

## THE EMOTIONALITY OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IMPLEMENTATION

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### ABSTRACT

*While there is extensive research on emotion in the workplace and on information and communication technology (ICT) implementation, largely ignored is the emotionality of ICT implementation and change management more generally, even though the emotional experience of such processes is critical to their success. The current paper integrates insights from research on emotion at work and the social construction of technology to demonstrate the role of emotion in ICT-based organizational changes of a not-for-profit organisation's implementation of a Web based case management system. In particular, it is argued that emotions and new ICT systems are experienced as ambiguous phenomena, which makes people susceptible to influence through interaction. Furthermore, such interaction to negotiate meanings for the emotional experience of ICT implementation is critical to its success. Adopting new information and communication technologies (ICTs) is in part a result of instrumental goals—for example, managers wanting to perform organizational activities more quickly or efficiently. However, such adoption is influenced by identity and relational goals, as well for example, a desire to be seen as cutting edge or technologically literate. This paper uses a constructive-dramaturgical approach to examine the emotionality of new technology adoption. Several strands of research and theory highlight subjective, or non-rational, elements of organisational changes such as ICT implementation. These strands include research on the social construction of technology, the politics of implementation, and emotional labour.*

**KEYWORDS:** *change management, emotion, emotional labour.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Many organizations today are using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to engage in e-commerce, e-business, or more broadly, e-organizing. While there is substantial debate regarding the benefits and costs of such initiatives, organizations are continually looking to ICTs as a means to increase efficiency and effectiveness. The adoption and implementation process may also be highly charged with emotions, running from excitement and enthusiasm at the positive end of the spectrum, to fear and frustration at the negative end. In fact, the emotionality of the implementation process cannot be separated from the instrumental and political dimensions. Both managers and researchers have acknowledged the importance of emotion in organisational life. The emphasis on customer service excellence in contemporary organisations, Such research suggests that ICT implementation is, among other things, a political process fraught with tension and power struggles. The emotionality of ICT implementation is implied in such work but not directly addressed. Thus, both research on emotion at work and research on ICT implementation suggest the need for research that explores the emotionality of ICT implementation. The purpose of this paper is to understand more fully how emotion is used and can be used in organisational communication specifically how and why employees express emotion in dealing with ICT implementation and how change agents use emotion to achieve their goals. My goals for this paper are to demonstrate some of the ways that emotion is implicated in the change-related communication processes that are inevitably a part of the process of adopting and implementing new ICTs. The adoption and Emotion & ICT Implementation, implementation of a particular technology will have significant meanings for organizational actors that may prompt or result from political actions and emotional responses. Technical, economic, and organizational outcomes are inevitably intertwined in symbolic outcomes, since such outcomes are rarely “given facts” but are framed and interpreted, subject to “spin” and other promotional discourse.

## 2. RESEARCH ON EMOTION AND ICTS

Previous research on emotional expression in the workplace tends to be of three types. The first type is research primarily from a marketing perspective that focuses on the instrumental uses of emotion in sales and service work. From this perspective, emotional expression can be manipulated and cultivated to achieve organisational and individual goals such as increased sales, customer satisfaction and larger tips. The second is research that focuses on ‘emotional labour’ primarily in service-oriented interactions with customers and clients. This work tends to be primarily critical of emotion work in service-oriented interactions, suggesting it may harm those engaged in emotional labour as well as the social fabric of society more generally. The third type is work that focuses on the role of emotion in organisational culture management that is emotion as an instrumental tool for nurturing employee motivation/identification.

From this perspective, emotional experiences and emotional expression are cultivated through organisational rites, rituals and language as a means of unobtrusive control. Prior research has not addressed the role of emotion in organisational change in general or ICT implementation specifically. Based on prior research, however, what could be surmised about emotional expression in the process of ICT implementation? First, studies on emotion at work suggest that organisational members express emotions to achieve a number of personal and organisational goals, many of which are prominent in organizational change processes. For example, emotional expression functions to sustain or challenge power relations, such as when managers praise or embarrass staff or when staff members angrily confront managers.

Organisational change is a process in which power relations become explicit in that change programmes typically are driven by management (or some particular organisational faction), and are often successful to the extent that change agents have the power to implement them. Emotional expression may also function to define and influence the ‘moral order,’ that is, the accepted norms for acceptable behaviour. This may be seen in change initiatives when employees express agreement with welcome changes or outrage at unwelcome changes. Here emotional expression may reflect, confirm or challenge organisational norms or rules. Emotional expression may also serve a ‘signal function’ in that they may convey dissent or dysfunction. The signals are critical for managers to monitor and interpret as change develops. Similarly, emotional expression functions to signal personal engagement and disengagement in tasks, for example when members express their enthusiasm or disgust for a particular task. Prior research is also informative regarding how emotional expression serves such functions. That is, research suggests that national and organisational cultures have rules governing emotional displays that enable and constrain expression. These rules serve as resources for organisational members, both managers and staff, to use in achieving their goals. Whereas specific rules may develop within individual organisational cultures, national or regional cultures are also likely to share rules for emotional expression. Kramer and Hess, for example, found the following generic rules apply in a large range of organisations— express emotions professionally

- express emotions to improve situations
- express emotions to help individuals
- avoid expressing emotion that may be seen as abuse.

Understanding and using these rules is important to individual success in organisations, as well as to team and organisational functioning. Research on the politics of ICT implementation does not directly address emotion, yet such work makes abundantly clear the intense emotionality experienced in this process. For example, ICTs have been framed as a battleground for dueling factions. Such work implies that emotions are responses evoked in the heat of battle, the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat and the frustration of powerlessness. Furthermore, when one considers the task of adopting and implementing ICTs, the emotional labour of managers and change agents is obvious. Introducing ICTs is by its very nature disruptive and threatening.

Research shows that ICT spending often displaces workers and it is threatening because workers do find they may not have the skills needed to cope. Emotion may also buffer the stresses and frustrations of change. Theory on both ICT implementation and emotion at work points to the socially constructed nature of these phenomena. That is, neither emotions nor ICTs are objective phenomena with given meanings. Rather, the introduction of ICTs, as well as emotions, are typically experienced

as ambiguous phenomena to be interpreted, defined and evaluatively labelled. This ambiguity makes communication central to the construction of emotion and ICTs. That is, through interacting with others individuals develop expectations, labels and beliefs and negotiate them through continued interaction. Thus, it is clear that research on emotion in ICT implementation can be mutually informative. The study draws on both to explore the case of ICT implementation.

### **3. METHOD**

Consistent with the theoretical framework articulated above, I use critical discourse analysis as a method for exploring a specific case of ICT adoption and implementation. I focus on all two of the three levels of discourse (macro and micro), in part because of space limitations, but more so because these two levels provide are most informative in this particular case.

The research uses the method of event ethnography in that it develops an understanding of a non-routine event. Similarly, the study may be seen as focusing on a series of critical incidents within a larger study of change in this organisation. The goal of an event ethnography is to provide an ‘insider’ view and unique insights into a particular historical event. Through a focus on meanings and identities as revealed by participants the researcher attempts to see the events through the eyes of those within the context, experiencing the event in real time. The organisation studied is called here Community Services (CS) — the name of the organisation, its members and the ICT programme itself have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants. CS adopted, designed and implemented a new nationwide, Web-based database system beginning in late 2000 and continuing through to the present. The author was given permission to study the adoption and implementation process throughout CS.

### **4. ANALYSIS**

Community Services Information System, (CSIS), had been completed and a test version was online for users to try out. Various delays meant that it would not be implemented until about five months after the start of research.

My analysis will focus on highlighting the key theoretical dimensions articulated above. Specifically, I will explore the political and emotional dimensions of discourse surrounding CSIS’s adoption and implementation, focusing on the macro and micro levels of discourse. The Context of CSIS’s Adoption and Implementation: Macro-level Discourses A number of broad, societal level discourses created the context of CSIS’s adoption and implementation. Two that are particularly important to note are the closely associated discourses of marketization and managerialism, and the management fashions of knowledge management and e-business.

Marketization and managerialism. Numerous authors have pointed out the trends toward managerialism and marketization globally. Marketization is the importation of market discourse--and thus business-oriented thinking, logic, and terminology--to domains of life that were previously considered to be separate. Closely related is the Politics & Emotions, notion of managerialism, which Deetz defines as “a kind of systemic logic, a set of routine practices, and an ideology” Ingersoll and Adams distilled this ideology into three core assumptions:

(1) Eventually all work processes can and should be rationalized, that is, broken into their constituent parts and...controlled; (2) the means for attaining organizational objectives deserves maximum attention, with the result that the objectives quickly become subordinated to the means....; and (3) efficiency and predictability are more important than any other consideration.

In essence, marketization is the discursive move to talk about non-businesses as businesses, and managerialism is the complementary move to construct the governance of those organisations from a particular set of values and assumptions. Both are strongly associated with a neo-liberal political and economic philosophy that values minimising government institutions in favour of private providers of services, as well as competition and efficiency in all sectors. Thus, government, health, education, and even religious organisations have adopted such business-oriented tools as strategic plans, “customer” responsiveness, and mission and vision statements. Furthermore, they have adopted guiding values such as efficiency, control, and self-preservation.

## **5. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION**

Analysis of the case will focus on several closely related key issues. First, implementation of the new ICT system, including the emotional experience of the implementation, is inherently ambiguous and negotiable. Secondly, participants in organizational change attempt to influence each other's emotional experience of the change via communication. Thirdly, participants' emotional expression is used instrumentally to achieve their objectives, including relieving tension, connecting with co-workers and managing power relations. Fourthly, change agents engage in emotional labour to enact the change. Fifthly, participants relied on generic and organizationally specific rules of emotional expression as resources and constraints in achieving their objectives. The ambiguity of emotion and ICT implementation.

It is the ambiguity of the new ICT system and of emotional experience that enables negotiation of meaning and attempts to influence. From multiple interactions over an extended period with the three participants in the office, each of them expressed both positive and negative comments about CSIS. Like many participants in organisational change they seemed to be open to the change, while at the same time having some misgivings. Their comments on the many things that went wrong in the initial training session are evidence of this. They were aware of the problems but continued to work around them, for the most part expressing positive emotions in doing so. Thus, they seem to have been open to multiple interpretations and evaluations of the system from the beginnings of the author's interactions with them. Furthermore, the mixed emotions expressed by participants in the two training episodes also suggest that their emotional experience was similarly negotiable. In terms of the success of the change initiative it is critical to acknowledge the ambiguity of experience. If what people are feeling as they try out a new initiative is ambiguous, it suggests their openness to influence by others. For example, they may be influenced to construct the system, its implementation, and their collective emotional experience, as positive, negative or neutral. Influencing others' interpretations of emotions Because of the ambiguity of felt emotions and the CSIS system each individual was open to influence and each tried, consciously or not, to influence the others.

As managers who were responsible for making the system work (and who would eventually be evaluated on its success) they needed. CSIS may have problems, but problems are to be expected and would eventually be worked out.

In attempting to influence each other's interpretations of the emotional experience of the ICT implementation, emotional expression serves other instrumental ends as well. From multiple observations and multiple conversations was apparent that there was a great deal of respect and attachment between them. Similarly, they spoke positively as well. Thus, the positive emotional expressions during the training session also functioned to maintain and enhance their working relationships. Similarly, the use of humour served as comic relief means of managing the frustration and stress of learning a new system — and often, simultaneously, as a means of bonding.

First, they served to resist a change about which she had misgivings, conveying to the managers that she could not be expected to perform well if CSIS was 'rubbish.' Secondly, they served to manage power relations.

Emotional labour is characterised by the performance of emotion both suppression/control as well as expression of emotion as a key component of an organisational role or as a means to achieve organisational goals. While most studies of emotional labour have focused on service jobs in which there are clear prescriptions for how the labour is to be performed, professionals such as doctors, lecturers and change agents also manage their emotional displays in keeping with expectations for the role and with an eye toward achieving organisational goals. Emotional labour is central to the role of change agent. The success of a system such as CSIS depends on people accepting it and developing positive feelings about it. Change agents have the task of influencing users to adopt the new system and develop the emotion-laden beliefs that the system is a good thing that users can and want to make it succeed. Emotion display rules as resources and constraints.

Precisely because there are no prescriptions for their emotional labour, change agents and other staff must draw on culturally and organisationally sanctioned rules for emotional display in order to achieve their goals. Like other social rules, these are not behavioural 'laws' to adhere to, they serve instead as resources and constraints to use to achieve social goals. Knowing that these rules are to a large degree shared, a communicator can expect that following the rules will result in perceptions that

one is a professional, competent communicator and that the situation is ‘normal.’ On the other hand, violations of the rules may suggest either that one is not a professional, competent communicator or that the situation is not normal. If follow the general rules set out above and to use them quite skilfully as resources in their interactions rather than reacting defensively or expressing their own frustration, they maintained calm and The emotionality of ICT implementation.

As competent change agents, they carefully used the rules as resources to manage the emotional climate of the situation and framed CSIS as a system with the sorts of problems to be expected at an early stage but which would ultimately turn out to be a useful tool.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

It is apparent that the various stakeholders in CS understood CSIS and the processes surrounding its adoption and implementation subjectively, through discourse. This discourse was not neutral, but reflected and was used in a political struggle. Specifically, CS was influenced in adopting CSIS by social discourses promoting marketisation and managerialism in the public sector and simultaneously by discourses promoting the management fashions of e-business and knowledge management. These discourses are political in that they advance the interests of some groups—particularly private enterprises standing to gain from market-oriented solutions to social concerns and management fashion setters standing to gain from widespread adoption of new management fashions. Furthermore, these discourses are inherently emotional as they are both expressed in emotional terms (e.g., hype and fear appeals) and simultaneously engender emotional responses (e.g., excitement and Politics & Emotions, enthusiasm, or anxiety and hostility). Thus, emotion is both a tool and a result of politicized discourse.

There are a number of lessons for communication researchers and practitioners from this study. Most importantly, change agents should be sensitive to the discursive, political and emotional dynamics of the introduction of ICT systems.

Emotion is a central part of people’s work experience, a fact that scholars have only recently acknowledged. Rather than consider it tangential to the ‘real work’ of organisations, scholars studying emotional labour and related concepts have shown that an understanding of the dynamics of emotion is key to scholarly and practitioner understanding of organisational life. Emotion plays a key role in ICT implementation because of the ambiguity of emotional experience and organisational change, both are subject to influence. Organisational members, and change agents in particular attempt to influence others’ interpretations by drawing on commonly understood emotion display rules to achieve their goals.

**At last I want to say,  
“welcome with smile  
Accept with confidence  
Implement with efficiency  
Achieve goal with assurance.**

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