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Structuring the Agora of Techno-Organisational Change

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Abstract
The Agora of Techno-Organisational Change refers to the global emergence and expansion of a marketplace for the resources necessary to carry out technological changes in business organisations. These resources include technologies such as information systems and software packages, specialised technical and business expertise, change methodologies, project management, etc. The Agora of Techno-Organisational Change is populated by various diverse and heterogeneous actors (suppliers, users, intermediaries, consultants, analysts, the state, professional associations, and so on) with conflicting (or not) interests and diverse viewpoints. In summary, there is an expanding and evolving marketplace for IT and other specialised resources and expertise used to carry out technological change efforts in organisational settings. We have termed this marketplace as Agora of Techno-Organisational Change which is the analytical and practice space where technical and organisational change is happening.

Keywords: agora, techno-organizational change, analytical space, practice space

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Although technological change in organisations has long been seen as a way to increase competitiveness in the markets through more effective operation, we can identify a recent (since early 1990s in the service sector) transformation in the way it is happening. More particularly, the increasing demand for sophisticated and specialised expertise and technological products/solutions to business/organisational problems and the parallel development and expansion of supply of such resources, has gradually transformed technological and organisational change from an activity carried out locally, in-house with restricted resources to a commercial activity carried out within a wider market-like community extending on a global scale. We have termed this emerging socio-economic environment as 'The Agora of Techno-Organisational Change' (Kaniadakis, 2006) and it refers to the global emergence and expansion of a marketplace for the resources necessary to carry out technological changes in business organisations. These resources include technologies such as information systems and software packages, specialised technical and business expertise, change methodologies, project management, etc. The Agora of Techno-Organisational Change is populated by various diverse and heterogeneous actors (suppliers, users, intermediaries, consultants, analysts, the state, professional associations, and so on) with conflicting (or not) interests and diverse viewpoints. In summary, there is an expanding and evolving marketplace for IT and other specialised resources and expertise used to carry out technological change efforts in organisational settings. We have termed this marketplace as Agora of Techno-Organisational Change which is the analytical and practice space where technical and organisational change is happening.

The heterogeneity and diversity of the actors populating the Agora, along with its global expansion, the increased specialisation and the modular design of technological solutions and products make this marketplace appear fragmented and unstructured. This fragmentation of the IT marketplace causes problems both to industry practitioners, that is, the actors within the Agora, and to the academic analysts trying to study it. More particularly, user organisations are encountering high levels of uncertainty in relation to making good procurement investments in technological solutions. What to buy? Who to buy from? Are there any other alternatives? These are questions that reflect the complex structure of the Agora of Techno-Organisational Change which offers a great variety of options at the cost of making procurement decisions more difficult and uncertain. Similarly, suppliers and consultants (or Agora professionals in general) are trying to strategically manage the various networks of vendors, customers, competitors and partners in their attempt to profit within the Agora. Finally, policy makers are having difficulties in planning consistent policies for creating platforms and standards towards structuring the Agora, thus, lacking an integrative approach to innovation policy planning.

The uncertainty and confusion in industrial practice is highly related with a similar picture in academic research. The interdisciplinary study of technological and organisational innovation appears fragmented and unable to analytically capture and explore in an integrative way the emergence and the shaping of the global market for techno-organisational change. A recent focus on implementation studies of local scope as opposed to more technocratic analyses, although informative they create an analytical gap which leaves a broader context of socio-economic relations unaccounted for. In summary, the global marketplace for IT and resources for technical and organisational change appears complex, uncertain, fragmented and unstructured with no clear boundaries. This is due to the mode of industrial practice

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which is fragmented and also due to monolithic academic analyses of diverse foci which adds to the confusion. A more integrative approach is, therefore, needed in order to capture the complexity of the IT marketplace and understand how it is shaped and structured. The Agora perspective offers such an approach.

Empirical research in Greece has shown that technological change in organisations is happening through phases of initiation, design and implementation of change instances in particular organisational settings. During such local instances the wider Agora environment is mobilised and through actors' choices it is configured into specific technological solutions for particular local organisational problems. For instance, there was a Greek Bank who's management decided to go through large-scale restructuring in order to change from a product-centered to a customer-centered marketing approach. This change effort was initiated through negotiations between the bank's top managers with various external Agora professionals from the broader environment who would be involved in carrying out the change. Through subsequent choices and selection they chose a particular consortium (1 out of 5 international competing consortia) which started designing the change combining modern change methods and principles (i.e. BPR) with the particular bank's local particularities (i.e. large branch network, sensitive hierarchies, etc.). Certain design choices were also made during this phase, although things became more particular during the implementation phase. During implementation the design was further customised, changes and adjustments were made and implementation problems were dealt with. Nonetheless, during implementation the final choices were made in relation to the direction of the change based on purely local particular circumstances, politics and negotiations.

This story shows how the broader environment of the global IT marketplace might be linked with local particular instances of technological change in organisations. This way, the analytical gap between localist studies and more macro approaches is in a way filled. During the phases of initiation, design and implementation of change instances and through actors' choices, the abstract, complex and unstructured Agora environment becomes particular as it is configured into a local particular change instance. The indeterminate multiple options, resources and actors within the Agora are reduced through choice, giving the Agora a specific structure and shape when linked with a particular change instance. The existence of multiple such instances and the different ways in which the broader Agora environment becomes configured into each one of them shows the pattern in which the IT marketplace is shaped and structured. This pattern follows a journey from the abstract to the particular and back.

In conclusion, we could suggest that the initiation, design and implementation of techno-organisational change instances influence the way the Agora is shaped/structured, echoing Utterback & Suarez (1990) who link the existence of a dominant product design with industry and market structures. To move the argument a bit further, it could be said that due to the fragmentation of the Agora, the increased specialisation and the modularisation of design of technological solutions, the process of dominant design (and implementation) of instances of techno-organisational change on one hand and the process of shaping/structuring the Agora marketplace on the other, are actually the same thing. In other words, actors' choices during the initiation, design and implementation of change efforts shape and structure the Agora in certain ways. This conclusion gives a new meaning to the notion of strategic management of technological change.

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