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► **To cite this version:**

Sofianne Messaoudi Escarabajal, Régis Meissonier. Autonomy of Information System project managers: A research of institutionalized practices. 4th Business Management International Conference, Burapha University, Nov 2017, Pattaya, Chonburi, Thailand. <hal-01992787>

HAL Id: hal-01992787

<https://hal.science/hal-01992787v1>

Submitted on 24 Jan 2019

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Autonomy of Information System project managers: A research of institutionalized practices

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Abstract

In Information Systems, few researchers studied the influence of mimetic practices of project managers. Indeed, IS project managers are observed as trying to apply “standard methods” or “best practices” observed in the business sector or recommended by experts. At the same time, they are forced to consider the specific context of the company they are working for and the needs and requests expressed by the stakeholders. In Information Systems, few researchers studied the influence of mimetic practices of project managers. So, the question is raised concerning their autonomy in their way to balance this double influencing phenomenon. The paper reviews neo-institutional theories, enhances their sociological approach and presents possible “institutionalized practices” of IS project managers. After it presents a research perspective related to the specific cultural context of our research field: a French educational religious institutions.

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Keywords: IS; project manager; institutionalized practices; freedom of action; new institutional theory

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1. Introduction

A lot of articles in management sciences uses the neo-institutionalist theories to apprehend the way organisation are influenced by their environment. The prefix «neo» the revised versions of institutionalist theories (The « old institutionalism »), those of Weber (bureaucracy, study of institutions and « Iron Cage »), Parsons (cultural and institutional theory of organizations), Simon (decision-making in organizations) since the beginning of the 20th century.

Initiated by DiMaggio & Powell (1983), Meyer & Rowan (1977), Scott (1995; 2001), this way of thinking is based on concepts of isomorphism (adoption of identical structures and solutions) or legitimacy seeking that organizations tends to adopt in their behaviours and decision-making to match with the expectations of their environment.

In Information Systems, few researchers studied the influence of mimetic practices of project managers (Mignerat & Rivard, 2006; Flynn & Du, 2012). Indeed, Information System project managers are observed as trying to apply “standard methods” (ITIL, Cobit, etc.) or “best practices” observed in the business sector or recommended by experts (Mignerat & Rivard, 2010). At the same time, they are forced to consider the specific context of the company they are working for and the needs and requests expressed the stakeholders. So, the question is raised concerning their autonomy in their way to balance this double influencing phenomenon.

The paper reviews neo-institutional theories and enhances their sociological approach and present possible “institutionalized practices” of IS project managers. After it presents a research perspective related to the specific cultural context of our research field: a French educational religious institutions.

Consequently, our project is to observe a threefold influential mechanism on IS managers: (1) the “best practices” in IS projects (professional context), (2) the specific requests of the actors (stakeholders’ context), the historical values endorsed by the organization (cultural context).

2. Literature Review

For neo-institutionalists, institutions are social constructions composed of individuals or interacting organisations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). They are characterised by structures considered as legitimate because being socially accepted and complying with norms or rules of the environment (Suchman, 1995).

This environment is defined as “*a social space which includes a set of organizations constituting a domain of the institutional life characterized by a particular distribution of rules and institutional resources, a cultural and structural equivalence, and a network of interconnection*” (Phillips, 2003).

Institutional organizations and actors in the same context share “*rules, common values, uninterrupted relations and processes based on information flows, as well as on mutual recognition, allowing the social building of needs and of practices*” (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2001). The environment is political, legal, economic and technological. It is seen as the humus on which organizations born, develop and die (Friedland & Alford, 1991) and gives sense and constancy to actors who develop their *institutional logic and practices*.

An *institutional logic* is defined as a set of practices, of symbolic constructions, of beliefs that actors develop in their activities (Goodrick & al., 2000). It may also be considered as the cultural difference that exists between groups (Thornton, 2002). Then, an institution is likely to adopt not only one but several *institutional logics* (concept of *hybridization of values* (Lounsbury, 2007) or *decoupling* (Meyer & Rowan, 1977)).

An *institutionalized practice* is widely adopted solution to a given problem (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). It is a solution, widely broadcasted, adopted by members of a group. In other words, organisations having similar institutional context are likely to use similar solutions to similar problems (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983). The neo-institutionalist theory postulates that macroeconomic actors (complete sectors of the

economy as organizations) as micro-economic actors (different groups of actors composing an organisation, or individuals), apply *institutionalized practices* over time (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) in an imitation way of doing supposed to save the energy and the resources required by more innovative solutions. Over time, such practices take the form of *social norms*, or *standards* having a high degree of resilience (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2001; Abdennadher & Cheffi, 2011).

Some authors, like Meyer and Rowan (1977) questioned the efficiency of *institutionalized practices* by comparing them to “Myths and Ceremonies” whom the symbolic dimension confers some stability to the institution (Scott, 2001).

Three different forms of isomorphism are identified and allow to explain this homogeneity of *institutionalized practices* (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983):

- The *mimetic isomorphism* arises because of the uncertainty (unstable environment, confused purposes of the organization, debatable utility of a new technology), of the limited rationality and competitive pressures. Facing these situations, organizations tend to imitate to be perceived as the most legitimate as possible. This practice is adopted because it strengthens legitimacy (adoption of rituals). This mimicry can also be the result of some transfers of competences, by expert teams, consultants or professional associations (Di

Maggio & Powell, 1983; Haveman, 1993; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999).

- The *normative isomorphism* is the result of the phenomenon of professionalization and the product of the collective effort to rationalize working methods (Scott, 1995). The normalisation of competence profiles (e.g.: recruitment of similar profiles of similar universities), the development of professional networks and organizational models are other sources of normative isomorphism: same project managers, same characters, same qualities or defects are expected as giving similar results.

- The *coercive isomorphism* is the result of the political and regulative pressures played by the State, other organizations competing in the same field of activity, or by societal cultural expectations. These pressures affect many aspects of the global and structural behaviour of the organization and favour the adoption of common standards (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983). The adoption of durable development solution, such as green IT, may be an illustration of *coercitive isomorphism*.

Suchman identified three categories of legitimacy: the *pragmatic legitimacy*, the *moral legitimacy* and the *cognitive legitimacy*.

Table 1 details these categories and sub-categories.

Pragmatic legitimacy	It conforms to personal interests of organisations and his immediate hearings	Legitimacy exchange	Organizational policy organized around expected values of constituents
		Influential legitimacy	Highlighting most important interests of constituents
		Relational legitimacy	Supported by audience, underlines the coherence of values
Moral legitimacy	They include positive evaluations at the normative level	Consequential legitimacy	The organisation is judged on result
		Procedural legitimacy	Technical and procedural compliance with the company's criteria
		Structural legitimacy	Evaluation of structures and categories of organizations
		Personal legitimacy	Charisma of the leader
Cognitive legitimacy	The understanding	Credible legitimacy	
		Predictible legitimacy	
	The evidence (Taken-for-grantedness)	Inevitable legitimacy	The idea of transgression does not cross the mind of actors: the institution guides the behaviour naturally
		Permanent legitimacy	The idea of transgression does not cross the mind of actors: the institution guides the behaviour naturally

Table 1: Categories of Legitimacy (based on Suchman 1995, and Deephouse, 2017)

The legitimacy quest of organizations is closely linked to the strategic alignment concept.

Organisations that assimilate legitimized practices may increase the support of their environment and then ability to survive. Conversely, the adoption of alternative practices is considered as more risky and a source of discomfort (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Greenwood, Suddaby & Hinings, 2002).

However, adopting *institutionalized practices* require some changes can also involve perturbations. Some authors (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996; Greenwood, 2002) described it as a six-stage-process (see table 2).

	Characteristics	Indicators
1.Shaking	Disruption of existing practices	New thrusts in a given institutional context
2.Questioning	Introduction of new ideas	New ideas, new actors, Modification of authority reports
3.Pre-institutionalization	Creation of new procedures, answer to new problems	New procedures, introduced by technological researches
4.Theorization	Search of moral and pragmatic legitimacy by the justification of a possible abstract solution	Asked questions and possible solutions
5. Dissemination	Search for pragmatic legitimacy	Progressive dissemination of new structures Search for legitimacy
6. Full-institutionalization	Sedimentation	New structures are entirely institutionalized Assimilation by actors Not enough resistance but risk of de-institutionalization (if solutions has not effects on the structure)

Table 2: The process of institutionalized practices (adopted from Mignerat & Rivard, 200

Strong criticisms were addressed to neo-institutional theories. Some authors questioned the static character of the isomorphism concept and put forward in interest of analysing transformation processes in more detail (Dacin et al., 2002). Other ones stressed on an incomplete description of rationalization and institutionalization processes (Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000), a poor analysis of power sources and mechanisms (Hoffman, 2001), or socio-cognitive dissonances between actors questioning the ability of people to assimilate and reproduce institutionalized practices as intended (Seo & Creed, 2002).

As a consequence, organizations can also try to abandon some *institutionalized practices*. Oliver (1992) identified three sources that leads organizations to a desinstitutionalization posture:

- Social factors, problems of social divergence and practices between different groups.
- Political factors, problems of interest and the distribution of power.
- Functional factors, problems of performance and the utility.

The use of the neo-institutional theoretical lens in some research (Williams, Lueg et al., 2009; Hofer, Hofer et al, 2011) and especially the theory of the institutional isomorphism (Di Maggio et Powell, 1983) can also be an approach to interpret the decision to adopt or not an IT solution instead of an other one. Concerning IS project management, Mignerat & Rivard (2006), Bernard, Rivard & al. (2004) observed that there three types of institutionalized practices being quasi-rules of managing (Farastier & Carton, 2016):

- *Planning and control practices* that concern the management of activities (the deployment of strategy with the aim of efficient actions) and the management of time as part of project.
- *External integration practices* that assure communication and coordination between members of a project team, between users and managers.
- *Risk management* that aim to anticipate and to prevent the occurrence of factors likely to jeopardize the project.

IS project management are sensitized in standards and "best practices methods", mainly initiated in occidental countries. These concepts are supposed to reduce the risk of non-completion of the project (Avgenou, 2002).

However, beyond norms and habits of institutional organizations, other researchers note that there is a large range of strategic responses from actors facing institutional pressures: decision-making tactics raised by Oliver (1992), or « mindlessness » and « mindfulness » solutions of Swanson & Ramiller (2004) are only some examples that suggest that the institutional actor can react differently facing to institutional habits.

Oliver (1992) and Mignerat & Rivard (2010) identified 4 possible strategic responses, allowing to not conform to institutional pressures and expected practices, and playing with autonomy and freedom margin:

- *The compromise* that is the consequence of a compensation, an appeasement or a negotiation when conflicts of power exist.
- *The manipulation* is an opportunistic response, a control technique of influence and cooptation.
- *The provocation*, and the tactics of rejection.
- *The avoidance* which is a dissimulation tactic, a buffer strategy to hide unconformity to institutional pressures.

Swanson & Ramiller (2004) also supported the idea "mindfulness" responses (opposed to), that is thoughtful choices, characterized by openness to originality and novelty, as opposed to "mindless" solutions considered as mechanical behaviours paying not enough attention to the drawbacks of the norms.

In the Management Organizations of Catholic Teaching (MOCT), which are in charge of a part of the private educational sector in France, isomorphism, institutional solutions, institutional pressures play a significant influence in the management. The empirical part of the article puts forward the interest to investigate this field to understand the way IS project managers maintain use their autonomy when facing to different sources of institutionalized practices.

3. Research perspective

Our research field (the institutional context) is quite unconventional in the framework of Information System because being a religious Teaching institution: Management Organizations of Catholic Teaching (MOCT).

Religious culture, customs, rituals, are the “own character” of this type of institution; this represent a first form of institutionalized practices. A second one corresponds to the standard, the norms and methods in IS management. The last source of pressure is the one of stakeholders (especially the operational managers, the strategic managers and the users). In other words, one contribution of our research will be to put forward that the autonomy of an IS managers is not a balance between IS institutionalized practices on one side and specific needs and request of his company on the other side, but a complex dealing with a threefold context.

Adopting a qualitative research will allow us to analyse the interactions between these 3 components by using different techniques of data collection: interviews, document analysis, observations, etc.

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