An Investigation into Resistance Practices at an SME Consultancy

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Abstract

Purpose
Prior research emphasizes that organizational founders have a good deal of influence in organizational development and, where ICTs are involved, a generic strategy is usually deployed by managers in order to deal with any resistance that might occur. Cognisant of this, we investigated the role played by a Managing Director of an SME consultancy in an ICT project associated with organizational development.

Design/methodology/approach
This study is based on an ethnography of a ICT related change management initiative which, theoretically, takes into account though from the social shaping of technology – specifically the idea that technologies in their broadest sense are subject to ongoing work beyond the design stage.

Findings
We argue that Markus’ Interaction Theory of resistance still has relevance today and we extend it by emphasizing the problem of homogenizing users and downplaying their ability to appropriate resistance strategies in situ.

Research limitations/implications
Our study is based upon one group of individual’s experiences. Further case studies of resistance success are required which further highlight how such this is achieved and why.

Practical implications
Those engaged with organisational development projects need to be better educated as to the reasons for resistance, particularly positive ones, and the methods by which this might take place.

Originality/value
This study conceptualises strategies for ‘overcoming’ resistance as managerial technologies. Conceptualising them in this way, shows the deployment of such technologies to be a complicated and active process where the audience for such things are involved in how they are received and appropriated to suite differing agendas.

Keywords: Owner Manager, SME, User Resistance, User Participation.
1 INTRODUCTION

Within management studies, particularly those relating to strategic management and entrepreneurship, it is often argued that the founders of companies are influential in shaping the emergence of organisations and their continuing development via the moulding of cultures and strategies (Darazdi, 1993; Reynolds and Miller, 1992; Carter et. al., 1996; Boeker, 1988). However, this line of thinking has been subjected to critique. Indeed, culture regularly presents itself as a ‘difficult’ concept for all of the social sciences (Williams, 1983: 87). It can be seen as: a response to biological determinism; a delineator between what is viewed as civilised or barbarian; an ideology in terms of a set of beliefs attitudes and opinions; artistic practices and, of course ways of life (Abercrombie et al., 2000). In cognisance of a more sophisticated view of culture then, the picture of organisational founders put forward by many strategy and entrepreneurship researchers is said to be framed by a monolithic view of organisational culture which emphasises organisation-wide consensus, homogeneity and one whereby top management are assumed to be sacrosanct (Martin et. al., 1985). Such studies have also been criticised due to their uncritical acceptance of ‘official’ accounts of organizational history (Alvesson, 1993; Rowlinson and Proctor, 1999). In a small medium sized enterprise (SME) context it has been suggested that owners are integral to technology adoption. Levy and Powell (2002) for instance, suggest that the recognition of the business value of the Internet combined with an owner’s attitude to business growth are key factors in determining Internet adoption strategies. However, Millward and Lewis (2005) suggest otherwise in that they see the dominance of an owner/manager having a detrimental impact upon product development programmes. Thus whilst some argue that company founders have a great deal of influence within SME organisations, others are more sceptical regarding its quantity and quality. In this paper, we explore the influence of the founder, and Managing Director of a SME consultancy during a phase of an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) related organisational development project.

The issue of user resistance is a key consideration in ICT development projects. Indeed, there is a significant body of literature examining the complexities of user resistance in ICT projects dating back several decades (Keen, 1981; Dickson and Simmons, 1970). Many academics give warnings that existing empirical and theoretical research regarding resistance research in ICT contexts suggesting it lacks relevance, rigor and weak theoretical foundations (Marakas and Hornik, 1996; Lyytinen, 1988). Indeed, Jiang et. al. (1997) suggest that the problems are widespread and pervasive as no single feature can describe the phenomenon entirely. As King and Anderson (1995:168) state, resistance is a ‘complex kaleidoscope of interrelated factors’. Over the years, attention has been given to the reasons for resistance and strategies to ‘deal with’ this phenomenon, yet there is still no widespread agreement on how to successfully engage with such practices (Hirschiheim and Newman, 1988). Whilst emphasis has been placed on investigating the link between user acceptance and user resistance (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh et. al., 2003; Delone and McLean, 1992; Wong and Tate, 1994), much of this work ignores (or turns a blind eye) to the heterogeneous, situated nature of users (Lamb and Kling, 2003) and with that the further nuance of system purpose (Jiang et. al., 2000). Additionally there is a lack of attention to the tensions between different users affected by the development and implementation process which if addressed would focus the lens somewhat upon the heterogeneous user (Markus, 1983; Wong and Tate, 1994). This view persists even though user reactions, intentions and behaviour may differ if a system type is mandatory, voluntary, hedonic and depending on their characteristics such as their place within the organisational hierarchy (Marakas and Hornik, 1996; Barki and Huff, 1985; van der Heijden, 2004; Jiang et. al., 2000; Butler and Fitzgerald, 1997). With this in mind, we introduce our study which is concerned with the idea that organisational actors involved in ICT related change are not a homogeneous group, but rather users belonging to distinct groupings, each with their own organisational and personal agendas. In this paper, against a backdrop of user resistance in an ICT development context, we aim to explore this further by drawing upon Markus’ (1983) arguments for an Interaction Theory of resistance and a study of a pilot of a custom developed customer relationship management system at a SME. In doing this we illustrate how a Managing Director’s strategy for overcoming resistance proved ineffective, whilst simultaneously becoming a conduit for successful resistance for various users. Our work emphasises the need to consider diversity in users, their resistance practices and their abilities to appropriate managerial strategies for dealing with resistance.

The first section of the paper briefly considers the nature of user resistance within an ICT context. This exploration was edifying in highlighting some problems and limitations of the generic strategies designed for overcoming resistance. In the following sections we present an interpretation of the findings from an ethnographic investigation of the responses of diverse actors involved in the pilot project that brought about diverse resistance practices. Finally conclusions are drawn which centre on providing insights into why the Managing Director’s generic strategy to avert organisational-wide resistance went wrong and how user resistance could be labelled as a success. In sum, we argue this is because, despite the overall level of influence of the Managing Director, the generic strategy for overcoming resistance deployed, did not account for the
diversity in resistance practices employed including those that involved the appropriation of his strategy to meet particular resister’s objectives.

2 USER RESISTANCE IN AN ICT CONTEXT

In a general context, resistance can be understood as the intentional acts of commission or omission that defy the wishes of others (Ashforth and Mael, 1998; Newman, 1989). In an organisational context, resistance can be seen as the activities or intentions through which those in organisations seek to oppose official and unofficial forms of control (Marakas and Hornik, 1996; Gabriel, 2000; Newman, 1989). In an ICT context, this might translate into users preventing system designers achieving their objectives (Markus, 1983). Users of ICTs often respond in different ways to the changes associated with them (Dickson and Simmons, 1970). Such responses include total rejection and through to a moderate rejection of some of its functionality (Markus, 1983; Doolin, 2004), demonstrated resistance (Hirschheim and Newman, 1988), passive resistance (Marakas and Hornik, 1996), or reluctantly begrudging acceptance (Brown et. al., 2002; Jiang et. al., 2000). Resistance practices can be seen as a reaction, a symptom (Hirschheim and Newman, 1988), an indicator of users attempting to appropriate changes processes. Thus, if resistance practices are not given serious, meaningful consideration, they can, rightly or wrongly, undermine system implementation efforts.

In Markus’ (1983) work, she introduces the idea of an Interaction Theory of resistance. Here resistance is not enacted because of innate user factors (people determined) or because of technological system features (system determined). Resistance is enacted due to the interaction of a system and the context within which it is to be used. Markus thus argues that no one set of tactics are ever going to avoid resistance and that in order to address this, a thorough socio-political analysis of the situation is required. In this study we intend to take this as our starting point and, in the following sections, extend this position by referring to the broader literature regarding resistance, and our ethnographic investigation, in order to evaluate the situation 25 years on.

2.1 Conceptions of Resistance: Nature and Method

The notion of resistance often invokes the images of confrontation, hostility and conflict, a negative idiom that is often used by those initiating or facilitating a change. This tactic of spotlighting resistance as destructive strengthens and privileges management’s position so that the rationality of the organisation (read management’s) is justified to triumph over the interests of the users (Newman, 1989). Newman thus reports that resistance is often viewed as negative, associated with derogatory actions that require eradication. Resistance, therefore, is often portrayed as subversive and unlawful, often involving gratuitous acts of sabotage. Yet, Markus’ (1983) Interaction Theory of resistance, which draws heavily from Kling’s (1980) examination of theories of resistance, starts from a different position. It posits that systems acquire different social and political meaning in different environments and that disparate users may react to the same system differently. Therefore, a well-designed system may be resisted because there may be a potential shift in power relations or of social status because of the system’s capabilities. The ‘real reasons’ for resistance are the perceived values and social content gains or losses of users that occur before or after system implementation (Markus, 1983; Keen, 1981). It can therefore been seen as functional, as an indicator that things are not working as well as they could be, and that they highlight opportunities for learning. As Suchman and Bishop (2000) point out, naming of innovation is a political effort, often those who are labelled the resister in opposition to so called innovation effort are actually the innovators – they desire radical change and resistance is a helpful indicator of this. In summary, resistance can be conceptualised as a good or bad thing.

Theoretically two conceptions of methods of resistance are identifiable – overt and covert. Marakas and Hornik (1996) suggest that resistance to change is an observable behaviour. This overt behaviour will be or can be observed by others, manifesting itself as dysfunctional behaviour motivated by criminal intent or personal gain. By contrast, passive, or covert, forms of resistance are hard to detect. It may involve users demonstrating a reluctant acceptance, with no outward displays of frustration regarding, or rejection of, the system (Lauer and Rajagopalan, 2003; Marakas and Hornik, 1996). The passive resister may resentfully accept the system, customising working practices, silently scheming to conspire in its downfall. Such a user may exhibit acceptance and resistance concurrently, towards different facets of the system, depending on their stance, knowledge, level of control, or politics. Resistance can sit very happily alongside acceptance.

2.2 Resistance Rationales: Why is happens and How to deal with it

Most research regarding reasons for resistance in ICT projects predominantly refers to the resister’s pathological fear of change (Friedman and Cornford, 1989; Selwyn, 2003; Hirschheim et. al., 1988). More specifically, Keen
(1981) has also pointed out that ICTs may alter relationships, working patterns, and communication channels and, with that, perceived power, authority and control. Doolin’s (2004) research, for example, explores how ICTs may be cloaked as an efficiency exercise or a strategic decision, and highlights how sophisticated users can influence organisational practices and manipulate technologies by facilitating power and control within an organisational setting. Further, change has been reported as an intruder into the familiar working environment of users who, in turn, perceive the ICT as threatening and unnecessary, and ultimately as a criticism of their working practices (Keen, 1981; Grover, 1988; Markus and Pfeffer, 1983). Underlying these guidelines, or strategies, is the notion that ICT development is political beast as well as technological animal, ‘resistance is not a problem to be solved...it is a useful clue to what went wrong’ (Markus, 1983: 441). Despite more general examples of positive resistance, such as the actions of the French Resistance in World War II, within ICT research very few studies see such practices in this way.

Unsurprisingly then, research on ICTs is replete with strategies for predicting (Kettinger 2002), pre-empting (Martinko et. al., 1996) and over-coming (Keen, 1981) resistance. Such strategies tend to focus upon the practicalities of how to influence the processes by which resistance is coped with in organisations. There are many exemplars of non-specific guidelines and/or generic solutions for indistinct users groups (Keen, 1981). Additionally, there are many different models, frameworks and strategies to evaluate user attitudes, on the premise that they are valuable tools for predicting user satisfaction (Barki and Huff, 1985) and, hence, a lack of resistance (Al-Gahtani and King, 1999; Brown et. al., 2002; Kujala, 2003; Venkatesh et. al., 2003; Kettinger, 2002). Jiang et. al., (2000) report on a variety of strategies that researchers have identified to overcome resistance, which they classify into two groupings: participative and directive. Participative strategies are ‘user friendly’ and focus upon training, building support structures, releasing adequate resources; architecting an optimistic environment. Directive strategies are practical ‘business driven solutions’ which focus upon financial incentives for use of system, role modifications, power redistribution, top management support, job status modification, and job counselling but ultimately job elimination for those who do not want to learn to use the new system.

Given that conceptions of resistance, how it is done, and why it happens are generally viewed negatively then, it is no surprise that there are numerous strategies which start from the position of eradication, rather than inclusion. It is not in the remit of this paper to add to this stream of work. We do not want to add to the cookbook approach to dealing with resistance. Instead, we emphasise that there is a capacity within some inclusion. It is not in the remit of this paper to add to this stream of work. We do not want to add to the examples of positive resistance, such as the actions of the French Resistance in World War II, within ICT research very few studies see such practices in this way.

3 RESEARCH APPROACH

This case study was part of a larger three-year ethnographic study conducted, at T.Co (a pseudonym), a Management Careers Consultancy based in the North West of England. The study was positioned well both in timings and circumstances, as throughout the three year period a number of significant ICT projects were undertaken. ICT investment was considerable with the aims of increasing operational efficiency and supporting a strategically planned expansion. From 2000 until 2002 the organisation grew from two-sites, to a six-site operation with a national UK coverage. The first major ICT investment involved the migration of an obsolete Apple Mac platform to a PC platform and the second was the implementation of a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) package. The decision to conduct an ethnographical study was informed by the fact that one of the researchers was situated at the organisation full-time as part of a Knowledge Transfer Partnership and another researcher attended the organisation at least one day per week. Furthermore ethnography allowed for flexibility in the research design and approach. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest, research design can be a reflexive process that operates throughout every stage of a project. Ethnography facilitates an iterative, inductive and co-dependent approach to data collection and analysis allowing for adaptation as the study progresses (O’Reilly, 2005). Ethnographers become the research instruments, reporting on what they observe, their experiences, and their interpretation of the social, cultural, and economic aspects that influence the research setting (Schulze 2000). Typically, the ethnographer focuses on a social setting (T.Co), building a relationship with key groups within that locale. This cultural immersion aims to reveal common understandings and assumptions whilst generating evidence that can be indicators of the phenomena under observation (Bartunek and Myeong-Gu-Seo, 2001). Access for this case study was exceptional, general company documentation was made available with restrictions only placed upon personnel records, and certain financial/strategic information. This level of inside access facilitated an in-depth observation of the working practices at T.Co and by the time
the pilot project took place the researchers had already conducted two years of the ethnographical study leading to a high degree of immersion in the research setting.

Throughout the study, various forms of data generation were used: unofficial informal narratives, official textual-based discourse, and participant observation. Early in the project, semi-structured interviews were conducted but it became evident that they were not productive so they were stopped. The participants were reluctant to be recorded due to the autocratic culture of the organisation and the Managing Director - Rupert. As an alternative to the interviewing process a research diary was kept and informal communications were logged which proved far more appropriate in such a dynamic environment. The participants were much more comfortable with this arrangement and this research technique yielded a more immediate reaction and frank commentaries from the workforce. Staff members featured in the research diary as and when noteworthy events occurred (alongside many mundane exchanges). A typical entry would include data regarding time, date, location, those members of staff present and subject matter. Direct quotes would be written down if possible along with a paraphrased narrative of the event and reference to any relevant documentary evidence. Diary entries were regularly crosschecked with those at T.Co. Some events were often recorded in precise detail. These event narratives were not treated as silos of data but as components of the whole study in conjunction with the text-based research and interpretation of the cultural artefacts of organisation. This study of the pilot project forms one of these ‘silos’ but is more informed than a traditional case study and better seen as an integral part of the larger ethnographical study.

Rupert, who incidentally always referred to himself in the third person, was determined that the workforce, who had experienced extreme changes in their working practices, would not, under any circumstances, impede his proposed ICT strategy. His was an autocratic leader, with a capacity to be charismatic and the potential to be cruel. He was at times both loved and loathed by his workforce. Rupert felt pressurised to be seen to be ‘doing the right thing’ regarding supporting the workforce through change process although, arguably, this could be seen as a façade to mask his desire for things to work the way he wanted them to. There was an ad hoc change management programme at T.Co that evolved via a supply on demand approach. The pilot project could be described as part of this approach. As part of the change management programme it was decided to conduct a pilot project to introduce new working practices and processes prior to the CRM package implementation. It was crucial that those involved were kept informed throughout each stage including the development. It must be remembered at this point that this was an exercise to alter working practices so the pilot was an adaptation of the existing ICT system to introduce new procedures that would be reflected by the CRM package. Each version of the development was presented to those involved and their responses and reactions were collected and fed back into the pilot. Once the pilot project went live, the mandatory activities were monitored on a daily basis. The researchers were able to observe the interchange of the resistance activities and controlling strategies throughout the pilot project. This study allowed us to witness the termination of the pilot project due to user resistance, despite Rupert’s wishes.

4 THE ENACTMENT AND APPROPRIATION OF A STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH RESISTANCE AT T.CO

T.Co is a small, privately financed, business management consultancy; predominately concerned with the career guidance of senior management professionals. They provide guidance in finding new roles for those who have been made redundant or to deliver performance improvement training for those in the midst of a career change. This is done through processes of mentoring and networking, facilitated by personal Management Career Consultants. The Career Consultants were self-employed and the working relationship with T.Co was very informal with clients being allocated on an ad hoc basis. Their marketable products were expertise, capability and professionalism, with the team of Career Consultants referred to by Rupert as “grey haired gentlemen, not gelled hair young thrusters.” The consultancy claimed a 100% success rate attributing this to their bespoke career guidance service and in doing so distancing itself from standard recruitment agencies that offer regular advertised job opportunities. T.Co differentiated their service by focusing on networking, mentoring, the construction of sector knowledge banks, the identification of management gaps, and conducting speculative letter and CV campaigns. The people who paid for T.Co services were previous employers (Sponsors), who would provide such a career service bundled with severance packages.

Once the Client’s started their ‘journey’ with T.Co, the clock began to tick. Their Sponsor would pay for a six-month careers package. If a career opportunity were agreed in a matter of weeks, T.Co still received the full six-month payment. T.Co’s mantra was to ‘reduce job search time,’ ensuring the client’s journey was fast, but without the sense of being rushed. The relationship between the Career Consultants and Rupert was mutually dependent. However, the connections between these parties blurred blur because once the Client procedure
started and the initial basic contact and contract details had been recorded and centrally stored at T.Co, the continuing Client information was stored by and kept externally with the Career Consultant. The rational was that Client information maybe of a sensitive nature so it should be stored securely. However, regular updates were expected from the Career Consultants (either by e-mail, hard copy report and sometimes verbally). Doris, the Administrator, then entered these onto the Client system. The process was problematic because there was always an ambiguity regarding who should record the data, Doris, the Sales Directors who would conduct the introductory meeting (the Royal Tour) with the Client or the Career Consultant who would only be allocated a Client after the Royal Tour. This often meant that Clients had the Royal Tour but that Doris was unaware of their existence. As a result, Clients were not assigned a Career Consultant at the crucial early stages because they did not appear on the system and therefore invoices were not sent out immediately because the Clients were not on the system. This situation was being replicated across the six regional offices. The existing process of sharing client information was ad hoc, informal and lent itself to uncertainty with key staff members being selective about what information was held centrally. As T.Co expanded geographically and the client base increased, this fuelled existing problems. The problem was that Management required current, accurate, client information but this was not readily available. Therefore, prior to any given senior management meeting there was a frenzied burst of activity targeted at gathering information from various sources and locations.

As T.Co expanded Rupert decided to centrally store all client information (any job hunting practices, interview feedback, consultant meeting details) using the existing processes and IT system. That is, various staff would report all data to the Doris. Rupert planned a second stage, this involved giving the Career Consultants a mechanism by which they could enter their own data onto the centralised system. This process of decision-making was located within the broader ICT implementation project. At this time, an organisation wide implementation strategy for CRM had recently been finalised with the client facing function and it was due to be implemented within that year. Rupert felt that this would allow time to enact some organisational change activities. Therefore, as part of the first phase, a pilot project was set up at the Head Office to be rolled out across all the regional offices after what Rupert called ‘any initial teething problems’. The pilot project incorporated newly designed forms and training sessions for the staff providing key Client information. This would be a major change to existing working practices for those involved especially when confronted with a mandatory involvement in the pilot project. An application was built, based upon the existing one for familiarity purposes. Furthermore to ensure that the pilot study was taken seriously, and key client information was collected, Rupert insisted on a strategy to enforce the mandatory population of the application. Any users who failed to enter the mandatory data were to be logged and Rupert was updated on a fortnightly basis.

4.1 The heterogeneous user group: the organisational actors

The key users differed in how they interacted with the newly designed application and their levels of organisational status. Table 1 illustrates the user group’s roles with the existing system, the details of what was required of them through out the pilot project and their status. It was recognised that the outcome of the project was to alter embedded behaviour and therefore it was agreed amongst Rupert, the Sales Directors and the Career Consultants that a rigid timeframes maybe too restrictive. It is worth remembering that Rupert would propose a concept and others would unanimously agree with his suggestions. Furthermore it is important to note that the pilot project was not a new idea sprung upon the unwilling workforce, there was documentary evidence that discussion and meetings had taken place for over a decade regarding the need to capture essential client data. Yet, given this history, Rupert and other board members were aware that opposition and confrontation would be the universal response to the planned changes. This was confirmed by the reaction of those involved in the requirement gathering stage and reiterated when Doris reported that the Pilot was being avoided from the outset. Rupert therefore devised the ‘naming and shaming’ strategy to overcome resistance and to ensure that the pilot project would, in his eyes, be a success. The ‘naming and shaming’ strategy was commensurate with how Rupert dealt with company matters, very publicly. For example, if Rupert received an email with spelling mistakes in it, no matter what the content or circulation list, he would forward the e-mail to the entire company, publicly condemning the sender and their poor spelling skills. The ‘naming and shaming’ strategy was a similar style of punishment; a list would be kept of those users who failed to use the pilot system as agreed and as trained. Rupert would be regularly up-dated and he would then send a company-wide e-mail, including the Board members, naming and (ideally) shaming those individuals who did not comply. In the following sections we will outline the experiences and responses of the key actors in the pilot project.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Groups</th>
<th>Role as Related to the Existing System</th>
<th>Role in the Pilot Project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doris: Administrator</td>
<td>Role involved keeping database current, often required to answer analytical requests, maintain data for monthly board reports. Prior to pilot entered key data onto a database from paper forms, e-mails, verbal instructions and personally seeking data directly from clients</td>
<td>Monitor the usage of Pilot system, report instances of misuse. To police all activity, naming individuals that did not conform which meant reporting more senior people to their superiors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rupert: Managing Director</td>
<td>Little input but he was closely involved with the system’s original design.</td>
<td>If Doris was police then Rupert was judge, jury and executor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Consultants</td>
<td>Supplied data to Doris via a paper based form which should be completed with the client on the first meeting (this triggered the sending of invoices to sponsors). Continued updating of Doris as necessary.</td>
<td>To adhere to the new system – inputting client data directly into the pilot system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales Directors</td>
<td>Conducted the introductory client meeting and started completion of the NCF. This included the client’s details and those of the product that they had been sold. Continued updating of Doris as necessary.</td>
<td>To adhere to the new system – inputting client data directly into the pilot system.</td>
</tr>
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Table 1: Heterogeneous user group

4.1.1 Doris - The Administrator

Doris was a capable 60-year-old Administrator who worked incredibly hard, was generally overworked and felt unappreciated, making her irritable at times. A matriarch to new Clients, to some Career Consultants and younger staff members, she was a conscientious employee and always got the job done. Her central location in the open plan office meant that everyone was within hearing range if Doris had a complaint or an objection to something. Doris was not known to keep her opinions to herself. Historically, the Administrator was the member of staff who usually inputted new Client data into the existing system. The Client data came via a New Client Form (NCF) that was completed (by hand) either by a Career Consultant or a Sales Director and handed to her. Completion of the NCF was often ignored, forgotten or only partially completed, leaving Doris to speculate and pursue basic contact details. As part of the requirement gathering stage it was determined that it would be beneficial to collect supplementary Client details together with the regular contact details and to make the completion of the NCF compulsory. Furthermore, the Career Consultants and Sales Directors were expected to start directly inputting Client data wherever possible, rather than passing the information through to Doris. It was expected that this would aid the change management process for the major implementation project. In practice this change management process immediately became problematic. Doris began to resist the Pilot for a number of reasons; she had to input the supplementary data into the system and believed her power base was being eroded. These were points of resistance because she had to undertake additional work and because, prior to the pilot project, she was the main individual at T.Co that could give instant overview of each Client. Doris knew who the Client’s Career Consultants were and was knowledgeable about the status of each Client’s career campaign. The implication of the changes were that her role might eventually be made redundant or change significantly, particularly as related to the downgrading (in her eyes) of her status. In terms of her resistance practices, she vocalised, and exaggerated, the instances of incorrect data entry by others, and continually highlighted the fact that other people could cause big problems if they were allowed access to the system. Her central position in the office ensured that no one was able to ignore her. Thus Doris created an atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the pilot project. There was a conflict in Doris’s actions because as part of her administrator role it was beneficial that the Client data was inputted but she was fearful that she would lose control. The blanket prescription of the naming and shaming strategy did not prevent these resistance practices. Doris was required to compile the naming and shaming list, but this actually supported part of her strategy of resistance. Doris was able to highlight publicly that people were not inputting the data to make the system work and thus that the old (her) system was better.
4.1.2 The Career Consultants

The Career Consultant’s were powerful individuals at T.Co as being self-employed allowed them some protection from company protocols. They had an extremely comfortable arrangement with respect to obtaining work. Doris was aware of their availability so new Clients were automatically matched against a consultant’s skills and expertise, therefore they never had to pursue work. The Career Consultants were paid monthly, usually regardless of how often they met with the Client, payment ending once the Client became employed again. Doris inputted essential Client data but the majority of Client data throughout the recruitment campaign was stored off-site with the Career Consultants. Client reports were submitted monthly to the Doris and she inputted the data. Often the reports were very ad-hoc, irregular, in different formats and any client up-dates that were needed immediately were usually collected verbally over the telephone. The Pilot required all client-consultant recruitment practices to be captured and Client meetings to be logged centrally. The Career Consultants resisted this as they did not want client-consultant practices scrutinised. Currently they were managing the recruitment campaign, and they did not want to share their knowledge or expertise. Like Doris they resisted the pilot project because their powerful positions and professional expertise was under threat and they were also required to contribute to this threat by inputting the data themselves. They resisted because they faced a reduction of their power and status, a dilution of their knowledge, their current private client relationship was to become public and all meetings were to be logged which may have impacted on their fees if the quota was not met. In addition they believed that the non-paid ‘secretarial’ work of inputting data was not part of their role. There was also a real fear of the new technology (Career Consultants are predominately near retirement age and some were IT illiterate).

Conspiring with each other the Career Consultants became a imposing force, adding extra alarmed voices by highlighting inadequacies and shortcomings of the pilot project, new procedures, and questioning the confidentiality and security risks of centralising highly sensitive private data. The Career Consultants tactic was simple, ignoring initial attempts to release this information until directly asked by Rupert (the pilot project dissolved before this stage was reached in earnest). A further tactic was avoidance, creating a chaotic problematic situation when attempting to enter data. This was helped enormously by the fact that Career Consultants had to share PCs with part-time staff members. Claims of the system not working were rife, a flurry of statements about being too busy were made and requests for formal training to be organised became prevalent. Career Consultants also increasingly arranged meetings away from the office to avoid confrontation with Rupert regarding the pilot. The name and shame strategy had minimal impact on the Consultants. After the initial shock of being named publicly there was a dissolving of the effect, an apathetic laissez-faire attitude prevailed. At some stage nearly all the Career Consultant’s had been publicly named and shamed and it became a badge of honour. They were part of a reciprocal relationship and could easily walk away, they were nearing retirement, were self-employed and they would not be intimidated.

4.1.3 The Sales Directors

The Sales Directors, in conjunction with Doris, conducted the Royal Tour with the new Clients and matched them with a Career Consultant. This involved arranging a meeting at the company premises where they would start to complete the NCF. Basic contact data was collected alongside details regarding what Career Campaign (services) the Client had purchased. This data collection method was very informal, sometimes completed on a paper and handed to the Doris for inputting, other times it was e-mailed but usually Doris would have to collect the required information on the Client’s following meetings. It could therefore be weeks before other departments in the company were aware that there was a new Client to be dealt with. The sales team were all at Director level so there was an immediate resistance to the requests of a formal structure in how they worked and the anticipated extra workload of populating the pilot with mandatory data was completely frowned upon. They all agreed to the idea in theory and no individual voiced their concerns at the discussion stage of this pilot project as it was felt ‘that would not be a good career move’ given the initiative was owned by Rupert. Yet, the Sales Directors did not want explicit details of their sales contracts being made public because although services were standardised they offered variations of the services to tempt the Client into finalising a deal. They resisted on many levels with the additional fear of technology - like the Career Consultants some Directors were not IT literate. The reason for their resistance was also partly because of their position in the company - they deemed themselves above inputting data and did not like the idea of being policed by who they saw as a subordinate staff member. Doris who was appointed to ‘police’ the pilot was therefore placed in a difficult position, having to inform on her superiors to Rupert. Ultimately, the Sales Directors were not directly affected by the ‘Name and Shame’ as they asked Doris to input the data on their behalf.
5 DISCUSSION

Markus (1983) identifies three theories (causes) of resistance. The first two are, people determined (influenced by a person’s internal factors) and system determined (influenced by external factors associated with the perceptions of the features of piece of technology). These two theories regard resistance as a negative intrusion that should be eradicated. The assumption is, that designer’s and/or implementer’s intentions or objectives should not be questioned just accepted. The third theory, Interaction Theory, differs in that resistance is not determined outside the context of the system designer’s intentions. The causes of resistance arise as a result of the potential outcomes of the use of technology by people and the assumption is that resistance is a response to the setting, user and designer objectives being neither desirable nor undesirable. On these bases, Markus discusses alternative approaches to developing strategies to avoid resistance. In relation to system determined theory, designers may increase levels of user participation and enhancement to functionality and usability may eliminate resistance, with people determined theory, a change or rotation of people involved may eliminate resistance. In terms of the Interaction Theory informed approach Markus (1983:44) argues that ‘no tactics are useful in every situation’, the best prescriptions for an implementation strategy follow from a thorough diagnosis of the organisational setting and the augmentation of any technical development with a socio-political analysis.

We concur with Markus and others (Friedman and Cornford, 1989; Selwyn, 2003; Hirschheim et. al., 1988; Keen, 1981; Grover, 1988) that resistance behaviour has numerous guises and is motivated by many causes. Clearly Markus’ work still has value. The Interaction Theory she posits clearly has resonance in the T.Co case study. Rupert’s generic, ‘directive’ tactics (Jiang et al., 2000) for overcoming resistance were not useful. The user base was comprised of three distinct types of resisters each with their own agenda and their resistance was very much rooted in the interaction of ‘social’ and ‘technical’ features of the work environment. However, we have to remember that T.Co is an SME and as such it is well known that they often face resource limitations, which affect their abilities to enact organizational, and ICT development (Welsh and White, 1981; Gable, 1991; Levy et. al., 1998; Caldeira and Ward, 2002). Moreover, as we stated in the introduction to this paper, SME owner managers often have very particular requirements for ‘their’ business (Darazdi, 1993; Reynolds and Miller, 1992; Carter et. al., 1996; Boeker, 1988). Thus, although Markus (1983) suggests that one route to avoiding resistance is to undertake a thorough organisational analysis, in an SME context this may not be possible due to limited resources and/or a lack of desire for alternate views other than the owners. However, even though owner-managers may hold such views, as other critiques of the strategic management and entrepreneurship suggest (Martin et. al., 1985; Alvesson, 1993; Rowlinson and Proctor, 1999), the T.Co study supports the idea that these might not necessarily translate into action.

Clearly, the staff at T.Co were aware that technology had the ability to alter working relationships, reroute existing communication channels and modify power, authority and control structures. Doris and the Career Consultants in our case study explicitly illustrate this. Doris became the collective centre for the information. As she took on the role of the gatekeeper of client knowledge the Consultants perceived their power and authority to be slipping away resulting in responses from them such as ‘sorry Doris, it’s personal information that only I have the authority to know’. A further dimension of resistance was witnessed with respect to the distribution of client information and the dissolution of power structures as experienced by the Sales Directors. They struggled with the change in their working relationship with the, lower status, Administrator resisting her attempts to monitor and manage how they work hence statements were made such as: ‘…. who the hell do you think you are…fill what box where …I don’t think so!!’ Furthermore, we see resistance caused by users who perceive the ICT as threatening and unnecessary, and ultimately as a criticism of their working practices (Keen, 1981; Grover, 1988; Markus and Pfeffer, 1983). The Career Consultants viewed the situation as a personal attack on their professionalism resulting in comments such as: ‘I have been doing it this way for the past ten years, why fix something that isn’t broken’. Yet, of course it is also important to remember that some causes of resistance were shared. We encountered a good degree of the fear of change, no matter how prepared the individuals were, or what level of user participation was instigated (Markus 1981, Friedman and Cornford, 1989; Selwyn, 2003; Hirschheim and Newman, 1988).

The endeavours of the project team to initiate the pilot project and change embedded working practices was always going to be a difficult task and Rupert knew this. However he perceived resistance as a dysfunctional behaviour that required eradication, regardless of consequences. Yet, he underestimated the extent and nature of resistance at this stage. Thus, although the ‘Name and Shame’ list was produced and emailed out each week, it failed. The strategy did not allow for any demarcation of the actors involved in resistance practices or incorporate any attempt to understand why these senior professionals, external Career Consultants or administration staff resisted. Doris in terms of her resistance practices (in particular highlighting the fact that numerous people inputting would create data quality concerns) was actually supported in her activity through the act of naming and shameing. This allowed her to publicise the fact that other people being involved would make
the system fall down. Further, because Rupert overlooked the fact that the Career Consultants were not directly under the company’s governance, but critical players of the client service delivery team, this also contributed to the failure of his strategy. Further their resistance tactics involved claims of professionalism through the highlighting of the inadequacies of the pilot, the questioning of client confidentiality and the security risks of centralising highly sensitive private data. They were able to overtly decline any attempts to enforce co-operation. The Career Consultants were members of a mutually reciprocal relationship and they would not be intimidated. The blanket prescription strategy failed when used against the Sales Directors because of their position in the company, they used their status to avoid being placed upon the shame list by requesting that Doris enact data entry processes on their behalf. Indeed, all the groups colluded against Rupert’s strategy as it was in their shared interests. The generic strategy applied to this heterogeneous group failed to resolve the situation because the users were from very unique groups in key internal and external roles with differing agendas and motivations. In not understanding and addressing these issues Rupert retreated as the ‘Name and Shame’ strategy lost its impetus. This analysis allows us to add to Markus’ work.

Since the 1980s a body of work regarding the sociology of technology has emerged – the Social Shaping of Technology/Social Construction of Technology perspective (Bijker and Law 1994; Bijker et. al 1989). Central to this work is the idea that the development and enactment of technology (in the broadest sense) is unpredictable because ongoing work is performed beyond the ‘design room’ (Fleck, 1994; Stewart and Williams, 2005). Although Markus’ (1983) Interaction Theory recognises the importance of the understanding the socio-political milieu with respect to resistance in ICT development, it does somewhat incorporate a rather flat, one-way view of this phenomena. That is, unlike a social shaping view, strategies (or technologies) for avoiding resistance are fundamentally conceptualised as being made by managers (the designers) and applied to resisters (users). The outcomes of this intervention are then conceptualised as working or not given the degree to which they are informed by the context of their enactment. This is where we extend Markus’ work. If we conceptualise the deployment of resistance strategies as indeterminate and subject to the potentiality for ongoing work we avoid the problems of social and technological determinism and can open up the processes by which resistance practices are enacted. At T.Co this is perhaps most readily visible in Doris’ actions – she directly appropriated the naming and shaming strategy to suit her own agenda. However, upon closer inspection, it is also evident that the Consultants and Sales Directors also drew upon the name and shame strategy as a resource. In both cases these groups enrolled the tenants of the strategy (being named and shamed) in their strategies of resistance. This took the form of various references to their professional identity particularly in terms of claims to autonomy, client confidentiality and their status not being commensurate with data entry and monitoring of the type deployed. The analogy here is a game of tennis whereby one player hits the ball very hard and in return the other player merely sticks out their racket in the right place and at the right time and in doing so users the power of the other player to hit a winning shot. Usually, the first player does not intend or expect for this to happen.

6 CONCLUSION

Previous research on owner managers and SMEs usually emphasises the necessary and significant influence such actors can have in organisational development and ICT related initiatives. There is however another view, which is less, convinced about the quantity and quality of such interventions. Our research contributes to highlighting this dialectic. Although owner managers in SMEs may have a unitary view of organisations that they seek to impose upon others, we clearly show that such actors do not always make effective interventions that make the impact they intended. It would be all too easy to link such failure with a dearth of resources in SMEs, which disallows proper thinking time, and the investigation of the socio-political milieu of organisations as a precursor to ICT related change. Whilst such an analysis may help matters it is deterministic to assume it will. As Stewart and Williams (2005) state, it privileges prior design, it is unrealistic and unduly simplistic, it may not be effective in enhancing design/use and it overlooks opportunities for intervention.

Markus (1983) has argued that better theories of resistance will lead to better strategies for avoiding with it. She recommends that explanations of resistance are vital because no matter how obvious or intrinsic the theories are; they ultimately guide the strategies of those attached to the management of ICT development. With this in mind 25 years on (somewhat late in the day!) we respond to Markus’ call for further empirical work that contributes to our understanding of the Interaction Theory of resistance. Markus’ work clearly still has value. However our wider review of the literatures on resistance and ICTs has focussed our attention upon a range of issues – the notion of resistance, rationales for resistance, methods of resisting and strategies for overcoming/avoiding it. From this review it became clear that Markus’ work incorporates a fairly flat view of user-developer relations and thus whilst she discussed the nature and rationales for resistance, we felt more of a focus upon methods of resistance and the pre-emptive/responsive strategies was required.
Our study suggests the value in a move beyond the fairly fixed idea of a strategy for dealing with resistance being developed by a group of managers and then being bluntly implemented. We nuance this further by unpacking the ongoing work that resisters put into resistance strategies (originally developed by managers) to nullify them and/or use them for their own ends. Moreover, drawing upon existing thought on mechanisms for resistance we add richness to the ways in which people might resist. Further research is required that considers the active role users play in the appropriation of the strategies developed and deployed by managers to overcome/avoid resistance. We also believe it would be helpful for future studies to become more attuned to diversity in users bases when considering ICT related resistance.

7 REFERENCES


