IT Implementation as Sensemaking

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Some Observations

• IT projects seldom proceed as planned
• Implementation failures are common
• The same IT system can be a “success” in one organization and a “failure” in another
• Systems with serious “design flaws” sometimes perform quite well
Dominant SE/ISD View of IT Implementation

• Implementation is seen as a quite straightforward and rational process

Users play a relatively passive role as “recipients” of the new system

The IT system is well-defined and stable
Users are *active* participants in the implementation process

New technological artifacts are *equivocal*
Key Questions

• How do users make sense of IT?
• How does their sensemaking affect the outcomes of the implementation?
An object’s meaning resides not in the object itself, but in the behavior directed toward it.
Technology
Affordances

• The possibilities for action that the technology offers
• Affordances may differ from user to user and from context to context
• The full range of affordances are not available for immediate perception
• Affordances frame, but do not determine, action
tirsdag den 2. marts 2010
tirsdag den 2. marts 2010
Symbolic Expressions

• The signs and symbols that are embedded within the technology
• Symbolic expressions may differ from one group of users to another
• Symbolic expressions trigger, but do not determine, interpretation
What is ProjectWeb?

- A graphic version of email
- An alternative to our LAN drives
- An electronic document management system
- Some kind of library or archive
- A common space where we can share information
IT Implementation as Chaos

• IT implementation starts with “chaos”
• The expectation of continuity is breached
• Ongoing organized collective action become disorganized
• This may provoke strong feelings of confusion and anxiety
Chaos Triggers
Sensemaking

• People start asking questions like:
  What’s the story here?
  Now what should I do?
• ... in order to make sense of the situation and normalize the breach
Sensemaking involves turning [ambiguous] circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action.

James Taylor and Elizabeth van Every
It's a bit like what mapmakers do when they try to make sense of an unfamiliar place by capturing it on paper. But the crucial point in cartography is that there is no one best map of a particular terrain. Similarly, sensemaking lends itself to multiple, conflicting interpretations, all of which are plausible.

Karl Weick
Properties of Sensemaking

Sensemaking is:

• Grounded in identity construction ("Who am I?")
• Social ("What do others think?")
Doctor: Before [the EPR], we used 5% of our time on administrative tasks. Now, we use around 50% of our time on that ... so we spend less time on taking care of the patients.

Doctor: To be honest, we do not feel that this task is a doctor’s task [to write in the EPR] – you know, to sit and click and write.

[Blegind Jensen, 2007]
Doctor: I don’t know how it was built, but it does not seem as if any healthcare professionals have had a say in the process. I believe it was the technicians who programmed it – perhaps in cooperation with inspectors, you know officials and politicians. This is my impression because it seems as if control has been prioritized above a more rational way of thinking. That’s my impression.

[Blegind Jensen, 2007]
Giving Low Priority to the EPR implementation

*Doctor:* I get a reasonable pay for what I do. And therefore I believe that I have to accomplish something. During the implementation, I had to participate in meetings instead of doing what is my main task.

*Doctor:* When I am attending all these meetings, I think, oh my God, I could have made a hip replacement instead.

[Blegind Jensen, 2007]
Nurse: The EPR system is a communication medium. (...) It will save us some phone calls and work processes.

Nurse: It [EPR] is something that will mark our future, and it is in our common interest to implement it and use it.

[Blegind Jensen, 2007]
**Vicious Cycle**

- System is irrelevant and difficult to use
- Users discourage each other from using it
- Reluctance to use system
- Negative assessment of system

System is irrelevant and difficult to use leads to users discouraging each other from using it, which in turn leads to reluctance to use the system, resulting in a negative assessment of the system.
Virtuous Cycle

- Positive assessment of system
- Efforts to explore and use system
- Users encourage and help each other
- System becomes more relevant and easier to use
**Implications I**

- Large IT systems are not “plug-in” technologies
- Sensemaking processes are not random, but neither are they completely predictable
- Implementation is a messy, negotiated and often contested process
Implications II

- Top-down control of IT implementation is largely an illusion
- More planning and control will not fix the problem
- Rather, the solution lies in more iterative, explorative approaches