Using System Justification Motives

to Understand Stakeholder Resistance in ES Project Implementation

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Abstract

The research reported in this paper uses system justification theory (SJT) as a lens to understand stakeholder resistance to ES implementation. A case study involving a problematic enterprise systems implementation is presented and illustrates the efficacy of SJT in this respect. The findings of the research show that SJT explains a number of features of stakeholder resistance including the tendency of stakeholders to vigorously defend established systems on which people feel that they depend and from which they draw feelings of stability and predictability, the tendency of system defenders to attack not just the features of the new system but the advocates of the new system as well, the tendency of stakeholders to switch allegiances when the new system is seen to be inevitable, and the emotional and non-rational nature of some resistance behaviours. The paper concludes with some practical implications of SJT for the management of ES implementations.

Enterprise systems implementation, user resistance, action research, system justification theory

Introduction

The Information Systems (IS) literature, including the Enterprise Systems (ES) literature contains many accounts of implementation failure, and many prescriptions to remedy such situations. Stakeholder resistance (or user resistance as it is often referred to) is argued to be a significant contributing factor to perceptions of failed implementations (Joshi 2001, Lapointe and Rivard 2005, Kwahk and Lee 2008). Given that stakeholder resistance has a significant impact on the ultimate success or failure of ES implementations, its study thus becomes important.

Lapointe and Rivard (2005) noted a considerable literature on user resistance in the IS literature, but interestingly, most of that literature treated the concept as a 'black box' (p462), with only four papers proposing theoretical explanations for this important concept. Lapointe and Rivard (2005) noted that of these four theoretical perspectives, Markus (1983) used a political perspective of interaction theory to explain user resistance in terms of whether or not they perceive a new system as increasing or decreasing their power base: a decrease in power results in resistance. Joshi (1991) employed equity theory, suggesting that resistance stems from perceptions on inequity. Marakas and Hornik (1996) proposed resistance from passive aggressive responses to new systems, while Martinko et al (1996) drew on attribution theory to explain resistance. In their own reported research, Lapointe and Rivard (2005) adopt a multi-level longitudinal approach, studying both individual and group behaviours, in an attempt to explain resistance to IT implementations. They present a process model that explains how resistance arises and progresses through time. The model focuses on the interplay between system features and individual and/or organisational conditions, suggesting that users react to this interplay with resistance behaviours if they think that the consequences look threatening or negative. A more recent publication is that of Kim and Kankanhalli

(2009) who used status quo bias theory as the basis for suggesting that in general, people prefer to maintain their current situation (the status quo) and hence resist new IS as they are seen as causing change to that situation.

The position adopted in this paper is that all of these theoretical perspectives aid our understanding of user resistance, a construct which is widely acknowledged as critical to the successful implementation of ES (Markus 2004). We agree with Martinko et al. (1996) in the assertion that there is no single, unifying theory of user resistance, but unlike Martinko et al (1996), we do not aim to articulate the grand theory of user resistance. Rather, in this paper, we will use system justification theory (SJT) as a way of explaining the resistance that was evident in an ES implementation over a number of years, and argue that it provides vital insights into what at times appeared to be quite irrational behaviours on the part of a number of key stakeholders. In doing so, we support the stance of Ortiz de Guinea and Markus (2009:433) who argue that *"planned behaviour and reasoned action may not provide the best theoretical foundation"* for studying IT use: we would assert that neither are they always appropriate for explaining and understanding user resistance to the implementation of new systems. SJT is a theory of motivation, but is ***not*** based on rational choice theory, and argues that cognitive and motivational processes may be outside the conscious awareness and control of individuals, and hence directly influence and impact behaviours without conscious evaluation of options, decisions, or intentions mediating behaviours (Blasi and Jost 2006). An argument will be developed to the effect that SJT not only provides a helpful way of understanding why stakeholders resist change, but also offers important practical and theoretical implications on how we can better manage projects to minimise such resistance. Note also that we slightly broaden the concept of resistance from user resistance to stakeholder resistance. Our motivation for doing so was simple: in this longitudinal action research study reported in this paper, in addition to resistance from direct users of the new

system, resistance was evident from a range of stakeholders who would not normally be regarded as users. We adopt the term stakeholder resistance to emphasise this fact.

In this paper we will outline SJT and suggest why it may be a useful lens to adopt to explain resistance. After outlining our research method, we will then present the case, and conclude with our findings, and implications that can be drawn from this research.

System Justification Theory

SJT posits that individuals and groups are motivated to view their social systems as just, legitimate and desirable (even if they are disadvantaged by these systems), and hence will in certain circumstances, become motivated to strongly support and defend the status quo[1] and resist changes to those systems (Kay and Zanna 2009, van den Bos 2009). SJT argues that *"people seek to maintain or enhance the legitimacy and stability of existing forms of social arrangements...even at the expense of their immediate personal or collective interests or esteem"* (Jost and Hunyady (2002:113). The theory concerns itself with the attitudes and beliefs about social structures, and the motivation people typically display to protect the status quo and hence defend the system (Thorisdottir et al. 2009). A perceived threat to a particular social system is likely to trigger justification of that system, arguably as people tend to be aversive to uncertainty and are thus motivated to restore certainty through a robust defence of the status quo (van den Bos 2009). Such a defence will occur even to the detriment of the individual and does sometimes produce irrational outcomes (Blasi and Jost 2006). Further, there is evidence to suggest that these behaviours may be *'activated outside an individual's awareness'* (Blasi and Jost 2006) or intent (Eidelman and Crandall 2009), and thus people may not be explicitly aware of the extent to which or even the reasons why they are resisting change and attempting to defend the status quo. From a psychological point of

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[1] We define status quo as an 'existing state of affairs' (Eidelman and Crandall (2009:85). The status quo has a history, and is seen to have been in place for some period of time. There is a shared collaborative nature to the social order we regard as the status quo (Jost 2001). We have tried to avoid components of definitions which assume the status quo is a barrier to change or innovation.

view, system justification (SJ) behaviours offer the advantage of requiring *"less effort, intention, control and/or awareness…endorsement of alternatives may require more effort, control, awareness or intention than does supporting the status quo"* (Eidelman and Crandall 2009:85). As these behaviours may occur nonconsciously, and require less effort and incur less risk than endorsing change to the status quo, resistance to change offers a psychological advantage to individuals and groups, and may occur even to the detriment of the individual or group. These SJ motives are, however, context dependent, and certain contextual features will either strengthen or weaken the extent of the SJ response. Three contextual or situational conditions are seen as increasing the system justification motive and are discussed below.

Perception of a Threat to the Existing System

Threatening the existing system such as suggesting a change or attempting to implement a change will increase the tendency to engage in SJ behaviours, whereas affirmation of the existing system should decrease SJ behaviours. So long as these threats fall short of actually changing the system, SJ behaviours may be evident (Jost and Hunyady 2005). Thus, announcing an intention to implement a new technical system (such as an ES) into a work group, business unit or organisation, for example, would be regarded as a threat to the existing system, and SJT would suggest that resistance will occur.

Perception of Inevitability of the System

People operate in social systems and agree to operate by the rules and norms of those systems. Thus their life becomes dependent on these rules and norms, and hence consistently ***not*** thinking ill of the system has its benefits. Just as people will resist change, they are also remarkably good at changing allegiance i.e. SJ behaviours will cease or decline when it is absolutely ***inevitable*** that a new system will be imposed. Indeed this process of rationalising the new system and swapping allegiance has been shown to commence almost immediately it

is recognised that a new system is inevitable (Kay et al. 2002). Thus SJT posits that the resistance response will be evident while doubt exists in people's minds as to whether or not the proposed change will occur. When they believe it is inevitable that change will occur, resistance is expected to decline as people 'get on board' the new social order. In IS terms, this may suggest that change will be resisted if there is doubt in people's mind as to its inevitability: when all doubt is gone (i.e. it is inevitable that the new system will become the new status quo), people will change their allegiance to the new system and a new status quo is established.

Perceptions of System Dependence and/or Control

People derive a sense of order from the social systems (families, groups, organisations and the like) they belong to, and become somewhat dependent on that social system for their welfare. The more that people depend on a social system for their welfare, and the more they operate within its norms and rules, the more they will be motivated to defend it against threat or change. In the context of ES, we would argue that people become dependent on organisations and work groups to provide both the finances required to live in modern society and also a sense of achievement and belonging. Introducing a new ES will undoubtedly change business processes, tasks and activities, information flows and access, and the like, and may involve redundancies and redeployments. Hence individuals and groups may feel relatively powerless to defend a sociotechnical system on which they are dependent, triggering SJ behaviours.

Some Consequences of System Justifying Responses

If people are motivated to defend the existing status quo for any of the reasons above, then they may criticise and make derogatory remarks/hold derogatory views of anyone who is perceived to criticise or challenge their existing system. Interestingly, 'rags to riches' stories

(i.e. the new system will be much better than the one you have now) lead to decreased support for change if they are perceived to imply criticism or threat to the existing system (Kay and Zanna 2009).

Stereotypes and beliefs about the system help people understand, predict and rationalise the current systemic arrangements. When people start to defend their system, they often attempt to find other targets to blame and may also result in the use of stereotypes, assigning traits, characteristics, competencies to individuals or groups, and thus justify their own defence of the system (Blasi and Jost 2006).

Almstrom (2006) notes that people no longer live in small isolated groups, but rather develop their self-identity through membership of and achieving status in a number of social groupings, institutions and hierarchies. People operate within multiple, often overlapping social groupings, and the importance attached to each of these groupings varies over time (Blasi and Jost 2006). An individual's worldview arises through experiences resulting in the evolution of self-identity and social identity over time (Almstrom 2006). Thus, protecting the status quo is partly motivated by protecting a sense of self within a particular group.

Research Methodology and Design

The empirical research reported in this paper concerns stakeholder resistance to an enterprise system (ES) implementation in an Asia Pacific business (Company Y) that had been taken over by a global manufacturing company (Corp eX). Shortly after the takeover, Corp eX decided to implement their corporate ES in the newly acquired Company Y. The history of this implementation to date exhibits intense stakeholder resistance. Thus, given their interest in SJT, the case was of considerable interest to the authors.

An opportunity arose for one of the authors to undertake an action research study while acting as an academic consultant to Corp eX. He was approached by representatives of Corp

eX for help and advice when the project was judged by some stakeholders to be severely troubled and problematic and, being interested in ES implementation, took the opportunity to carry out action research into stakeholder resistance.

Data was collected via relatively unstructured digitally recorded interviews, in which the participants were invited to 'tell their version of events' and to freely express their perceptions with regard to the ES implementation project. Such an approach provides a reliable and valid method for extracting the interviewees' perceptions of reality (Elliot 2005, Czarniawska 1997). The researchers then posed specific questions in an attempt to identify views on issues of particular importance to this research. The interviews were later transcribed, providing approximately 75 pages of data for analysis.

Details of the main participants are outlined in Table 1 below. In addition to the many informal meetings and more formal unsemi-structured interviews conducted with these four participants, many other informal meetings and email exchanges with other involved parties informed us on the course of this ES implementation. It should also be noted that some key participants declined the opportunity to participate in this study.

Table 1: Major Participants in the Study (P denotes Participant)

	Role in Company	*Contact with Researchers*
P1	IT Manager in another company acquired by Corp eX, was invited to attend the Company Y ES implementation review before he was actually appointed into the role of IT Manager Corp eX Australia.	Many informal meetings 2007-9. Formal interviews conducted May, October and November 2009.

P2	Project Manager appointed by Corp eX. Contributed to a number of the ES implementations in Asia.	Many informal meetings 2007-8. Formal interview conducted April 2009.
P3	IT Manager in Company Y. P3 had been with Company Y for more than 25 years.	Formal Interview conducted April 2009.
P4	External consultant, previously the Corp eX Project Manager and now one of the researchers.	Formal Interview conducted by co-researchers May and October, 2009.

The formal interviews have been written up as narratives, and have been verified by each of the participants individually as being an accurate 'version' of their story of the events. The narratives were analysed by all authors independently for themes and comments of interest, and then cross checked to ensure that similar interpretations and understandings had occurred.

The Case

Corp eX is a large (US$16 billion annual sales in 2008), US-based specialist chemical manufacturer and distributor. A series of acquisitions in the late 1990s and early 2000s turned Corp Ex into a global business. Business process efficiency and management and performance reporting was provided by a single instance global ES.

The acquisition of Company Y in mid-2006 created the need for the Australian arm of Corp eX to integrate the local Company Y business into the Corp eX international manufacturing and supply chain. This was to be achieved by bringing them into the existing single instance of the ES. A small team from Corp eX planned and drove the project, relying to a considerable extent on local managerial and IT staff to manage the details of the

implementation. However, before long significant difficulties arose. The project team seemed unable to engage the local staff. Progress was slow. Staff at Company Y voiced doubts about the new system, its functionality, and about the project team. Eventually, with little mutual cooperation, the Corp eX project team, aided by the relevant local Company Y staff went live with the new system in early 2007. It quickly became apparent there were many unresolved issues. Problems rapidly compounded and the new ES was blamed for rapidly rising costs and falling productivity in Company Y.

Three months later, the General Manager of Company Y spoke with the Asia Pacific Vice President of Corp eX, who then sought the support of the CIO in the US Head Office to remove the system and return to the legacy system. Unwilling to set such a precedent, and run the risk of arming the management teams of other newly acquired businesses also embarking on implementations, the CIO commissioned a review of the newly implemented system in Company Y. A senior IT Manager from within Corp eX, and one of the researchers (having experience in ES Implementation) were asked to form a "Review Team" to investigate the situation.

It was agreed that the Review Team would meet with members of each department and learn about their use of the system and the difficulties they were facing. Their intense animosity to the new system was quickly evident in the vehemence with which they told their stories of slow and cumbersome data entry, data subsequently lost and missing functionality. But when questioned about specific examples of their many complaints Company Y staff found it embarrassingly hard to produce specific evidence.

For the Review Team the options seemed to either simply abandon the implementation altogether; to invest in a revitalisation of the current project or to pull out the new system, and allow a temporary return to the legacy system whilst a new implementation strategy was

developed and implemented at some future time. Cognizant of setting a precedent the CIO supported the latter plan and in September 2007 the new ES was withdrawn..

Company Y personnel quickly returned to their legacy system, Plans for such an outcome had apparently been well prepared and waiting. P1 now developed a multi-faceted strategy to strongly align the IT resources across the local Corp eX businesses and focus them on directly supporting business activities. He set out to form a single composite IT support team for the region, and included in this IT staff from the newly acquired Company Y. As part of this P1 developed a simple business focused IS/IT strategy and communicated it at every opportunity within his team and within each business area. He focused particularly on 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 company achieve their objectives. 1 July 2009 had been agreed as the new (2nd) "Go Live" date. By the end of May P1 was confident the move to the new system would proceed as planned. He had carefully kept all key stakeholders, including the GM of Company Y, closely involved and without exception the feedback about going live with the new system was now supportive.

It was therefore a complete shock to P1 when just two weeks before the 2nd planned go Live, 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. The GM of Company Y repeated his old complaints about the system from 10 months before and seemed not to acknowledge the many changes that had been made. Once again he was successful in temporarily delaying the "Go Live" date.

A new "Go Live" date was set for 1 October 2009. If anything many local staff seemed disappointed by the final delays and all were prepared for go live day. And indeed on 1

October Company Y again went live on the Corp eX's ES, nearly three years after the initial failed attempt.

Reflections

Transcripts of interviews and written narratives were examined using system justification theory (SJT) and some interesting perspectives emerge.

The majority of people employed at Company Y, especially those involved in some way with the ERP implementation project were older people, fairly conservative, and many were long serving members of staff, well entrenched in the history and culture of Company Y. They had been using the existing legacy system (a bespoke system) for about 25 years.

One of the creators of the original software still worked for Company Y and supported the legacy system on a daily basis. Thus, we would argue that many of the dispositional and situational factors that would tend to result in heightened SJ behaviours were evident in this case. The conservatism and independence of the organisational members, a long-established status quo (in terms of the IS) and in fact previous success in warding off an IS implementation following an early take over, would suggest an increased likelihood of observing SJ responses.

P4 observed that staff at Company Y *"seemed elated"* by the decision to pull back the new system, saying that he *"sensed a 'Round 1 to us' mood amongst Company Y"*.

Denigration of the new system was constant, unabated and vehement. P2 reported being greeted with statements like "*we hear your ERP system is no good…we don't want to change to that*". P4 noted that "*a succession of disgruntled, fearful, and sometimes bemused local employees were asked to explain their interaction with the new system…they weren't backward…local benefits* [from the new ES] *were not understood, or least not valued, while*

the local downsides were strongly to the fore". P1 recalled that "*Strong claims of system inadequacies were made, and their disastrous business consequences. But when asked for data to support their claims, little could be found... ...despite their failure to actually demonstrate inadequacies, the vehemence of their rejection of the system was maintained. "Why can't we just go back to the system we've always used?' they kept asking. Your corporate ERP system will never work for this business*". Thus we see evidence of strong SJ responses to the perceived threat of the implementation of the new system.

P4 commented that "*...the Corp eX team had been unable to win the support and commitment of the Company Y team, and it seemed as if the Company Y team were determined not to be won over*". P2 remarked that "*we somehow seemed unable to fully engage the local team...there were some problems...not really technical, more a case of a lack of mutual cooperation.*" P1 described the local team as "*fierce defenders of the insular. legacy system*". We argue that SJT provides a clear explanation for these behaviours: that groups will, in response to a perceived threat to their system, resist, even when this is to their own detriment.

The threatened response is also evident in the use of stereotypes, which helped staff at Company Y to justify existing arrangements. For example, note the somewhat denigrating way P3 described some members of the project team: "*A small team at their local regional office seemed to have been given the task of making it happen but they seemed quite junior. Quite competent in their IT roles, but they weren't quite the right types, or at quite the right level to be running the project* and went on to comment that the functionality of the new system was inferior to that of the old: "*everything seemed to take much longer than on the legacy system and to be hard to understand*". He concluded that "*people in our business were concerned and suspicious about the whole implementation. There was even one rumour*

doing the rounds that we had been set up to fail". SJT predicts the use of such stereotypes to justify SJ responses to change.

The inevitability of the change to the status quo is also argued to be an important indicator of the strength of SJ responses. There are many indications in this case that Company Y staff did not view the new ERP system as 'inevitable', perhaps evidenced by their avoidance of becoming engaged in the project, and fuelled by their perceived success in having the first implementation withdrawn.

SJ theory predicts user resistance behaviours will decline rapidly when it becomes inevitable that change will happen, and in fact allegiances will change to the new system. In this case P1 made the inevitability of the change very clear after the second cancellation saying that *"we agreed that were still pushing ahead with go live, and it was made very clear to P3 that although he's pushed back another go live, it's not negotiable and we will be going live by the end of the year... even the Company Y team is recognising the great effort and support that their Corp eX colleagues are providing had I've had a number of notes of thank come through today"*. The allegiance of the last resistors in Company Y also shifted very quickly to the new ES, as SJT would predict. When asked about P3, P1 noted that *"he was very positive. He was thankful for all the effort ...he's confident this is going to work. So quite a different attitude...I think that's because he knows that he's probably p'd off a few VPs...and he's got too much to lose now"*.

Findings

The reflections on the case study demonstrate some of the strengths of SJT in helping build an understanding of the concept of stakeholder resistance. This case study is an initial study only, as it were a 'proof of concept', and we acknowledge that other rigorous research initiatives will be needed to further confirm and validate the findings presented in this paper.

We doubt that a single, overarching, grand theory of user/stakeholder resistance will emerge any time soon, given the great complexity of modern organisational contexts, and the increasing complexity and innovativeness of modern IS projects, including ES implementations (Maylor et al. 2008). SJT provided a useful and insightful explanation of many of the at times irrational behaviours evident in this case study. However we would assert that any strategies adopted by project managers/change managers in attempting to implement ES need to take into account the likelihood of system justification behaviours, as failure to do so may result in ineffective or dysfunctional systems implementation and use (Blasi and Jost 2006).

Theoretical Implications

Currently, many of the methods, tools and techniques surrounding and supporting project management practice are based on accepted rather than best practice, are highly prescriptive while usually overlooking context. Further, such methods, tools and techniques tend to be atheoretical (Maylor 2001), are overwhelmingly rationalistic, normative and idealistic, and are Tayloristic in prescribing 'one best way' (Maylor et al. 2008). SJT has provided insights into why some project management prescriptions do not always result in desired outcomes, and we would argue that SJT provides justification for a fundamental rethink of the rationalistic, theoretical underpinnings of project management and change management practice, most particularly in the area of managing user or stakeholder resistance to change. While project managers can do little about an individual's dispositional characteristics that may make him/her more likely to resist change, they can for example, select project team members carefully to include those more likely to demonstrate reduced SJ responses to change. In addition, SJT would suggest that a project manager should be able to influence situational factors which will lead to heightened or reduced resistance to change (Jost and Hunyady, 2002, 2005, Blasi and Jost 2006). SJT provides more explicit understanding into

stakeholder resistance, and thus could help more specific advice being offered to project managers and those involved in making change to sociotechnical systems. Thus we proffer the following model as one which might form the basis of further theoretical development in the area of stakeholder resistance.
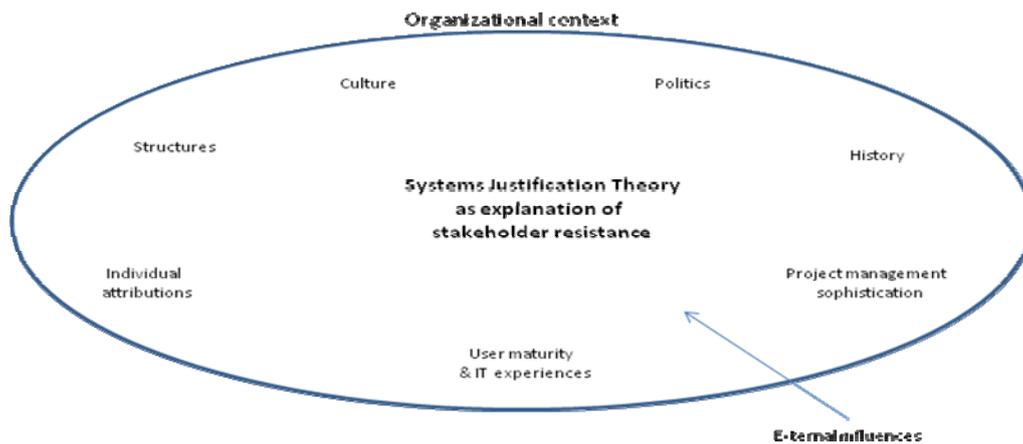

Figure 1: A Theoretical Model of the Construct of Stakeholder Resistance

Practical Implications

We argue that there are many practical implications from our research, more, in fact, than can be dealt with in this paper. We will focus on some of the more salient implications from this research.

Firstly, it is vital that project managers make the ES implementation absolutely definite and certain. It must be seen as inevitable by all stakeholders. Stakeholders must understand there are no other options. Making the change absolutely inevitable no matter what 'reasons' are raised to delay an implementation will help to reduce the SJ responses to change.

Secondly, SJT suggests that project managers need to consider which 'system' or group of the many social groups to which people belong is salient in people's minds (Almstrom 2006).

Kay and Zanna (2009) argue that the extent to which one operates within the norms and rules of a particular group, the more motivated one is to defend that system and not to change. In this study we focussed on the behaviours of one group primarily, the Company Y team, and while members saw their allegiance was firstly to Company Y, well ahead of allegiance to Corp eX or to the project group, their resistance to the ES implementation initially was very high and ongoing. To overcome this, project managers need to ensure a sense of desirability in belonging to the project/change team, and hence get allegiances to switch to the new system (van den Bos 2009). Figure 2 offer a simple illustration of this point.
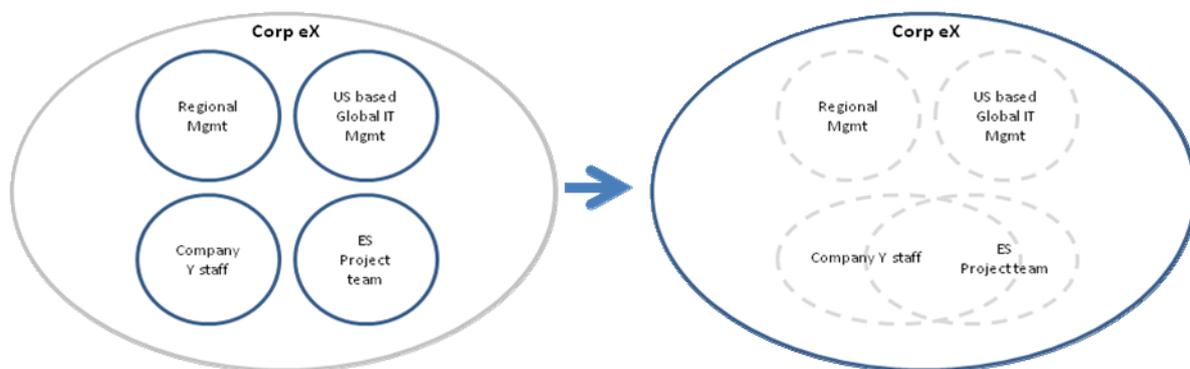

Figure 2: Changing Allegiances to Reduce SJ Responses

A third strategy which could be employed is to offer motivational incentives to those who come on board and 'join' the project team (Jost and Hunyady 2002) as this will get them to switch allegiance more quickly and the status quo will then be regarded as the new system (Kay and Zanna 2009). Making the project team highly visible, somewhat privileged and a 'cool' group to be with may well help people shift their allegiances to the new system and hence reduce resistance. Eidelman and Crandall (2009) argue that it is important to acknowledge the huge effort in making changes such as implementing and adapting to a new ES, and that action in this regard should be rewarded.

A fourth strategy is to adopt what is called counterfactual reasoning which "*is a cognitive process in which one stimulates alternatives to past or present factual events or circumstances...the ability to endorse a non-status quo position requires that one invests some time in counterfactual thinking – people are unlikely to endorse a novel process, procedure or politics without imagining what some of the outcomes would be*" (Eidelman and Crandall 2009:91). Thus working closely with users, helping them to imagine what their world will be like using the new system and showing they can achieve similar outcomes using the new ES is a way in which project managers can use counterfactual reasoning to reduce SJ responses. Frequent small exposures of positive images of what the future will be like are argued to reduce SJ responses. However, care needs to be taken that this is not attempted by finding fault with the existing legacy system as this will trigger resistance and defence of the status quo.(Blasi and Jost 2006) If the legitimacy of the old system is affirmed, this will decrease the need to justify the status quo (Kay and Zanna 2009).

Conclusion

The research reported in this paper shows that SJT is able to explain a range of stakeholder resistance behaviours in an IT implementation. In particular, the action research study shows that SJT can explain the tendency of stakeholders to defend established information systems, even when such defence appears irrational and against a stakeholders self-interest, the tendency of stakeholders to switch allegiances when the new system becomes an inevitability, and the tendency of stakeholders to attack, not just the new system features, but also the advocates of the new system. Such outcomes follow predictably from the basic tenets of SJT.

While SJT is a useful lens in explaining stakeholder resistance, the authors stop short of claiming that SJT offers a total explanation of this phenomenon. They regard other theories, such as equity theory and attribution theory, as useful complimentary lenses.

The authors acknowledge that the reported study is only an initial exploration of the efficacy of SJT in explaining stakeholder resistance behaviours. Further studies are clearly needed to test and evaluate SJT in this context, but the initial findings look promising

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