way (Silva and Backhouse 2003, Smith et al 2010). Boonstra and Gravenhorst (1998:99) take a broad definition in which they view power *“as a dynamical social process affecting opinions, emotions and behavior of interest groups in which inequalities are involved with respect to the realization of wishes and interests”*. Scott (1998) develops this concept of inequalities in suggesting that the power to control or influence another in part depends on the ability to control resources valued by the other, and thus stems from the other's dependency. *“Power relations can be reciprocal: one individual may hold resources of importance to another in one area, but be dependent on the same person because of resources held by the latter in a different area. And just as the degree of individual dependence may vary by situation, so may the degree of mutual dependence or interdependence...power has its origin in the dependency of one person on resources controlled by another, but power itself is best defined as potential for influence”* (Scott 1998:304).

Thus power can be viewed as existing between individuals and groups where some forms of mutual, but not necessarily equal, dependencies exist. If such concepts of power are translated into the context of an IT implementation project, the CAs and CSs have position power (Boonstra and Gravenhorst 1998, Silva and Backhouse 2003, Smith et al 2010). They have been charged with running the implementation process by the change strategists, and hence have been given the authority to implement the changes. It would also be expected that they had expertise power (French and Raven 1959), in that they would be expected to have experience and ability in managing projects and systems implementations (Boonstra and Gravenhorst 1998). However, importantly, given our definition above, they also have structural power, which focuses on the relative powers of interdependent groups (Simon and Oakes 2006). In the context of an implementation project, the CAs derive part of their power from their knowledge of process (project management methods, change management methods, knowledge of the software package to be implemented, and the like), and they may have some knowledge of the organisational context, and so on. But they are dependent on CRs to provide their support and 'labour' to effect the proposed changes, and to be willing to undertake change-related tasks as allocated by the CAs. Likewise, the CRs rely on the CAs to adopt an appropriate approach to change, to communicate effectively, to offer appropriate support and training, and to garner required resources to effect desired and desirable working change in the organisation. However, the CRs are not powerless in these circumstances. They derive power from their knowledge of context (their knowledge of user requirements, the business requirements, their detailed understandings of current business processes, practices and systems, and so on), and their knowledge of customers and other stakeholders. They also understand that the CAs need them to do a lot of the work in actually implementing the system, in making the required changes to business processes, in applying themselves to learning the new system, and so on. The ability of CRs to exercise power is derived from their knowledge and skills, and the fact that CAs are dependent on them for that knowledge, skill and labour to successfully implement organisational change (see Figure 1 below). Thus, power relations, in the form of mutual dependencies, are evident in the relationship between CAs and CRs. Studies on resistance in IS have typically adopted a one-sided view of this mutual dependency. Researchers typically examine the resistance exhibited by CRs in response to the change initiatives of CAs, and thus the perspective adopted and presented in most IS research is that of the CA (see Figure 1 below).

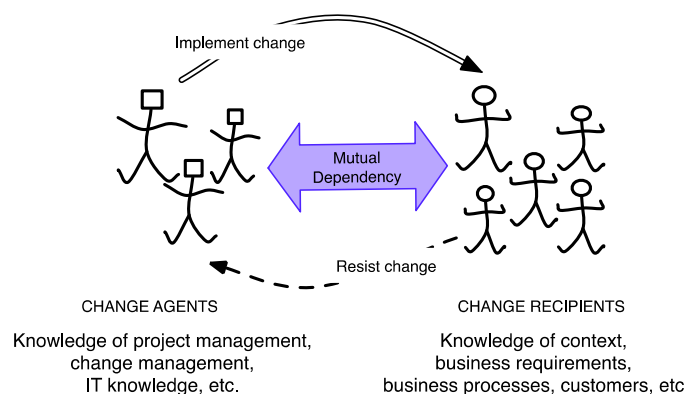


Figure 1: The typical depiction of resistance taking the CAs' perspective in the IS literature

Mutual dependency seems helpful to explain the behaviours evident in this case study. The findings of our research suggest that in an IT implementation project, the exercise of power is not unidirectional (from CS to CA to CR), but rather needs to be viewed as flowing between the involved parties. Their relative powers may not be equal, but no party is totally without power. Thus, there is the potential for resistance to be evident in from all parties, as we have empirically demonstrated in this paper.

Rivard and Lapointe (2012) do address the 'what happened next?' issue, where they identified and classified the reactions (behaviours) of CAs following resistance to change exhibited by the CRs, and suggested that certain types of responses to resistance were more effective in managing, decreasing or eliminating resistance. But it is still the perspective of the CAs that is adopted. We have found no IS papers that consider whether resistance might also be exhibited by CAs themselves throughout the change process, nor that examine resistance within a context that acknowledges power as a mutual dependency between CAs and CRs (see Figure 2 below).

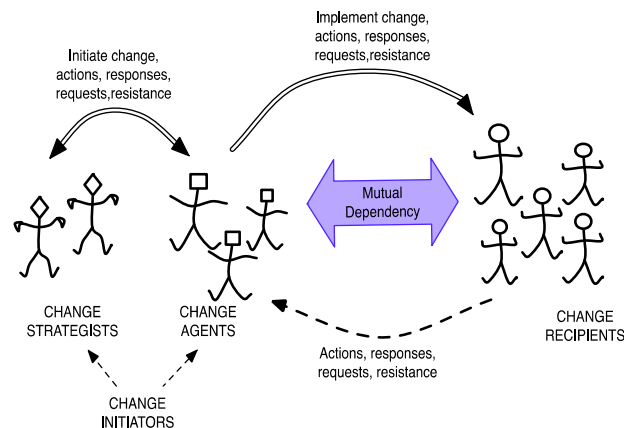


Figure 2: Locating Resistance Behaviours Potentially in All Stakeholders

Resistance does not reside solely in the province of the CRs, but seems to arise from the mutual dependencies that impact on the ability of respective groups to influence the other within the organisational change process and context. Our findings suggest that considerations of power are essential to developing better theories about resistance, and in this regard, we support the view of Agocs (1997: 919), who argues that in the main, there has been a failure to ground research on resistance in a "systematic analysis of power relations". IS research papers on power relations tend not to explicitly characterize and explain resistance while IS papers focused on resistance tend to ignore the importance of power relations. However, in this paper we have attempted to indicate the importance of both resistance and power relations. Understanding power from the perspective of mutual dependencies, and acknowledging resistance behaviours evident in CSs, CAs and CRs, underlines the importance of thinking extremely carefully about whose perspective is being 'accepted' as 'truthful', and whose is being marginalized. Currently, many prescriptions of how to better manage resistance to change only allow for the acceptance of the CAs' perspective(s) and marginalization of the CRs perspectives. The spotlight is seldom turned to focus on the behaviours of CAs and CSs, and whether these might also be regarded as resistant. While Rivard and Lapointe (2012) do consider how CAs respond to resistance from CRs, we know of no other work that has suggested that CAs and CSs may indeed initiate the resistance, and there are few studies considering the impacts of CAs' and CSs' on the progress and outcomes of IT implementation projects. The theory presented below in Figure 3 takes into account context, the exercise of power via mutual dependencies, the different perspectives and realities of change, and does not therefore locate resistance solely with CRs. It requires that due credence is given to the perspectives of all concerned parties, and suggests that improvements would stem from improved communications and more mindful interactions amongst the respective groups involved.

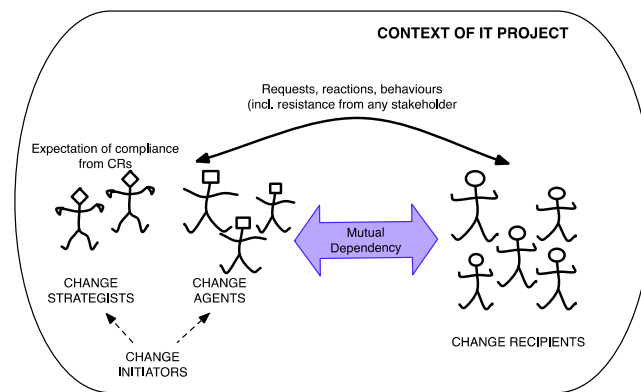


Figure 3: Reconceptualized theory of resistance in IS

DISCUSSION/PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Figure 3 suggests that resistance to change in IT projects can occur in both CSs and CAs, as well as CRs, leading to significant damage, disruption and loss for the organization. Arguably, there are a number of practical implications that stem from this finding, and these will be considered from the perspective of each of these groups.

Firstly, we argue that CSs may need to avoid the temptation of planning change initiatives in too much detail before involving CAs and CRs. Issues such as ‘scope creep’ may have tempted CSs to plan in ever more detail, but this may not be appropriate. If CAs are to be encouraged to listen more carefully and be more responsive to issues raised by CRs, then it seems inevitable that some degree of flexibility is going to be needed in the project plan to allow for on-going development and changes to be made. If the project plan can be developed and agreed to by the CAs and CRs working together in a collaborative and cooperative manner, gaining a genuine shared understanding of the overall strategy, the environment and key factors driving and affecting the process, then subsequent situations where one or the other party is perceived to be resisting change may be reduced. In essence, CSs may need to keep their planning at a high level, allowing CAs and CRs to jointly plan the detail and in this process will hopefully develop the common understanding outlined above.

Secondly, the CAs themselves clearly need to be genuinely receptive to ideas, suggestions and change emanating from the CRs. CAs may need to be aware that each project is also an ‘ultimate particular’ (Stolterman 2008: 59), in that the actors, the culture, the context, the business need and environment all lead to an implemented working system that is unique. By acknowledging this, by listening, by suspending judgments, by being open and taking on ideas and requests originating from the CRs, the CAs would model behaviours that contribute to a preparedness to change, which would support the implementation process (Thomas et al. 2011). This may lead to a more effective plan, and greater cooperation throughout the implementation process. Practically this requires that in the selection of managers to lead projects, flexibility and an openness to accept change themselves should be added to the long list of desirable project manager attributes.

Thirdly, the CRs themselves may not receive any project management education or training other than in the launch of the project in which they are involved. It may therefore be helpful to ensure that project launch programs involve both CAs and CRs and include discussion and clarification about communication channels, processes for raising issues and response expectations, and the overall strategic purpose of the project so that CRs gain an appreciation of the purpose, the scope, the environment and other constraints that the project management team is working within. With CRs understanding the constraints the CAs are working under, coupled with the willingness of CAs to take on board suggestions of the CRs, there may be less of a tendency to see resistance behaviors on either side.

Fourthly, project managers should also be on the lookout for resistance behaviors in their own CA teams, not only because it may result in the rejection of good ideas, but also as it may contribute to CR resistance. One way to monitor the health of the relationship between CAs and CRs might be to monitor records of issues raised in meetings between CAs and CRs, and to create a process to look at how issues are being responded to. More importantly, the health of the relationships amongst CAs and CRs, which is not evident even with rigorous inspection of various project metrics and reports, needs to be noted. This is not dissimilar to suggestions made in the literature (Lawrence 1954) some 50 years ago. A frosty relationship and a poor response record may be indicative of change resistant CAs and growing resistance amongst the CRs.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the traditional notion of resistance as it appears in the extant IS literature. With few exceptions, research to date views resistance as something that only CRs do. Further, given expectations by CSs and CAs that CRs should simply comply with their mandates, the assumed task for CAs is to overcome the resistance of CRs. However the results presented from our case study do not support this, but rather suggest that resistance behaviors can occur in CSs and CAs in addition to CRs, and we thus suggest potentially also on the part of all IT project stakeholders. Given these arguments together with the empirical evidence validating them, the theoretical implication of this paper is that the notion of resistance needs to be rethought and reconceptualised in ways that account for these behaviors. We have argued that in rethinking our conception of resistance, there is a need to recognize the importance of compliance, and hence power in the CS/CA/CR relationship, based around mutual dependencies that exist amongst these actors.

The above points all have considerable implications for formal project management education and training, which we argue needs to recognise CS and CA resistance behaviors, and discuss strategies and processes to enable recognition of this phenomenon. Through better education in communication, and the active involvement of both CAs and CRs in project planning and management, the problem of resistance behaviors from all parties may be helped. On their part, CSs need allow more flexibility, so sound ideas and localized requirements can be accommodated.

Given the above, together with the fact that resistance is such a fundamental concept in IS research, there is a clear need for further research that examines the implications of the broader, reconceptualized notion of resistance outlined in this paper. There is also a need to look more explicitly into processes of resistance especially from CAs/CSs and to examine the extent to which these contribute to project failure. It is hoped that such research directions will lead to a broader, more comprehensive and useful view of resistance, which leads in turn to more successful IT projects.

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