Helping organisations harness the power of innovative IT technologies

PA Consulting Group commissioned LSE Professor Carsten Sørensen to identify more innovative and strategic ways to use IT systems in organisations

What was the problem?

Information and communications technology (IT) has long been, to quote an LSE report, the 'bad boy in the boardroom.' Often perceived as too technical or too strategically insignificant, IT for many years failed to grab the attention of organisational executives, who dismissed it as a commodity to be purchased or outsourced.

However, the IT field has changed dramatically in recent years, not least because of rapid advances in software, hardware and networking technologies. As a result, IT is potentially a more powerful organisational tool, and a more complicated one. Yet the ways in which IT can serve organisations are poorly understood.

What did we do?

In 2006 the Information Technology Innovation practice of the global firm PA Consulting Group engaged LSE to conduct state-of-the-art research into information services. Beyond furthering knowledge in IT innovation, this five-year project had two purposes: to innovate PA Consulting's business offerings in IT consulting, and to offer new insights to the company's associates.

The research was led by Carsten Sørensen, Associate Professor of Information Systems and Innovation in LSE's Department of Management. Since the mid-1980s one of his strands of research had been concerned with understanding the diverse ways that information services support organisational innovation. His collaborator in the core applied research between 2001 and 2008 was Professor Lars Mathiassen, Co-Founder of the Center for Process Innovation at Georgia State University.

The research focused initially on the diversity of IT services and technologies that had become available and the ways in which they offered organisations the potential to closely tailor IT needs for internal and external clients.

Sørensen broadly divided this potential into several areas, focusing on the ability of broad-ranging IT strategy to maximise an organisation's ability to standardise processes, connections, information and shared material. His research also highlighted the important distinction between IT support for developing new business versus support for ongoing relationships with customers

and partners, and how to use IT to more effectively work with the growing ranks of mobile professionals.

The research was presented in a series of four reports, the first of which broadly explored the business needs for understanding diverse IT services as a source of ideas for innovation. The remaining three reports detailed the power of IT to better grasp the needs of customers, and the potential for highly-automated and self-service tools to deliver highly personalised services relationships at a low cost to customers and business partners.

What happened?

In a series of publications, meetings, consultations and lectures, Sørensen identified a number of key areas where PA Consulting might offer its clients more innovative uses of IT.

Initial meetings between Sørensen and representatives from PA Consulting Group scoped the process of translating the research into impact. These were followed by a series of discussions and interviews with business leaders to further explore the potential for practical impact of the research, including a CIO workshop. Sørensen engaged in close collaboration with a small group from PA Consulting in order to flesh out the business potential of the research findings, with this work happening most intensely from 2006 to 2008.

Sørensen's work had a direct impact on PA Consulting's business strategies and discussions, and the company used the insights from the research as the basis for a number of roundtable discussions with senior executives and at large-scale client networking events. In 2013 Sørensen was a panelist at PA Consulting's annual Innovation Event, which showcased the company's products, ideas and services for current and potential clients and focused on the positive aspects of 'disruptive' technological change.

According to a senior manager in PA Consulting, the impact is continuing: "The research projects helped to shape PA's own thinking and provided insights that are still used within the company today to help us to understand the scope and impact of technological innovation and how it transforms the workplace".

What happened?

Funding for Dr Helsper's research came from the European Union's Kids Online III project, involving partners in 33 countries, and its Safer Internet Programme. The US-based Conference Board funded her digital exclusion project from 2009 to 2012, and e-Harmony.com her project on 'Me, My Spouse and the Internet' from 2007 to 2010. Her collaborators included Rebecca Eynon and Bianca Reisdorf at the Oxford Internet Institute and Alexander Van Deursen at the University of Twente.

Funding

Research impact: making a difference

Carsten Sørensen has since 1989 been affiliated with a number of Danish, Swedish and British institutions, and LSE since 1999. Since joining LSE, Dr Sørensen has studied the business and consumer impact of mobile and ubiquitous information technology innovations. For more than a decade Dr Sørensen studied organisational innovation with mobile computing (mobility@lse &enterprisemobilitybook), and has extensive experience as a Principal Investigator on a number of national, EU, and industry research grants in the UK and Sweden with budgets totalling more than £3million. Dr Sørensen is a Senior Editor for The Information Systems Journal and serves as reviewer for all the major Information Systems journals and conferences. He has consulted and conducted executive teaching with a range of large international firms and public organisations, such as Microsoft, Google, PA Consulting Group, IMF, Orange, Intel, Vodafone to name a few.
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