Ethical Implementation of ERP Systems and Organizational Readiness

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This paper considers ethical dilemmas that managers confront during the decision-making process before implementing electronic resource planning (ERP) system at their organizations. The paper suggests an ethical decision-making model for resolving such dilemmas. The researchers explore managers' abilities to make ethical decisions in conflict situations when organizational productivity could jeopardize employee job security. Hence, managers become socially responsible, while implementing the ERP system successfully. The paper uses normative ethics and Habermas (1984)'s communication rationality ideologies to reach an ethical decisions creating a win-win scenarios for both managers and employees leading to organizational readiness and more leadership and labor commitment.

Keywords: Ethical Dilemmas, Electronic Resource Planning, Technology Applied Ethics, Organizational Readiness, Leadership Commitment, and Communication Rationality Ideologies

INTRODUCTION

Enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems support the day-to-day business operations and decision-making including internal and external management of information across an entire organization, connecting logistics, finance/accounting, manufacturing, sales, order processing, production, and material resource planning, human resources service and customer relationship management (Khaparde, 2012). ERP systems aim to accelerate communication and improve the exchange of information between different business units within the organization. ERP links departments within the organization with external stakeholders such as suppliers, customers and business partners, thereby improving accountability and enhancing corporate governance (Martin and Haq, 2007).

ERP systems aim to streamline the flow of information inside and across business processes, hence allowing them to cooperate for improved information processing and sharing information (Dorantes, Li, Peters and Richardson, 2013). Successful implementation of ERP systems can potentially lead to operational benefits related to business value chain processes, managerial advantages in the area of resource management planning and decision-making, strategic benefits concerned with business expansion and marketing competition, IT infrastructure, and organizational advantages in the field of organizational learning improvement (Myreteg, 2015).

Organization leadership faces conflicting commitments towards their employees and the organization ownership. They realize that successful implementation of ERP will result in competitive advantages thereby improving their financial performance. Better financial performance would result in further organizational growth and expansion (Myreteg, 2015). On the other hand, ERP technology could lead to a variation in the working hours and in the level of workers' skills needed. Due to technology implementation, some tasks would require less time, resulting in reduction of some labor time and employee pay. These conflicting commitments may potentially undermine management commitment to the future implementation of the ERP project.

The paper will develop an ethical foundation for the implementation of ERP technologies using the corporate social responsibility framework as an antecedent of management and labor commitment to the implementation of the ERP project. The authors will use the normative approach relying on deontological arguments to examine ethical conflicts faced by the management during the implementation of an ERP system in the organization in an attempt to enhance management commitment. The ethical conflicts which managers face in terms of differing management obligations to different stakeholders will be discussed. The authors will attempt to provide solutions for a manager who wants to be socially responsible using Habermas (1984) philosophy of communicative rationality thereby minimizing managers' conflicting moral obligations when implementing the ERP system, thus making the organization ready for the implementation of the ERP system. The paper will discuss research issues pertaining to:

- What are the managers' corporate social responsibilities towards different stakeholders?
- How ethical decisions will increase leadership commitment to the ERP project leading to higher organizational readiness?
- Which of these responsibilities should take precedence in case of a conflict between them?
- Is implementing ERP system ethical even if it has a negative impact on the employees?
- What are the methodologies through which labor resistance could be minimized to allow better corporate performativity and streamlining?

This paper fills a research gap by looking at how ethical decision making is linked to leadership commitment and employee acceptance of the ERP technology. Both factors are considered key building blocks of organizational readiness. The paper builds on the organizational readiness literature of Luminita and Ana-Maria (2013) by looking at organizational readiness from a new angle of ethical decision making. The paper applies ethical theories to a new context of technology implementation to show the dilemma that some ethical managers may have regarding efficiency versus employees' wellbeing. This research answers the call of Lehnert, Park and Singh (2015) for more research on ethical awareness, moral behavior, and normative ethical theories. The paper contributes to practice by recommending Habermas (1984) and his philosophy of communicative rationality to resolve potential problems between labor and management before the ERP project even starts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ethical Theories

Normative theory is the study of ethical action. It is the branch of philosophy investigating questions that occur when deciding about the moral source of action. The word "normative" refers to guidelines or norms for ethical principles or values stating human obligations or duties. Normative theory investigates systems of moral rightness and wrongness to provide principles and procedures for determining what (morally speaking) a person should do and should not do (Uhlmann, Pizarro and Diermeier, 2015).

Normative ethics is secularly based, therefore it is different from meta-ethics because it examines standards for the rightness and wrongness of actions. On the other hand, meta-ethics focusses on the meaning of moral language and the metaphysics of moral facts. Normative ethics is also distinctive from descriptive ethics, because the latter is an empirical investigation of societies' moral beliefs (Foley, 1994).

Descriptive ethics would measure the proportion of people believing a certain action is moral or not, while normative ethics researches whether it is correct to hold such a belief (Uhlmann et al, 2015).

Normative ethics is prescriptive in nature, rather than descriptive. To be effective, ethical discourse must use understandings, procedures, and judgment criteria that most rational people who are concerned with morality and ethics must uphold (Uhlmann et al, 2015). For example, theory T is a normative theory just in case T declares the norm(s) i.e., how things ought/ought not be with respect to some issue (e.g., how a person should act, what should believe, etc.). In declaring the norm(s), the theory will also inform us the truth conditions for such normative sentences as 'Albert should do', 'Michael ought not do A', A ing is the wrong thing to do (Von der Pfordten, 2012) Normative ethics is a theory of morality that originates duty or moral obligation from what is good or desirable as a goal to be achieved. Rawls (2009) developed a theory of justice that aims to prove that freedom and equality could be integrated into a seamless unity. He called this justice fairness. He created the reflective equilibrium procedure as a means to answer questions about ethics and justice. Reflective equilibrium identifies a group of principle judgments about justice then tries to provide justification about these judgments by exploring more abstract principles of justice to serve as a foundation and try to remedy any conflict between the principles one has arrived at and considered judgments about justice. Rawls (2009) also created core principles of justice such as guaranteeing equal basic liberties for all citizens such as freedom of conscience, association, and expression, democratic rights, respecting property rights, and ensuring distributive justice. Rawls (2009) also had a clear conceptualization of a well-ordered society where different groups had to present their case, while providing public reason.

Communicative Rationality Theory

Habermas (1984) philosophy of communicative rationality explores the role of dialogue and language in achieving consensus between different groups of people within organizations. Habermas' argues that it is possible to reach a common understanding between groups with different agendas and objectives using the concepts of universal pragmatics and communication. Individuals and teams need to understand each other and their situations as a collective and collaborative group. All differences in views and opinions need to be debated and discussed to allow reaching a common, consensual agreement (Barrett, 2013).

Communicative rationality explores how different groups with differing perspectives can effectively deconstruct their mental schemas and models and resolve their disputes using objective, subjective, moral and ethical reasons (Barrett, 2013). There are two types of external worlds—objective and social. The objective world consists of "totality of states of affairs that are connected by natural laws which exist or can come into existence or be brought about through interventions at a given time" (Sitton, 2003, pp. 36, Barrett, 2013). In contrast, the subjective world consists of "legitimately regulated interpersonal relationships". The objective world revolves around the state of affairs and is based on instrumental and strategic action. The subjective world revolves around norms where individuals are bound together through "normatively guided interaction" (Sitton, 2003, pp. 46). According to the subjective world, all individuals have varying perceptions of the existing reality. However, by talking, sharing and listening to each other, these preconceived notions can be changed and modified. It is possible to reach a common ground and formulate new languages and mental models (Sitton, 2003). For instance, knowledge has constantly grown over the years. Knowledge conceived during pre-modern theories has been replaced by new forms of understandings and information. Innovations have created new learnings which have freed "…the inner logics of different cultural fields" (Sitton, 2003, pp. 51).

Social Identity Theory

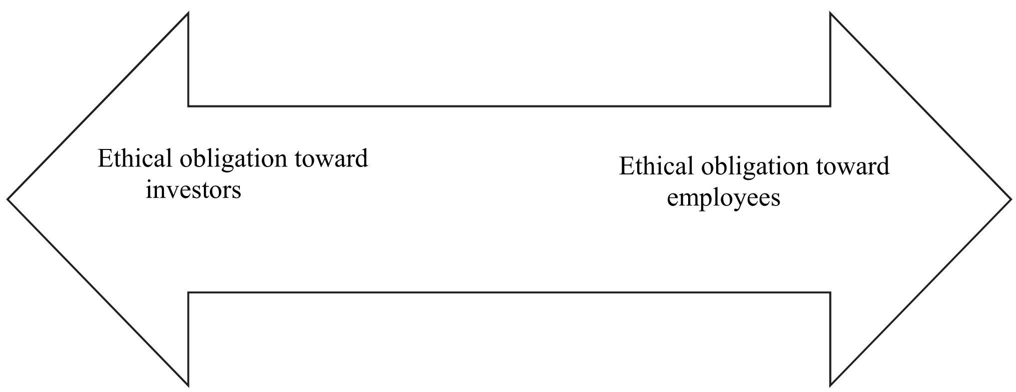
According to social identity theory, individuals are likely to classify themselves and others into various categories such as organizational membership, religious associations, gender, and age cohorts. Individuals tend to have different mental schemas, prototypical characteristics and behaviors based on the categories they have membership to (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Social classification or identification creates a frame or a stereotype for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for certain roles within each category. Furthermore, it gives the individuals a sense of belonging to a particular group making him/her feel personally invested with the success and failure of that group (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). The individual subconsciously also internalizes the values, and attitudes of the group until it becomes part of the individual's self-definition (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

A person's role within an organization plays a key part of the individual's self-identity. Work gives the individual a goal in life i.e., self-esteem (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). At work an individual become part of larger organization, department, work group, union, and lunch group. Hence, an individual at work may have a series of complicated identities that vary in strength (Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

ETHICAL DILEMMA FACED BY MANAGERS

Ethical dilemmas are situations where uncertain conditions, multiple stakeholders, interests, and values are in conflict and laws are unclear (Trivano, 1986). As shown in figure 1 below, a manager may face ethical dilemmas because of the conflict ethical forces pulling his/her conscience at different directions, thus negatively affecting his/her integrity. An ethical manager has obligations to maximize profit and minimize cost to the investors, however s/he also has obligations towards employees' welfare and towards the society. These responsibilities could sometimes become conflicting as in the case when implementing the ERP system specially the conflict between balancing obligations to investors and society on one hand and obligations to employees' welfare on the other hand.

FIGURE 1
ETHICAL DILEMMAS FACED BY MANAGERS



It can be argued corporations operating in the private-sector, are profit-making institutions, with strong accountability towards investors and owners. According to Rawls (2009) conceptualization of justice when implementing an ERP system falls within the property rights. Managers are primarily trustees or fiduciaries for investors and legal owners of a corporation or a firm, and they are entrusted to operate the business in the interests of the investors and owners. A manager is hired by his/her employers to improve the financial performance of the organization (Friedman, 1970). According to Friedman (1970; pp.1), "the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits.'' The implementation of an ERP system is likely to increase productivity, decrease the costs and improve financial performance. Furthermore, ERP implementation will increase the long-term valuation of the firm leading to higher stock prices (Hitt, Wu and Xiaoge, 2002). Therefore, ethical managers are obligated to implement the system as part of their moral duty towards the investors and owners.

In addition, managers in public traded companies are required by law to provide indicators of financial performance. Most firms provide statements for their strategic visions and key projects such as ERP implementations. These can be seen as an alignment with Rawls (2009) public reason requirement for a well-ordered society. Individual firms' advanced operations use sound strategies in branding, marketing, distribution, advanced production processes, and these production products will spill over into the economy resulting in more complex and unique products. Adoption of modern business processes such as ERP system could potentially spread across the country's business sector leading to a more competitive economy (Schwab and Sala-i-Martín, 2017). Therefore, a manager may be ethically obligated to his/her part of duties towards society.

On the other hand, an ethical manager also has a duty toward the employees which is bound by the contract of employment that imposes standards of 'good faith' on their behavior. The term good faith implies that there is mutual trust and confidence (Cabrelli, 2011). Implementing an ERP system may require workers to learn new skills and some may have to change their jobs. Implementation of ERP would result in loss of some jobs, with functions or departments becoming redundant or smaller due to organizational redesign. The system would lead to elimination of various support functions and jobs especially jobs dealing with data collection, recording, recoding and reporting. The elimination of middle managers, support workers jobs and the drastic changes in their roles is one of the key cost saving appeal of this system. For example, less transaction processing time would mean reduction in the number of workers as compared to the old system. It would also mean less workers, one support staff and one clerical staff. ERP systems would also require less warehousing, stock control and production workers. Therefore, some workers with obsolete sets of skills will not be needed due to automation and may lose their jobs or have to be retrained (Hall, 2002).

PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT AND MODEL

Ethics include a person's values, integrity, and courage. Values provide guidance to an individual's moral decisions, integrity is the extent of uniformity and consistency with which a person applies his/his values (Kidder 2005). Ethical decision making in organizations is justified by the combination of individual and situational factors. The manager reacts to an ethical dilemma with perceptions according to his/her cognitive moral development (Trivino, 1986).

According to social identity theory, a manager that views himself/herself as socially responsible is more likely to take actions that reinforce her/his identity by engaging in extra-role helping behavior and more likely to go beyond their formal job descriptions and to work cooperatively with coworkers for the success of the project (Shen and Benson, 2016). This could be lead to increased affective commitment that is linked to emotional attachment to a firm and its projects. Managers with a high level of affective commitment view their jobs as encompassing a wider range of behaviors such as performing extra-duties beyond their job description, persistence, innovation, strategy development (Michaelis, Stegmaier and Sonntag, 2009). Affective commitment is considered critical to major changes in the work place (Michaelis et al., 2009) such as ERP implementation. A management team that is acting ethically is more likely to work with a clear conscience and have stronger affective commitment to the project. According to Cianci, Hannah, Robers and Tsakumis (2014) ethical leadership creates a positive ethical climate that can help management to make ethical decisions which benefits the entire organization. Managers can be viewed as role models for their organizations. This would result in increased leadership commitment that is very visible, well defined leading to successful implementation of ERP (Nordin and Adegoke, 2015).

Socially responsible managers should understand that ERP is a large-scale commitment and investment that requires major commitment from the leadership and employees. The employer is obliged to exercise reasonable care for the physical and psychological welfare of its employees. Managers have to act in accordance to how a reasonable person would have acted in these circumstances, bearing in mind the predictability of harm, the risk of that harm occurring, the severity of the probable harm, the cost and feasibility of thwarting it and the justifications for taking the risk (Cabrelli, 2011). Therefore, a socially responsible manager should attempt to mitigate the damage of implementing the ERP systems on employees such as downsizing, deskilling, routinizing the tasks inherent in some jobs; and the intensification of work in many jobs (Hall, 2002).

P1: *Ethical decision making is positively related to leadership affective commitment.*

Management should encourage open and free communication and dialogue between all the stakeholders involved such as between employees, and between labor and management (Pabst et al., 2016). According to Sarker and Lee (2003), committed leadership, open, and honest communication are key factors for a successful ERP project. A committed manager acts as a leader solving political problems and disputes that may hinder the implementation of the ERP project. S/he should integrate dialogic communication to identify and resolve all forms of resistance (Pabst et al., 2016; Riddell and Roisland, 2017). S/he should convince employees and stakeholders including highly influential leaders of the potential benefits of ERP system. And make a conscious effort to win the trust of employees and all stakeholders and persuade them of the positive behaviors essential for an effective change program (Riddell and Roisland, 2017). One needs to accept that resistance to all forms of change from both stakeholders and employees can only be overcome by listening to them, both "empathetically" and "generatively" (Fair-Wright and Juli, 2016), thereby paving the way for a dialogic conversation. As further explained by Fair-Wright and Juli (2016, p. 3) the manager needs to take up the role of a conductor who coordinates different musicians playing a variety of instruments to perform as a single orchestra ---"…bringing the various musicians together, coordinating them, and forming a whole—without telling them individually what they need to do and how. The key capacity is to listen to the many players, conducting, giving the musicians cues, and thus aligning the whole orchestra. The orchestra is no longer made up of individual musicians but now forms a synchronized unit, a unified system" (Fair-Wright and Juli, 2016, pp. 3).

Habermas (1984) explains that it is possible to reach common consensus either through influence or consent. Influence is dependent on threats, manipulation, force and pressure. Consent relies on appealing to norms, emotions, facts and subjective experiences. Individuals reach common assumptions by sharing their perspectives, reasons and convictions. Communicative rationality adopts a middle line approach of goal attainment where language is used to allow gradual understandings and common goals (Habermas, 1984). Participants during group conversations, confront harsh realities and decisions and try to reach a situation of mutual consensus. It is true conversations can never be free of strategic interests, deeper inner gains and interests, but these can be acknowledged and confronted through justification and defense. Continuous interactions could ultimately lead to a common strategic action which moves the group forward (Sitton, 2003). It cannot be denied all arguments emerge from the historical and structural underpinnings of society (Habermas, 1984). But dialogue does pave the path for common consensus which sways towards corporate efficiency and performativity.

This dialogue is more likely to be fruitful as long as management does not become opportunistic, shirk responsibility or cheat employees (Thauer, 2014). According to social identity theory, when employees believe they are not being seen by management as legitimate valued organizational members, they are likely to become highly indifferent (Shen and Benson, 2016) or more likely to sabotage the dialogue. This indifference probably will have negative effect on organizational identification.

Language and linguistics thus can be effectively used to reach a common understanding and agreement on extreme disputes, conflicts and deviations. People usually are willing to talk and discuss about their actions, goals and plans. It is therefore essential to design and create open forums and spaces where people can communicate their perceptions and perspectives of existing reality. Honest and open communication would initially begin with heated conversations, but people will eventually be willing to listen, understand, reflect and reach a consensus. Consensuses ultimately leads to shared understandings (Habermas, 1984). Thus it cannot be denied that "dialogue is probably the best and most effective way to overcome stakeholder resistance" (Fair-Wright and Juli, 2016, pp. 6).

In other words, the advantages of ERP cannot be denied nor its negative impact on the labor. But management can overcome the negativity surrounding its implementation through labor-management dialogue. Management should design open spaces, forums or meetings, where both management and labor have a chance to converse with each other. A chance where employees are allowed to communicate their feelings, give vent to their perceptions and grievances to the management generating honest, open two-way communication process leading to resolution of conflicts and disagreements (Barrett, 2013). "By focusing … actions or beliefs potentially defensible by reasons, we expand the applicability of the concept far beyond the issue of 'facts' about the objective world of things, beyond the question of efficiency of interventions into this world" (Habermas, 1984 in Sitton, 2003, pp. 45). Open communication demands participants talk, defend their actions, vent their fears and feelings and reflect on overall objectives of the corporation. All perspectives and opinions are evaluated and discussed with the end outcomes of the corporations critically analyzed (Sitton, 2003). An appeal can be made to the employees to reflect on the positive impact of ERP and its capability in transforming and redesigning the company.

It is important for management to create and share a common vision for the organization and the role of the new system. Communication about the ERP project is critical to educate and inform employees about the importance of the project to the organization, thus potentially encouraging them to participate, cooperate, and accept change. Employees should understand clearly how the new ERP system will affect their jobs (Alhakimi and Alzahary, 2015). Management should provide training courses and be willing to provide funding that are required so that employees have good understanding thereby increasing acceptance and satisfaction (Alhakimi and Alzahary, 2015).

By engaging in a pragmatic discourse, managers can determine the optimum way to implement the system based on rational basis to the benefit of all affected stakeholders (Zakhem, 2008). New solutions to minimize the impact of technology on employees such as training workers to perform new tasks, multi-skills training, upgrading work processes potentially leading to increased productivity, more innovativeness, and more flexibility leading to a win-win for both sides (International Labor Organization, 2017). Proper implementation could also lead to new flexible employment opportunities that afford employees more work-life balance allowing employees to take care of family obligations such as more temporary work, flexible shifts, part-time work, multi-party opportunities, and on-call work (International Labor Organization, 2017). These new flexible opportunities could also be a stepping stone for young and disadvantaged groups to build experience and job skills that could lead to permanent employment (International Labor Organization, 2017). Additionally, innovative firms that use technology are potentially more productive, employ more workers, pay their workers better wages, provide better training opportunities, have better educated workers and employ more female workers (International Labor Organization, 2017).

P2: *Leadership commitment is positively related to employees' commitment*

Organization readiness is the extent of the organization's capacity for change. It mainly examines the important resources, infrastructure, knowledge, and competencies that are vital to carry out the change successfully. In a technology context, organizational readiness refers to the extent to which the necessary circumstances to safeguard a successful technology implementation are available and in place or the organization has the ability to deploy them in place on time (Shahrasbi and Paré, 2015).

According to social identity theory, employees that feel their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being are more likely to view themselves as legitimate organizational members. They would be willing to psychologically and emotionally attach themselves to the organization, thus take more risks and endure more personal hardships (Shen and Benson, 2016). Generally, committed employees remain with the organization through good and challenging times, are hardworking, defend company assets and believe in the company's goals (Meyer and Allen, 1997). Technology implementation adds to existing work stress and may require employees to learn new skills. It potentially leads to overload, role ambiguity, and job insecurity (Atanasoff and Venable, 2017). Therefore, it is important to inform the employees about the new system, seek employees' support to change technology and reduce resistance to the ERP system. Early user involvement of employees within the design and implementation of the ERP system as broad top-down and cross-functional communication could generate enthusiasm (Altamony et al., 2016). Employees become more committed to the implementation of technology, this in turn would potentially make the organization ready for implementation.

Therefore, organizations' ability to successfully gain the competitive advantages and cost savings promised by the ERP system is dependent on organizational readiness for implementation of the system.

ERP system will lead to changes to the way business is done and this change may most likely be resisted by many individuals (Luminita and Ana-Maria, 2013). User resistance is one of the major problems that faces implementation of ERP. For the ERP project to succeed, the employees have to accept using the new system (Luminita and Ana-Maria, 2013).

P3: *Employees commitment is positively related to the organization readiness for ERP implementation*

FIGURE 2
ETHICAL DECISION MAKING PROCESS

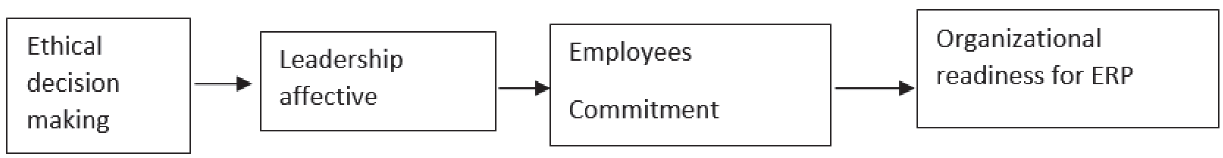


Figure 2 above shows that, ethical decisions making may set a positive chain of events starting from leadership commitment that in turn potentially leads to employees' commitments making the organization ready for ERP implementation. Therefore, it is possible for a socially responsible manager to reconcile differing stakeholders' goals and objectives, thereby accomplishing corporation's end goals and also increasing its efficiency through mutual coordination and cooperation. A successful manager engages in a win-win negotiation style by attempting to reconcile different moral point of views. Concerns for employees, communication effectiveness, cooperation, and teamwork indicate that an organization is socially responsible. This in turn creates a culture that is perceived as open, fair and attractive to potential and existing employees (Mėlynytė and Ruževičius, 2008). Socially responsible manager will make the organization invest in skill enhancing so that employees are able to use the new system and motivation enhancing practices so that employees have a positive attitude toward the technology (Shen and Benson, 2016).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTHER RESEARCH

By examining the ethics of implementing the ERP system using deontological arguments. The researchers argue implementing the ERP system will not contradict the corporate social responsibilities of corporate managers. Firms which are socially responsible are more likely to have a good reputation, great financial performance due to gaining competitive advantages from recruiting, engaging, and retention of more loyal employees (Mirvis, 2012).This may lead to "a psychological contract" between the employees and the firm making the employee feel like a citizen of the organization where there is a mutual trust and shared interests (Mirvis, 2012; pp 96).

However, to mitigate the negative impact on workers, the socially responsible managers should comply with the concept of universal pragmatics and engage in dialogue with their workers. This would allow balancing of the dual but contradicting responsibilities of managers towards their investors pertaining to maximization of financial returns and duties of good faith and reasonable care towards their employees. Managers need to change their mental schemas from that of an aggressive win-lose attitude or winner-take-all negotiation tactics towards a more value-driven win-win approach.

Future research could create an empirical study where managers and employees are surveyed about their feelings, perspectives, and attitudes about the implementation of the ERP system and whether they believe that communicative rationality could resolve the problems relating to the system's implementation. Future research should look at the impact of ERP on companies undertaking an ERP implementation that are operating at a balanced 40-hour workload and compare them with organizations where the majority of employee are over-extended. Future research may examine the impact of the new ERP system on hourly vs. salaried employees, and thus, researchers can examine the impact on wages by reduced hours or only through layoffs/attrition. Researchers can look at the work functions that are being replaced by the ERPs. It would be interesting to examine the ethical differences between public-sector and private-sector managers regarding implementation of ERP systems.

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