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THE INERTIA OF ERP PROJECTS: Diffusion or Drift?

Amany R. Elbanna
Loughborough University
Leicestershire, UK

Abstract

Models of the diffusion of innovation have received wide acceptance in IS research. Such diffusion models are typically based on the assumption that projects are either accepted or rejected by adopters, without recognizing or accounting for the negotiation, adaptation, and drift that take place during the implementation (Rogers 1995). This paper presents an alternative view, based on the actor network theory (ANT) concepts of translation, moving the token, and modality. This lens reveals that software implementation projects, such as enterprise resource planning (ERP), have no inertia in themselves. Instead, a project's fate depends on each move it takes and each party involved in handling that move. Every handling of the project by different parties could present either a positive modality (that strengthens it and pushes it forward on its track) or a negative modality (that weakens its initial form and drags it in a different direction). The findings provide an explanation of drift and an alternative view of the diffusion of innovation in the ERP case. This could be extended to other technological projects. The findings also invite practitioners to monitor the various movements of their projects and encourage academics to revise their endorsement of the previously dominant diffusion model. They also contribute to the drift argument by identifying and discussing one of the sources of drift.

Keywords

Drift, ERP, diffusion of innovation, systems implementation, packaged software, case study, actor network theory (ANT)

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1 INTRODUCTION

The implementation of enterprise resource planning (ERP) has a reputation for being notoriously problematic for organizations, as the large size and scale of the system and its organizational coverage make implementing it a challenging task. These implementation difficulties have been described as resembling “the prisoner escaping from an island prison” (Ross and Vitale 2000). The failure of many ERP system implementations has even led some organizations to bankruptcy and litigation proceedings (for example, in the Fox-Meyer case; see James 1997; Montoya 1998).

In addition to dramatic failures, research has also revealed that organizations end up with different results from their ERP systems as a result of changing the project scope and objectives (Lee and Myers 2004); customizing the system according to local needs (Alshawi et al. 2004; Markus et al. 2000); blocking some of the system functions (Elbanna 2006); or achieving a mix of legacy practices and new ERP-based practices (Wagner and Newell 2005). Research also shows that organizations implementing the same ERP package achieve different results, in ways that make their integration a very challenging task (Alshawi et al. 2004). The explanation of the occurrence of these variations in ERP adoption is beyond the capacity of the traditional diffusion of innovation model, typified by that proposed by Rogers (1995).

The traditional diffusion model, in its simplistic linear form, assumes a technology–push where users are invited to adopt the technology based on its technical merits (Rothwell 1992). From this perspective, the user’s role is seen to be either to adopt or reject the project. Even when a need–pull is incorporated in the model, this adoption view has still been based on the same passive role of users as either accepting a project if it suits their needs or rejecting it if it does not (Rogers 1995). This assumes compliant and cooperative actors who are likely to adopt the project over time, which led to classification of adopters according to the time of adoption, such as eager minority, early majority, late majority, or awkward laggards (Baskerville and Pries-Heje 2001; Rogers 1995). In all cases, the underlying assumptions are based on a model of the project that assumes it has an in-built inertia which moves it forward and that the different parties involved can only accept or reject, without interfering in its direction.

The drift model, on the other hand, highlights the evolving nature of technology projects, which do not always follow a preplanned discourse. It gives more weight to organizational actors and allows them the possibility of moving the project from its initial discourse toward their own. In its extreme form, the drift model finds technology projects rather uncontrollable and liable to run away (Hanseth et al. 2001). In its modest form, it argues that technology projects are surrounded by surprises and emerging events that deviate it from the preplanned discourse and lead to unintended consequences (Ciborra 1999, 2000; Nandhakumar et al. 2003; Orlikowski 1992).

The underlying structure of technology drift continues to occupy many researchers who try to reveal how and why drift happens. This paper extends and complements research in this area. It focuses on examining the process of drift in ERP projects and revealing how and why drift tends to occur in such projects. To this end, it studies an ERP implementation in a sound international organization and applies actor network theory (ANT) to analyze the findings. ANT has been increasingly adopted in IS research to understand the emerging process of systems implementation. Researchers employing this approach have applied different concepts from the theory to reveal the complex

character of IS implementation (Bloomfield et al. 1997; Klischewski 2000; Lilley 1998; Vidgen and McMaster 1996). These and other researchers also argue that applying ANT in diffusion studies provides an alternative, deeper insight on the technology adoption process that goes beyond the linear version of the diffusion model (Buscher and Mogensen 1997; Knights and Noble 1997; McMaster et al. 1997).

The paper consists of five sections after this “Introduction.” The next section discusses the underlying assumptions of the translation model and contrasts it with the assumptions of the diffusion model in order to establish the theoretical background against which the data was analyzed. Section 3 presents the research methodology, followed by a section that describes and highlights some key findings of the case study using this methodology. Section 5 analyzes these findings applying ANT concepts. Section 6 provides a discussion and conclusion of the study.

2 THE TRANSLATION MODEL VERSUS THE DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION MODEL

Actor network theory has been developed to understand the construction of facts in science and technology. It has evolved incrementally over the years through the cooperative efforts of many scholars including Akrich, Callon, Latour, and Law among many others (Law and Hassard 1999).

The translation model at the heart of ANT is concerned with investigating the circulation of a *token*: a claim, order, project, idea, gadget, life style, product, or other artefact. The theory claims that network builders achieve their goals and those of their projects only through associations and alliances of faithful human and nonhuman actors. This model regards the spread in time and space of any token as being in the hands of people, each of whom may act in many different ways, for instance by dropping, modifying, deflecting, betraying, adding to, or appropriating the token (Latour 1991). It maintains that faithful transmission of a token is a rarity (Latour 1986). In this regard, ANT explicitly assumes that there is no intrinsic inertia in the token or the network builder project. Hence, everyone in the chain handling the project token gives it energy.

If the token is to move on, the project needs to find fresh sources of energy all the time as “you can never rest on what you did before” (Latour 1986, p. 267). For this reason, ANT denies the diffusion model’s view of an actor as a medium that either resists or transmits the token. Instead, everyone is seen as doing something essential for the existence and maintenance of the token. As Latour (1986) elaborates, “the token changes as it moves from hand to hand and the faithful transmission of a statement becomes a single and unusual case among many, more likely, others.” Thus, the translation model considers that “there are active members shaping and changing the token as it is moved,” which means this model is not about the *transmission* of the same token but the *continuous transformation* of the token. It regards the stability of the token as an unusual circumstance.

According to ANT, translation is the mechanism by which the network builder recruits actors and ensures their faithful alliance. Callon (1986) suggested four inter-related *moments of translations* that actors may go through during the translation process: problematization, interessement, enrollment, and mobilization. He also noted that these moments do not represent stages and might not occur—or be detected—in this order, and

that all or only some moments may be gone through. Problematization refers to the network builder's effort to divert the actors' attention from their initial goal toward the network builder's aims and to convince them that they cannot achieve their displaced goal without helping the network builder to pursue his or hers. It sets the network builder project as an indispensable or obligatory passage point to the actors if they want to achieve their displaced goal. Interestment is the action of interest building. Enrollment specifies the role the actors are required to play in the network and convinces them to accept it. Mobilization means moving the new actors to be part of the network.

Building on Greimas (1990), Latour (1987) illustrates that the network building project is like a sentence that could be made more of a fact or a fiction depending on how it is inserted into other sentences. By itself, a given sentence is neither a fact nor a fiction. It is made into one of these in later stages by others who intervene to add their own positive or negative modalities. Such modalities are "the sentences that modify (or qualify) another one" (Latour 1987, p. 22) and, depending on the kind of modalities, "people will *be made to go* along completely different paths" (Latour 1987, p. 25). Positive modalities are those sentences that lead a statement away from its condition of production down stream, making it solid enough to open up some other possible consequences (Latour 1987). In contrast, negative modalities are those sentences that lead a statement upstream in the opposite direction, toward its conditions of production. It does this to investigate and review the details of its production, instead of using it to render some other consequences necessary. The notion of modalities illustrates that the status of a statement depends on later statements.

Latour contrasted this version of the translation model to the diffusion model. He explained that the diffusion model views the displacement of a token through time and space as the usual expected action.¹ It assumes the transmission of the same token through others, and interferes only to explain the slowing down or acceleration of the token movement that results from other people's reactions. In this regard, the diffusion model views the token as having an initial force that is fully maintained and regards the network through which it passes as playing the role of the medium through which the token circulates. The slowing down or distortion of a token is then explained in terms of societal friction and resistance, such as poor communication, ill will, the opposition of interest groups, or indifference. The diffusion model, therefore, explains everything through either the initial force or the resisting medium.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study follows the interpretive tradition in IS research. It aims to answer questions about how and why ERP projects tend to drift and to provide explanations of the phenomena based on participants' experiences in real world situations. This is done by examining a case study of ERP implementation. Such case study research does not seek generalizations in a statistical sense, but aims to provide analytical insight and theoretical generalization.

¹The contrast between the diffusion and translation models largely adopted in this paragraph is derived from Latour (1987).

In order to understand ERP implementation, data of an ERP project in a large reputable company in the food and beverages sector (which we will call Drinko) was collected between August 2000 and March 2001. Drinko owns many production, packaging, and sales sites in several countries, each of which represents a company or group of companies that operates in that local area. This study focuses on Drinko's business units (BUs) in only three countries, referred to here as EUK, EUB, and America, which include more than 25 BUs.

The data collection methods applied comprised interviews with various parties involved in the project; document reviews; and other communications with the project participants. Interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours and followed general guidelines. Interviewees were encouraged to talk about the project, with questions asked only as triggers when needed (Bryman 1989). Interviewees were encouraged to drift during the interview and to talk more about whatever they felt was most interesting or important. Following the main interview, interviewees were contacted again via e-mail, telephone, or in-person for a short interview lasting between 30 and 60 minutes in order to clarify issues, explain positions, or comment on the progress of issues. Thirteen members of the ERP project teams were interviewed, in addition to two other members of the staff who were met several times before the formal collection of data. These included the project director, project manager, module managers, change managers, and project members from all of the implemented modules, as well as members from the external consultancy teams. Tape recording was not permitted, in line with the access agreement with the organization. To address this limitation, full notes were taken during each interview and extended directly afterward by the researcher, who added further observations and comments. Document reviews included project newsletters, corporate bulletins, internal reports, external consultants' documents and reports, and internal e-mails.

Data was analyzed following ANT's analytical conventions, for example grouped according to actors. A chart of actors was produced, followed by a few translation charts connecting the different actors and showing their diverse interests. The progress of each issue was followed and its settlement recorded. The negative modalities were traced backward to examine how the translation took place, and forward to understand how the project proceeded. Positive modalities were also identified but due to space limitations are reported only briefly here.

4 CASE STUDY

The ERP project studied for this case passed through many changes during the course of its implementation. The following subsections highlight some of these.

4.1 Changes to the Initial objectives

The ERP project started with three objectives. Quoting from the project plan and the company newsletter, they were: "To enable Drinko to meet increased worldwide demand profitably; to give people access to accurate information quickly so they can make good

decisions fast; and finally to simplify core processes and systems across what have been traditionally regarded as separate regional operations.” During the progress of the implementation, there was some confusion and a disparity of views regarding the purposes of the project. When each party started to work against its perceived objectives, the deliverables of the first stage of implementation varied significantly across ERP project teams as well as departments.

Senior management decided to hire an external consultancy to analyze the situation and provide an explanation for the varied nature of the deliverables. The consultants advised that different parties had made their own assumptions regarding the objectives of the project and hence worked to achieve certain deliverables that were not necessarily in harmony with those of other groups—or with the corporate overall vision of the system. In following up on this insight, and as a result of successive brainstorming sessions, the organization’s senior management simplified the project objectives to a single one: to unify the business. This was complemented with a colored logo to reinforce the new objective.

4.2 Change of System’s Scope and Reach

The initial scope of Drinko’s ERP system encompassed all the organizational business units in many different locations. This included three main commercial arms within the organization, located in EUB, America, and EUK. However, America BU refused to join the project, arguing that this would complicate their ongoing plan to merge with a distribution company operating in the same market. ERP project management became engaged in intense negotiations with America BU to try to convince them to cooperate by joining the project. This would contribute to the realization of the project’s plan and corporate executive management’s aim of having a single system across the entire organization. The ERP project management failed to convince the American BU and had to exclude it from the project’s scope, despite the major importance and large size of its market (Drinko’s third largest). This meant the initially planned corporate-wide system ended up excluding nearly a third of the organization, leaving it to focus on only two of its companies: EUB and EUK. These had historically been isolated from each other, with EUB having an organizational reputation of lagging behind and being less competent than EUK (Elbanna 2007).

4.3 Change of System’s Vision

The initial plan was to have a single ERP system encompassing all organizational operations, replacing 225 systems around Drinko. Yet, departments either refused to replace all of their current systems or insisted on buying different packaged software to complement ERP. This meant the project team had to work to interface its ERP system with several other software packages, such as Manugistics for production planning; a decision support system; and a number of business statistics and graphics packages. The initial plan also recommended that a single, shared service should be created to conduct routine accounting across the entire organization. The idea was that one group of staff would be

responsible for most finance transactions, based in one location, which would lead to these tasks no longer being carried out independently in each company. EUK and EUB fought so fiercely over the location of the proposed service center that the continuation of the project was threatened by their dispute. Because of this, Drinko's senior management changed their position and allowed the project to have two shared services, one in each company.

4.4 Change of Orientation

The project started with many teams, including internal teams comprised of the organization's managers and employees together with two external teams from two consulting firms. One external team (here called Business Consulting) was responsible for the business side of the project and the other (Technical Consulting) for the technical side. The technical consultants kept a low profile within the organization as they focused on preparing the relevant technical capabilities of the system and the organization. In contrast, Business Consulting were more conspicuous as they pursued their business methodology on the implementation that aimed to bring a more business-oriented view to the ERP implementation.

Business Consulting competed with the internal change managers for the attention of corporate executives. For example, while maintaining frequent contact with Drinko's corporate executives, Business Consulting often conveyed the internal change managers' ideas as if they were their own and without giving credit to the change managers (according to change managers and the project manager). This initiated a war between the two parties that ended in the termination of Business Consulting's contract and a dependence solely on Technical Consulting for external implementation support. This change of the team structure led to a shift in the project's orientation from being a business project, as it was initially perceived, to becoming a primarily technical project.

4.5 Change of Configuration Assumptions

During the ERP implementation, an organization-wide transformation program was initiated to review the strategic structure of the organization. In its initial phase, the transformation program suggested to the ERP project that it was considering the separation of the supply and demand organizations, which would be something the ERP project would need to take into consideration in its system configuration processes. As the transformation program did not yet have any detailed view of how the supply and demand organization would be split, the ERP project had to configure the system according to its own working assumptions.

As the transformation program progressed and established a detailed view of how the separation between the supply and demand organizations would be done, the ERP project management discovered that their working assumptions were different from what had been finally decided by the transformation program. This meant the ERP system was configured for an imaginary organization that would never exist. Hence, it would need to be changed again to suit the final organizational design of the transformation program.

5 ANALYSIS

The following subsections present an account of drift in the investigated case study, given from an ANT perspective. In this analysis, it should be borne in mind that ANT considers *actor* to including a network comprised of more actors and networks.

5.1 System Objectives

The ERP project studied deviated from its originally planned objectives as it moved from the project office to involve the rest of the organization; its goals were translated differently in many of the networks through which it passed. For example, EUK sought to align the project to its interest in understanding EUB's operations, which shifted the project's objectives for this business unit to making transparent the hidden processes and data in EUB. On the other hand, EUB, with little experience of large business and systems projects, viewed the ERP project as a major challenge. EUB also viewed the project as a good opportunity to prove their efficiency and equal business capacity to the rest of the organization. In these ways, the ERP project's objectives drifted in EUB to become focused on installing an ERP and keeping up with the project's tough schedule.

For the operational planning department, this was seen to be a good opportunity to implement what they had always advocated but which had been resisted by business units: a sales plan for the entire organization. As a result, this team pulled the project's objective toward their prime aim of having one sales plan for the entire organization, seizing the ERP system's capability and the corporate executives backing of the project. The sales department problematized the project as an opportunity to solve their problems with warehouses and transportation as well as offering a way to bring together, streamline, and "see through" end-to-end processes. This meant the sales team focused more on integration issues and emphasized the detailed design of warehouses.

In effect, each team translated the project objectives to suit their local interests. This led to considerable drift from the project's initial goals of meeting market demand profitably; improving the quality of information and speed of its flows; and simplifying processes and systems across the organization. Instead, the deliverables of each team varied according to its translation of the project, which put more weight and emphasis on their translated and displaced objectives.

As the teams' deliverables for the second phase varied considerably, Drinko's top management hired a third party to investigate the situation. This consultancy's report pointed to the dispersed understanding of the objectives between different teams and recommended the need to establish a solid objective for the project; in ANT terms, this could translate all the networks involved. This new objective problematized the project as an integration exercise aimed solely to unify the business. This focused objective made the project's goals immutable and put an end to the multiple translations and different modalities that occurred during the project's moves between networks.

5.2 Project Scope

As already indicated, the scope of the ERP project as initially planned and documented in the business case was to cover all BUs in the company. Yet when the time came to

move the project token to the BUs, the American business unit opened the project's "black box" and returned it to the point of setting its objectives because they disputed and challenged these objectives. Through a series of translations, the American BU displaced the project team's interest in covering all business units and shifted the objectives toward reducing operational costs and increasing efficiency. They then presented their local interest of merging with another distribution company as an answer to the project's displaced objective. In doing so, America BU successfully translated the project management by convincing them that this business unit's proposed merger was more aligned to the corporate objectives than implementing the ERP system. This negative modality succeeded in shifting the project scope to exclude America BU from the corporate ERP implementation project. This effectively drifted the whole notion behind the implementation of ERP in the organization from being an organization-wide implementation to a system implementation covering only a few of Drinko's parts.

5.3 System Vision

A further area of change from the initial ERP plan was the use of other systems, which required interfacing them with ERP software. The project team's vision of implementing a single, integrated ERP had to be modified when the detailed design phase and consultation with end users in configuration sessions commenced. As the ERP implementation moved from the project office to the end users, the users returned to the point of initiation to discuss the technical reasons behind the decision to introduce the system.

Different users strongly advocated different reasons in favor of other systems that they were either using at that time or would like to acquire instead of the ERP. They disputed many ERP system functions, such as the operation planning processes, statistics and graphics, and the capacity for storing and analyzing information. Negotiations between the users' networks and the project team ended up favoring the use of other systems to carry out such functions. Thus, the users' negative modality meant the project team had to incorporate the implementation of other new systems, or the continuation of existing systems and building interfaces between them and the ERP system. This drifted the ERP project away from the initial plan.

Another deviation from the ERP implementation plan and what the system was expected to support was the configuration of the system to include two shared services. When the detailed design process reached the phase of approaching EUK and EUB, these business units shifted the project aim of implementing a single shared service for the organization to a discussion focused on the location of the proposed new ERP service center. Each unit insisted on the service center being located in its premises and indicated they would seriously question the intentions of senior management if they decided not to locate it in their country.

The implementation project ground to a halt while the project team waited for a resolution to the dispute about the location of the service center, with each party threatening to withdraw its commitment to the project if they did not win. Drinko's top management intervened to resolve the issue in a way that would satisfy both parties' explicit interests, in order to guarantee their commitment to push the project forward. This involved agreeing on a costly configuration based on having two service centers, one in each business unit. Although this decision was a deviation from what had been

planned, it was a step forward in materializing the project. By guaranteeing the continuation of the BUs' commitment, this new plan sustained the project's inertia by maintaining its sources of energy.

5.4 Project Orientation

A major incident of drift was the shift in orientation from a business project to one focused on a technical software implementation. This occurred as a result of a battle between the external Business Consulting and internal change managers. The change managers were a traditionally influential network within the organization, accustomed to a close relationship with corporate executives. However, Business Consulting tried to highlight their role in the project to ensure future contracts within Drinko. It did this by approaching corporate executives directly, without consulting the change managers. Business Consulting also did not give credit to change managers when adopting ideas surfaced by change managers during project meetings, and conveyed them to corporate executives as if they were the consultancy's own. This interference by Business Consulting in the corporate executive network threatened the power and prestige of change managers within the organization and was not tolerated.

The change managers problematized their interest in regaining their status by moving to get rid of Business Consulting. They did this by displacing the project management's strong interest in justifying the project's time and cost overruns, shifting it to helping the change managers in their dispute with Business Consulting. Change managers and project management aligned to open the consultants' black box and returned to the point of the consultancy's appointment in order to question their competencies, methodology, and implementation approach. They criticized Business Consulting of taking "an awful lot of time and producing little results." In doing so, they returned the project to the point of a choice of overall direction by advocating a new path based on the idea that "we have a system here to build." In this way, change managers eventually convinced corporate executives to choose what they thought was an organizationally less complicated and more straightforward technical implementation guided by Technical Consultants.

5.5 System Configuration

Organizational requirements for the ERP system configuration passed through several changes during the course of its implementation. While the ERP configuration process was underway based on assumptions representing the current organizational structure, the transformation program network was proceeding on its study of the strategic direction of the organization and the possible improvements to the organizational structure. This returned the ERP project to a discussion of basic organizational assumptions. The transformation program, despite its initial vague notion of separating the supply and demand organizations, translated the ERP project's interest in continuing top management support and displaced it to follow the transformation program's rough ideas on the future design of the organizational structure.

In following the negative modality of the transformation program's proposal for a new structure separating supply and demand organizations, the ERP project began to pur-

sue a new, displaced goal. This led to a drift from its initial assumptions about organization structure. By the time the transformation program communicated its detailed final vision and plans for a new organizational structure, the ERP project found that the final version of the proposed separation between supply and demand was even different than their drifted assumptions. Being already translated to follow the transformation program's deliverables, in the hope of the continuation of management support, the ERP project drifted again to follow this different negative modality in order to accommodate the newly conveyed design for the organizational structure.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The case study and its analysis described in this paper illustrate how this ERP project moved between many networks during its implementation. Actors that handled it contributed actively to its realization through their modalities. Each actor represented an important source of energy for the project. When actors disputed the project, the project came to a stand still to wait for fresh energy to push it into a direction, either the same as previously planned or a different route.

For instance, in the dispute regarding the location of the service center, business units succeeded in returning the project to the point of discussing the rationale behind the service center and what it represents organizationally. This negative modality led to a standstill that set the scene for a different direction for the project. Another example is the Business Consulting' challenge to change managers, which backfired by initiating fierce opposition to themselves and the discussion of their existence in the organization. The change managers succeeded in associating themselves with the project management, gaining more power and strengthening their modality. The negative modality of change managers and project management drifted the ERP project to termination of the consultancy's contract and shifted the project from a business orientation to what was perceived as a straightforward technical implementation.

Departments also contributed with negative modality that returned the ERP system back to the decision of acquiring it to dispute the value and functionality of the system itself. They argued for the introduction of their preferred alternative rather than the ERP system, including special software for graphics and statistics, Manugistics for production planning, and other existing and new systems. As a result, the project drifted from being viewed as a single system for the entire organization to an ERP system interfacing with many other software programs. Furthermore, the system objectives were frequently changed during its adoption by different teams and departments. Different networks tended to translate the objectives and pull it toward their organizational interest. Each team contributed with a different modality that shifted the project objectives into many directions.

In conclusion, the ERP's horizontal integration invited many parties to be involved in its implementation. As the project moved between different networks, it gained positive or negative energy from the different actors that contributed to it, either pushing the project forward along its initial plan or backward to the point of production to set a different direction. Negative modality that alters the initial plan represents the source of drift in ERP implementations.

The paper contributes to ERP implementation studies by providing a novel framework to conceptualize the drift in such integrated horizontal systems that are supposed to span the entire organization. It highlights the drifting course of ERP implementation and, more importantly, demonstrates that drift is inherent in such implementations. This helps to explain why researchers often find that merging companies that have implemented the same packaged ERP system is problematic, despite the initial perception that merging the same ERP system between organizations should follow a rather straightforward and predictable trajectory (Alshawi et al. 2004; Truex and Ngwenyama 2000).

The research emphasis on the importance of drift for the survival of technology projects illuminates some areas of significance for theory and practice. It demonstrates that a technology project needs a continuing stream of fresh sources of energy to keep it alive and to guarantee its circulation between networks. However, it is rare to achieve the submission of actors to the project's stated objectives during this circulation as in many cases they wish open its black box, dispute it, and return it to the decision-making process. This can translate the project differently and change its direction. As drift results from the occurrences of such negative modalities, it is necessary to accommodate them to guarantee actors' involvement and ongoing support, providing the required energy for the project's survival.

In this regard, but with a different analysis, this study also supports the proposition of Holmstrom and Stalder (2001) that technology projects succeed to disseminate when they are allowed to drift to suit different actors' needs. Such drift is required to give the project energy at points of disputes where actors successfully open its black box and discuss its production. Such disputes cannot be settled without a drift that allows the technology project to work for everybody. This stress on the continuous need for new sources of energy also provides an alternative view to the diffusion of innovation model. It shows the lack of inertia in IS implementation projects and that the possibility of drift always exists—unless a positive modality is guaranteed from the outset (which is an unusual occurrence).

On the practical side, project managers should be aware of the vast number of negotiations through which an IS implementation project goes, and the way actors' different modalities and positions can drag it in many different directions. With every move of a project, and with each new actor entering the network, there is the possibility of the IS implementation taking a different path. Keeping the project on its initial path requires maintaining the same translation from beginning to end. This is not realistic because different actors may join during the course of an implementation. In principle, actors could translate and bend the project in their way, indicating that drift should be considered as an embedded characteristic of IS implementations. It might also not be feasible to follow the initial path at critical points when new energy is needed to proceed. This is when drift can be in order, to guarantee actors' commitment and contributions. At every step of an implementation project, therefore, special care needs to be taken to monitor the moves being made in order to try to keep actors aligned in achieving desired mutual goals.

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About the Author

Amany Elbanna is a lecturer of Information Systems at the Business School, Loughborough University, United Kingdom. She holds a Ph.D. in Information Systems from the London School of Economics. She also holds MBA and M.Sc. degrees in information systems. Her research interests include packaged software implementation, the project management of large IS projects, and the management of change associated with the adoption and appropriation of ICT. Amany can be reached by e-mail at a.elbanna@lboro.ac.uk.