

37 PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTANCE AND INFORMATION SYSTEMS ADOPTION

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Abstract

According to Brehm (1966), if a person's freedom to behave as they choose is threatened in some way, then they will become motivationally aroused to either reestablish the lost freedom, or to ensure that there is no further loss. This hypothetical motivational state is referred to as psychological reactance. While resistance is defined as behavior against compliance, psychological reactance is a motive to behave to recover a lost freedom, and may result in behavior against compliance. It is argued that negative behaviors, which contribute to the poor record of information system implementation, likely contain some element of psychological reactance and that the latter may be brought about by threats directly or indirectly related to the implementation at hand. Therefore, an understanding of the interactions between system implementation, broader contextual influences, such as organizational climate and the formation of reactance, offer an opportunity to base interventions in strategies that avoid or minimize the motive to adopt negative behaviors, and therefore enhance the implementation of information systems in organizational settings.

Keywords

Psychological reactance, resistance, motivation, IS adoption

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1 INTRODUCTION

Resistant behavior associated with the implementation of information systems has been described by a number of authors. Ang and Pavri (1994) considered *resistance to change* as an end user attitude operating at an individual level within an organization. Lapointe and Rivard (2005) suggest that resistant behaviors occur as a result of perceived threats that arise from the interaction between initial conditions and a given phenomenon, in this case the implementation of an information system. Examples of resistant behaviors included passive resistance, sabotage, not using the system, and oral defamations. Hartwick and Barki (1994) also observed that some users begrudgingly accepted that they would have to use a mandated information system, behavior that they termed *unwilling compliance*.

It is suggested that, in an organizational setting, “negative” behavior directed at an information system may be situationally generated, perhaps as a reaction to an act of mandate, rather than as a result of aspects of the system in question. Brehm’s (1966) theory of psychological reactance is proposed as an explanation for such negative behavior (i.e., when a specific freedom is eliminated, or threatened with elimination, an individual may be motivationally aroused to recover the freedom). The freedom threatened in the case of mandated information system usage could be a loss of job control, or perhaps the replacement of an existing system to which a user has some level of investment or allegiance. Reactance could be expressed in negative behaviors such as incorrectly or inefficiently using the new system so as to preserve the sense of control. Psychological reactance is seen as a motive to behave negatively toward something upon which individual focuses upon (i.e., the object is not necessarily part of the causal mechanism). This is different to the concept of resistance, which describes negative behavior toward a phenomenon such as an information system implementation (Marakas and Hornich 1996). Recognizing psychological reactance in an organizational setting should enable us to formulate strategies to minimize or negate its motivational impact, and thereby improve the success rate of systems implementation.

2 PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTANCE

According to Brehm (1966), most of the time people hold a belief that they are relatively free to behave in the ways that they choose. It can be argued that given some level of knowledge about oneself and the environment, freedom to choose is potentially beneficial in terms of survival. It follows, then, that if a person’s freedom to behave as they choose is threatened in some way, they will become motivationally aroused to either reestablish the lost freedom, or to ensure that there is no further loss. This hypothetical motivational state is referred to as *psychological reactance*. Brehm further argues that the size of the psychological reactance is a direct function of (1) the salience or importance of the threatened freedoms, (2) relative proportion of free behaviors that are threatened or eliminated, and (3) where there is perceived threat only, the size of the threat.

In any social situation, there will always be a number of competing pressures influencing the way that people choose to behave. If, for example, the magnitude of reactance is less than the social pressure to comply, then the person will do what is suggested,

albeit in a less enthusiastic way than if there was no reactance component. *Psychological reactance* is a *motive*, which may result in observable negative behavior. It is proposed that reactance is a likely underlying motivational state to a number of noncompliant activities in which potential information system users engage, and perhaps the source of dissatisfaction experienced by users when they are seen to comply with usage at a minimum level.

While Brehm's theory does not emphasize individual differences (Brehm and Brehm 1981, pp.213-228), it can be accepted that different life experiences would generally shape an individual's perception of what freedoms they have and value as being important. This perception would have direct influence over the amount of reactance aroused in a given situation. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume in a given context, such as an organizational setting into which an information system is introduced, that there would be individual differences in the amount of any psychological reactance generated.

3 REACTANCE IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

People in an organizational setting are exposed to many influences. For the majority of workers, their "psychological workplace" (Statt, 1994, p. 25) is an organization of some type, and organizations are characterized by three common attributes. People within organizations share a *social identity* or sense of belonging in some way. The activities of the people in an organization are *coordinated* so that they interact with each other in what is supposed to be a supportive and complementary manner. The reason for the coordinated interaction is to *accomplish the stated goals* of the organization. However, organizations are not just about what people collectively do, but inherently involve who the individuals are, what they want, and how they feel about things. The freedom to choose what to do and how to do it is likely to be one important aspect of work in organizations.

Given these organizational influences, looking at information systems from an organizational perspective thus brings into focus social factors, as well as business and technology factors, organizational behavior, and organizational culture and climate. Past research has identified a number of aspects of organizations that contribute to the success of information system implementation. For example, Rivard et al. (2004) discuss system adoption in terms of organizational transformation and identify four pieces of the transformational "puzzle," namely, strategy in terms of positioning, capability, and governance; structure in terms of boundaries and success factors; the information system itself in terms of its place in the organization; and aspects of leadership. Within the framework defined by these factors, however, lie the perceived freedoms of individual users that may or may not be disrupted by any implementation activities. Any perceived loss of freedom, whether it arises from the nature of the information system, the implementation, or from existing social factors, can result in negative behaviors toward the implementation.

If we look at this organizational landscape through the lens of reactance, we can see that there are many situations where individuals can experience actual or threatened loss of freedom when new systems are introduced into a work environment. Broeng (2006), for example, suggests that the task of ERP implementation is typically bigger than initially estimated, and one of the major issues is that of *ownership*. The new system will

likely need to be resold internally as often the nature of jobs can be changed, and “uncommitted people can derail the process very quickly” (p. 35). Lack of ownership of a mandated system (e.g., where the user cannot foresee that they can comfortably integrate the system within their work practices) is likely to be perceived as a threatened loss of freedom and hence will trigger reactance.

In terms of systems research, it is likely that researchers have noted reactance-driven behavior, but not recognized it as such. In a study of safety culture attitudes in a highly regulated environment (Harvey et al. 2002), the authors describe hierarchical situations whereby management expect “compliance with regulations” and utilize downward instruction, whereas shop floor workers are characterized as “being resigned to high levels of prescription” with a minimum of participation in the workplace (Dake 1992, cited in Harvey et al. 2002, p. 21). The workers are described as being “fatalist” (Dear 1995, cited in Harvey et al. 2002, p. 21) and their varied adherence to safety system requirements is attributed to this mind set. Such an organizational setting would likely generate differing levels of reactant motivation, and varied levels of adherence to safety systems by the workers might be better understood through this lens, an apparent loss of freedoms brought about by adherence to the new safety system expectations.

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Psychological reactance is likely to be an important motivator of behavior in organizational settings. It may be that the perceived or actual loss of freedom, which triggers the reactance, is associated directly with implementation of an information system, but in the implementation context it is also possible that there are other organizational factors responsible. This perspective represents an opportunity for interventions in the pre-implementation phase of information system projects to reduce or eliminate the psychological reactance, and in doing so increase the likelihood of implementation success. Core to this approach is the need to understand such factors as the climate prevailing within an organization within which reactance can be generated. According to Bock et al. (2005) “climate” can be thought of as a contextual situation that occurs at some definable point in time, and this contextual situation frames the behaviors of organizational members. It would follow, then, that an assessment of an information system implementation within the context of an organization’s climate, with particular emphasis on reactance, could provide cues to the development of an appropriate strategy to minimize both psychological reactance and its effects.

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