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Managing Organizational Change: Challenges to the e-Learning Paradigm in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract: Academic institutions across the Arabian Gulf are turning to advanced web-based technologies to advance their educational missions and goals. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is no exception and is considered a regional leader in terms of technology-based education (Mussallam, 2007). e-learning, in particular, has been making notable advancements in recent years, as it has the combined advantages of both temporal and locational flexibility whilst requiring only minimal, and ever cheaper, hardware and software. This paper examines portal-based education, a technology which offers opportunities for library and information professionals in the educational sector to provide e-services to existing users with a single port-of-call to access a multitude of resources, thus allowing ease of access to library services for students and staff alike in an interactive manner (Murray, 2003). This can enhance the learning experience and enable institutions to maximize utilization of published informational resources in an efficient and cost effective manner. The paper further investigates change management for organizations engaged in transferral from traditional to e-based portal systems. The research examines factors such as resistance to change from late adopters, issues pertaining to the management of change will be identified and recommendations extrapolated from a regional case study will be expounded.

Keywords: Learning, Change Management, E-learning, Library, Middle East, Arabian Gulf, UAE

Introduction

GLOBAL EDUCATIONAL WORKING practices are demonstrating a pedagogical shift in education towards e-learning which has led to the use of web-based portals and enabled students to have ever greater proficiency with information technology. In combination with active learning, this has raised personal employability and corporate competitiveness of graduating students through producing independent learners with skills in critical thinking.

University staff in the UAE must understand the importance of information and of creating and developing an effective and well organized information systems network for the support of research, education, development and communication with the rest of the world. They must be educated to realize the importance of technology and its integration with a host of learning techniques and learning resources available for its facilitation, to empower both instructor and student (Flanagan & Jacobsen, 2003).

Online communication between instructors and students can take place through discussion forums, where students can participate in discussions as well as make comments on issues posted. Furthermore, students and instructors are able to communicate via email and students can submit assignments as well as write quizzes or tests online.

A significant number of instructors have proven to be late adopters and have demonstrated, in particular, resistance to the implementation of portals,

preferring to continue teaching through textbooks and hardcopy materials.

Portals (e-learning) are useful in order to allow the sharing of knowledge and expertise in developing the functional and technical architectures necessary for institutional systems' interoperability. Further, they allow for engagement in national and international research programs aimed at developing the interoperability of these systems and allowing the sharing of developments to these systems where possible. Integrated e-procurement can thus become possible, allowing for shared purchase agreements in relation to commercial systems components. This is often manifested through the development of strategic alliances with other universities or with industry partners to further the interests of Collaborative Online Learning and Information Services (COLIS). In a regional context, this assists in the promotion and development of the UAE's intellectual, institutional and social capacity to be creative and innovative in developing capacity in applied research and development and supporting education and training in science and technology. e-learning has demonstrated many advantages. It provides temporal and locational flexibility for its users since it is a web-based portal. Consequently, the learning environment changes markedly, which can be equated to a pedagogical educational shift with the introduction of flexible learning practices. Consequently the initial investment of time and resources is vast, particularly in terms of training developers and instructors and



in the preparation and integration of materials and services. e-learning also provides a “mixed-mode” education system; a combination of communication and technology, which has thus far been adopted by every state university in the UAE. Though “computers can make aspects of learning more convenient but they don’t eliminate the need for human intervention”, Bose (2003), e-learning does require students to be additionally self-motivated and independent learners.

Independent Learning

In an instructor-centered approach, the instructor imparts the students with information and attempts to elaborate this information to form the basis of knowledge. Consequently, students may not be exposed to methods or techniques for finding information in an independent way or learn the skills such as critical thinking, critical analysis, synthesis and evaluation. In contrast, a student/learner-centered paradigm allows students to become active participants and gain their own knowledge by interacting with the information available, thus “rewiring the brain by sculpting new pigeonholes and adding connections”, (Bose, 2003). The student is thus placed at the center of a teaching/learning process and the instructors are mentors, navigators or guides, assisting students to access, organize, construct and transfer information, ultimately to gain knowledge or solve real problems. Student-centered learning allows students to work in both groups and individually to explore problems and become active learners rather than passive recipients of information (Randeree, 2006). In this approach, students gain expertise not only in terms of content in relation to the study, but also in the learning process - how to learn through discovery, inquiry, and problem solving. With this aim, universities in the UAE have adopted student-centered e-learning portal technology with the vision of it providing a better learning environment whilst driving students towards more independent approaches to learning. Courses designed to enable users to understand the technology are an important component and they must be implemented in order to provide instructors and students with the technological skills required to utilize the portal to its full potential, with frequent skills update sessions.

Furthermore, students gain the ability to conduct research and have access to appropriate and directed research materials. Students participate actively in searching for research materials for their classes and courses are designed with a framework to enhance their research skills.

Change Management

Change management is really challenged by the clash of early and late adopters as well as the process of

implementation of new technology, in terms of funding, hardware, software and training. Ultimately, the behavioral aspect requires innovative methods for encouraging participation (Henry, 1994). Resistance, in an organizational setting, can be defined as “an expression of reservation which normally arises as a response or reaction to change. This expression is normally witnessed by management as any employee action is perceived as attempting to stop, delay, or alter change. Thus resistance is most commonly linked with negative employee attitudes or with counter-productive behaviors,” (Waddell and Sohal, 1998). Resistance to change may result from factors such as innate resistance to change, lack of involvement in the implementation process, lack of administrative and management support, lack of technological skills and the limited interaction between designers of change and users (Henry, 1994). Computer-based technology could be difficult to learn or intimidating to users who are afraid of technology, which would make it difficult for them to grasp the idea of change or training. Resistance can happen when differences of opinion occur between employees and management, or from fear of the unknown or anxiety. Poor leadership style may also be a contributor to resistance. Individuals differ in their ability to adapt to organizational change because of different backgrounds, experience and knowledge. Though some people may have had experience of moving through a similar change management process very easily in the past, others may have experienced difficulty in organizational change (Bovey & Hede, 2001). Managing employee resistance is thus a major issue for management and it is important to understand how the human elements and behaviors influence the success or failure of the change. Resistance is mostly recognized as a complex phenomenon that is caused by variety of factors and most commentators consider resistance as purely a negative trait. Contrarily, recent theories consider resistance as a positive factor to change implementation. It may not necessarily be the enemy of change and it should be considered carefully for it can play a useful role in organizational change management. According to Waddell & Sohal (1998), “management can use the nature of resistance as an indicator of the cause of resistance. It will be most helpful as a symptom if [management] diagnoses the causes for it when it occurs rather than inhibiting it at once”. Naturally, there is a certain level of motivation and energy release required to implement change in organizations. Where energy is lacking, change is often uncreative, poorly implemented, and inadequately developed. It is very important to examine more closely the problems that exist and consider more deeply the changes proposed. Where conflict becomes too great, there must be a focus on the energy that is suggesting this

change and therefore should be treated in a manner to use resistance in a positive manner. Also, alternative methods and outcomes should be utilized to minimize conflicts that may exist.

It has been known that by including employees and involving them in the learning, planning and implementation stages of a change process, it can significantly influence their commitment to change and decrease the level of resistance. By conducting a two way communication, information and consultation, employees become more committed and motivated to implement change, and therefore would help in running the process smoothly. Managers must keep in mind that people resist mostly the uncertainties and the potential outcomes that change can cause. They must look for alternative methods of introducing the change process into their employees and must communicate the process and consult with them regularly. Employees must be given the opportunity to be involved in all aspects of the change process in order to provide their opinion and feedback. Management and employees must work as a team to overcome difficulties and try to resolve them. Managers must empower their staff to be involved and effective and should provide the right environment and the necessary resources for them to take an active and positive role in the planned change (Waddell and Sohal, 1998).

Internal resistance against innovative change reveals conflicts of motives between management and staff. Change can be very good for organizational competitiveness in the long run, particularly in the UAE, where numerous universities have become evident in recent years based on private ownership with profit-based models. Management must reduce such resistance by utilizing motivational tools such as improved employment conditions and guarantees, before innovation in learning can be implemented successfully. Such things can motivate the staff and can reduce the level of resistance (Zwick, 2002), though the discourse pertaining to the effectiveness of instruction under "for profit" educational models remains a source of debate in the UAE in particular. Effort, time and money have to be invested before the change occurs. Apart from HR tools and training, ways in which resistance can be managed include comprehensive documentation in the form of staff manuals, training aids, policy documents, staff appraisal schemes, counseling, stress management, time management, ergonomics, job enrichment, career planning and re-education/education programs. One aspect of telecommunications networks that can be used for the benefit of staff are network discussion groups which can increase professional awareness and even lead to staff exchanges as a result of network contacts. Staff need to be taught how to cope with external pressures and how to keep up with re-

cent developments, and these skills will play an important role in encouraging positive attitudes (Farrow, 1997). A common challenge is that most managers invest a significant amount of time and money into creating the planned change, but little is invested in communicating training and follow-up activities needed to successfully implement the changes. Consequently, staff may find themselves completely ignored by management, leaving them on the edge and very disappointed in the process. Most staff expect to have their views and opinions well respected and treated as constructive feedback. However, some managers treat employees in a manipulative and coercive manner to overcome resistance, resulting in mistrust and resentment, which may lead to difficulties in implementing planned change (Zwick, 2002). According to Bovey & Hede (2001), "*leading an organization through change involves constructively balancing human needs with those of the organization. Because organizations consist ultimately of people, organizational change essentially involves personal change. Change requires the participation of people who must first change themselves for organizational change to succeed*". Often it is an older person who is not used to new technology who sees it as a threat to the status quo. Instead of being the experienced and competent staff member, a person can find himself having to learn alongside young professional, who, very often, are much more rapid in their ability to grasp new ideas or skills. Older, more experienced professionals who have perhaps been in the same field for many years may be less willing to change or regain motivation in any organizational restructuring. The impact of technology on organization structure can be profound. Organizational structure in a new technology environment needs to be more dependent on interpersonal relations, effective and continuous communication, as well as based on trust. Naturally, professional staff who are unfamiliar with such informality and lack of reliance on hierarchies will find it difficult to adjust. The emphasis, in any restructuring needs to be on empowering individuals. This change must involve organic convergence of academic services, libraries, computer centers, multimedia production units, and everything that is related with the change. In order to service the satisfactorily, all parties that are concerned with the change would need to be prepared to learn new skills and training and re-education opportunities for all levels of staff would need to be made available (Farrow, 1997). The management of change needs to be approached in a logical and structured manner. Most importantly, people need to understand why change is occurring. Management need to ensure that staff are aware of developments and are receptive to change. Staff worry about their own competence, particularly when the technology

may be perceived as being too complex to the extent that they feel they would not understand it. Another concern is that insufficient time is allocated for them to learn the requisite applied knowledge. The best way to overcome and manage such fears is through communication, good planning and training. Staff involvement in decision making can help overcome resistance (Farrow, 1997).

Recommendations

According to Eley and Eley (1995), three essential components are needed to manage resistance to change in an educational IT context: funding and leadership at the national level; encouragement and appropriate training at the institutional level; and a realization at the personal level of the enormous potential for IT in university teaching. One of the most important recommendations in this case is that a program of training for academic staff should be provided to improve their IT skills and its uses in an educational context. A further recommendation is serious appreciation for the role of motivation. Instructors are very often more self-motivated than many groups of employees, but they need to know that time and energy have been made available to them in order for them to learn new skills, and that such skills will be recognized and rewarded by management. There must be a rewards system in place as well as appropriate guarantees and instructors need to be empowered and be a part of the decision-making team. By being included in this process, they will have greater commitment and motivation towards the change. Time constraint is also considered to be an important issue to instructors, as they need time for both individual and shared learning. Time is a very important consideration for instructors as learners and for organizational change.

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Finding time to support instructor learning and sharing remains a challenge. There needs to be a radical rethink of time, with a result that includes more flexibility in instructors' schedules and employment contract and allows more instructor-directed time for learning and sharing of ideas (Collinson and Cook, 2001). According to Flanagan and Jacobsen (2003), "Teachers are not expected to utilize tools and processes for which they have no training. There is a range of opportunities to learn new skills, and opportunities to collaborate with other teachers. Effective professional development includes coaching, on-site and in-service, individualized instruction, observation of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) integration in practice, and self-directed learning. School [and university] leaders who are committed to ICT integration support teachers in their individual growth plans and build opportunities for collaboration between colleagues with similar goals."

Conclusion

The UAE is the leading country in the Middle East in terms of adopting e-learning and web-based education. This paper has been an exploratory study into the purposes and advantages of e-learning, as being a vital tool for sharing and providing information. The study has stressed the importance of change management and the management of resistance and has further examined the changing face of educational institutions for higher learning in the UAE through the implementation of a web-based portal. Furthermore, this investigation has outlined the importance and challenges to change management and organizational change from a structural and behavioral perspective in an educational context in the UAE.

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Dr Kasim Randeree is a Lecturer at The British University in Dubai and Visiting Lecturer to The University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. He is the Programme Director for the Master of Science degree in Project Management at The British University in Dubai. Dr Randeree has an academic career spanning the past 15 years, with experience both in the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates. He is dedicated to the development of contemporary Middle Eastern society and has worked in the past at the United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain, The American University in Dubai as well as conducting research across parts of the Arabian Gulf and North Africa. Dr Randeree is Associate Editor to five international journal publications and is a Member of the Association of Project Managers and the Institute for Leadership and Management. His research interests are in leadership, organisational development and theory as well as in project management. His particular interests in Emiratisation, the role of Emirati women, multiculturalism and diversity in the UAE, the advancement of management education in the Middle East and Islamic perspectives on leadership and management, have brought him numerous accolades and supporting publications both internationally and across the region.

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