

# **PERSISTENT PROBLEMS WITH IT-USER COLLABORATION: A FUNCTIONALIST EXPLANATION OF RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT**

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## **Abstract**

*Collaboration between IT staff and user groups is an enduringly problematic aspect of IS deployment and use in organizations. In this paper we offer an explanation as to why such difficulties persist despite management initiatives designed to eliminate them. We examine how a retail banking organization attempted to improve IT-user collaboration through the creation of an intermediary role called a relationship manager. The new role was not used as intended, and the organizational response was to introduce more relationship managers in an attempt to regain control. Adopting a functionalist perspective, we see relationship management as a problematic structure that served to heighten professional allegiances at the expense of organizational goals, with the unintended consequence that the IT and user departments became more alienated. Finally, we highlight some limitations of functionalist explanation in order to present the implications of our work for professional practice and suggest further directions for IS research.*

**Keywords:** Relationship manager, IT-user collaboration, functionalist explanation, unintended consequences, persistence, human agency, functionalism

## Introduction

For more than three decades, information systems (IS) research has examined ways of addressing issues with collaboration between IT staff and user groups. One body of work has focused on best practice for IS development. For example, the software crisis of the 1970s revealed how often information systems failed to live up to stakeholder expectations and spawned considerable investment in systems development methodologies (Avison and Fitzgerald 1995). Methodology proponents argued that user participation is a major contributory factor to successful IS implementation, and sought to involve prospective users in the development process. Indeed, the theme of empowerment through participation in IS development and implementation may be traced to the early days of the socio-technical movement (Ehn and Sandberg 1983; Hedberg 1980; Kyng and Mathiassen 1982; Mumford and Weir 1979). Nevertheless, there was limited evidence that the use of methodologies involved more than passive user participation. In effect, system users often had little influence on the course of a development project, but through the sign-off process were expected to take significant responsibility for project outcomes (Beath and Orlikowski 1994). Moreover, the goal of achieving more than a token user involvement remains elusive (Spinuzzi 2003).

On the other hand, several authors have attributed the persistent problems with IT-user collaboration to the inherently conflictual nature of systems development (Knights and Murray 1994). Rather than attempting to provide best practice guidelines for bridging a communications gap, this work reveals the politics of user participation (Beck 2002; Spinuzzi 2003) and hence the range of tactics that participants in a development effort might employ to achieve their goals. Researchers have examined the exercise of power by IT professionals, managers and system users, offering a range of explanations of how such power is mobilized and to what effect (Howcroft and Wilson 2003; Kling and Iacono 1984; Knights and Murray 1994; Markus 1983; Markus and Bjørn-Andersen 1987; McGrath 2002). Such work reveals not only continuing concerns about systems failing to meet user expectations (Sauer 1999), but also frequent occurrences of negative social consequences for the actors involved. In short, IT-user collaboration is widely perceived as an enduring problem for organizations, although researchers vary in how they account for attendant negative outcomes.

In this paper, we examine the persistence of this problem by focusing on a management initiative designed to eradicate it. We use a case study of a large retail banking operation in Britain, referred to by the pseudonym Abadia. Our case addresses the creation of an intermediary role – called a relationship manager – intended to facilitate communication between members of the IT division and user departments. This strategy was an effort to improve IT-user collaboration as part of a wider concern that there was insufficient transparency and accountability within Abadia's IT management processes. As such, the new role was inspired by a managerialist rationality, which sought to improve overall organizational performance. However, this initiative failed to achieve desired outcomes and gave rise to unintended, negative social consequences, such as increased alienation among participants. Yet it persisted until Abadia was acquired by a foreign bank and extensive restructuring took place. Our research aim is to explain this persistence. In short, we ask why relationship managers (RMs) – and indeed, IT governance mechanisms more generally – endure in the face of continued negative feedback. Such unintended consequences may include reinforcing existing boundaries (Currie and Glover 1999) and engendering a lack of mutual trust and cooperation among participants (Hatzakis 2004). Hence our study is potentially useful to IS research and practice.

Our analysis is informed by a functionalist argument. Such an approach employs a 'cause and effect' style of argument to explain the persistence of a social structure despite unintended, negative outcomes for participants. In our case, functionalist explanation highlights effectively the intended function – to improve communication between IT staff and business users – and its unintended consequences. It is especially useful for explaining how beliefs or behaviour patterns start to stabilize, and hence it can inform studies of the introduction and endurance of IT governance mechanisms such as relationship management. Our argument differs from a historicist explanation in that it accounts for social structures in terms of consequences for a social group rather than external causal or social forces enabling belief systems and behaviour patterns to self-replicate (Markus 2004). Necessarily, it is premised on a particular view of human agency and social conflict, the implications of which are discussed in the final sections of our paper.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section we review relevant literature and then present details of the functionalist perspective that informs our analysis. In the following sections we provide details of the research setting and describe our research methodology. Then, we present an analysis of the case and a discussion of the limitations of our explanation. Finally, we draw conclusions from the study and identify further research directions.

## The Emergence of Relationship Management

Managing collaboration between IT staff and user groups is often addressed as a cultural gap (Schein 1992), in which organizations create new roles or redefine existing ones with the intent of building partnerships between IT and user departments, providing strategic direction, and advancing organizational effectiveness (Henderson 1990). One such effort was the UK 'hybrid manager' programme (Earl and Skyrme 1992) of the 1990s, which aimed to develop individuals with a combination of business and technical skills – counter to the norm of specialization in most British and North American corporations. However, this programme had limited appeal for aspiring young managers who in general believed that their careers would be better served by following established paths, and indeed, it tended to reinforce existing boundaries rather than bridging between them (Currie and Glover 1999). Researchers have argued that hybrid managers cannot be a solution *per se*. Rather, they need to be supported by adequate structure and processes as well as a sympathetic approach to IT by senior management (Peppard and Ward 1999). A six-stage process model (get the basics right, enlist key influences, build credibility, seek involvement early in projects, place responsibility for IS with business, cultivate and maintain partnerships) has been prescribed as a way to bridge the IT-business gap and create high performance from the IT department (Peppard 2001).

Focusing specifically on change agents, Markus and Benjamin (1996) redefined the traditional 'expert' role of IT professionals to one in which individuals balance a technical, facilitator, and even advocate role. Similarly, system analysis' skills have been identified as user, politically, or technically oriented with a perceived lack of competencies within the IT department when this full spectrum of orientations is not present (Jiang et al. 1999). Indeed, based on the view that creating value through information and communication technologies (ICTs) is the responsibility of the IT function, it is not uncommon for managers to try to re-skill the personnel within their IT departments (Peppard et al. 2000). Moreover, the challenge for Chief Information Officers (CIOs) has been presented as the need to manage their superiors' expectations regarding systems delivery and performance while acting as managers of diverse development teams (Potter 2003).

In this context of building effective partnerships, providing technology leadership and adding value to the organization, the role of the relationship manager<sup>1</sup> (RM) emerged. Relationship management aims to enable closer collaboration between IT and user professionals, so as to facilitate systems development and increase the benefits accruing from IT investment (Subramani et al. 1995). Two models of relationship management have been identified in the literature (Iacono et al. 1995). In the first of these, RMs act as intermediaries or conduits between IT staff and user groups. They work at the operational level, focus on systems development and maintenance processes, and pass information about user IT needs to the IT group. Their tasks are well structured by the project environment in which they work. Success is determined when a project is implemented, based on how well the new system is received. In this approach, RMs seek improved economic value from IT investments by addressing the social aspects of IS development and the deep cultural gap that is perceived to exist between business and IT functions in many organizations (Peppard and Ward 1999; Ward and Peppard 1996; Willcocks and Margretts 1994).

In the second model, RMs act as entrepreneurs or change agents. They work at a more strategic level, focus on integrating or reconfiguring organizational structures and processes, and aim to build a responsive IT infrastructure. Their work is very unstructured (Applegate 1994), requiring experimentation, learning and an ability to achieve results from whatever resources are at hand. Success in such a role involves building effective partnerships between IT and user groups as an essential aspect of the redesign of business capabilities. In this approach, RMs aim to add value by working around bureaucratic constraints to provide an integrated set of interfunctional organizational processes.

In practice, individual RMs have to enact roles as intermediary and entrepreneur to varying degrees – dependent upon the organizational context in which they work – with the inevitable tensions that such demands give rise to. Their major goal is to remove barriers to collaboration in order to increase and strengthen the bonds between business and IT staff and improve work processes. In general, they have no budget or staff, so they rely heavily on their personal credibility, knowledge and negotiation skills to influence peers (Hatzakis 2004; Iacono et al. 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> These specialized middle management roles have been known by a variety of other names, including account manager, consultant, and client executive.

Although there has been continued effort by researchers and practitioners to find means of facilitating IT-user collaboration and derive best practices towards a successful relationship, there has been limited investigation of the unintended consequences of the governance mechanisms that have been adopted. These consequences may be positive and negative for the organization. Crucially, where the mechanisms adopted have some beneficial consequences but do little to address the issue of collaborative working, there is scope for these mechanisms to endure, even multiply, potentially limiting the organization's ability to address its core problem. We examine this issue by addressing the phenomenon of unintended consequences in the context of a retail banking operation that employed RMs with the goal of improving IT-user collaboration. Our aim is to explain why the use of RMs persisted and spread, despite both a failure to achieve the desired goal and negative consequences for the social group. The type of functionalist argument we adopt is outlined next.

## **A Functionalist Approach to Research**

The functionalist paradigm was the dominant force in twentieth century sociology and organization theory (Knights and Murray 1994). It comprises many different schools of thought, ranging from an extreme form of objectivism on the one hand, through social system theory, to the more subjective arguments expressed in integrative theory and interactionism on the other (Burrell and Morgan 1998). Within the spheres of objectivism and social systems theory, there has been strong commitment to using the models and methods of the natural sciences to study social phenomena. Indeed, Durkheim's positivistic, biological analogies have been highly influential in certain branches of the social sciences, notably anthropology. These spheres of functionalism are rooted in general systems theory (von Bertalanffy 1968), which has been influential within the IS field in a 'hard' variant (based on mathematics and engineering) and a 'soft' variant (concerned with the sociotechnical realm). They are concerned with taking a holistic view of the world in which the complex interrelationships of 'wholes' and their emergent properties – rather than individual parts – are the focus of attention.

On the other hand, strong influences from the German idealist tradition have been evident in work at the more subjective end of the functionalist paradigm; hence functionalism should not be conflated with positivism. Indeed, integrative theory and interactionism sought to link or combine sociological positivism with elements of German idealism and Marxist theory, and hence fuse theoretical perspectives from writers as diverse as Durkheim, Marx, Simmel, Mead and Weber (Burrell and Morgan 1998). More recently, this branch of functionalism has been developed by Merton, Parsons and a number of contemporary neofunctionalist theorists. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a more detailed account of the history of the functionalist tradition, interested readers are referred to Burrell and Morgan (1998) and, for more recent developments, to Markus (2004), who provides a useful guide to the literature.

Our work in this paper is informed by the less objective branches of functionalism, in which we aim to provide a functionalist explanation combining etic (outsider's) analysis with emic (insider's) understanding of the meanings individuals attributed to the relationship management initiative within Abadia. A functionalist argument focuses on the linkages among individuals, organizations and the environment and at this level of analysis its assumptions of social order, relative stability and shared values are frequently sustainable. Specifically, we provide an explanation along the lines indicated below.

Functionalist explanations adopt a cause and effect style of argument, in which a structure that is to be explained produces and maintains a function, which feeds back to reinforce the structure. In an example given by Markus (2004), the structure to be explained concerned patterns of email use, which had unintended, anxiety-inducing consequences for staff at a health insurance company. These outcomes were explained by the function, which attributed the patterns of use and the negative social consequences they induced to the shared belief that email was the primary medium of work-related communication at the firm. Drawing upon the work of several leading sociological thinkers, including Stinchcombe, Elster and Douglas, Markus outlines the key elements of functionalist explanation and the requirements for a persuasive explanation as follows:

Key elements of functionalist explanation (Stinchcombe 1968):

1. The structure to be explained is a 'problematic activity', in the sense that it has negative consequences for a social group. It may be a pattern of behaviour, a social structure such as a governance mechanism, a belief or idea system.
2. The structure serves a wider social need, which is the function of the activity.

3. Forces (or tensions or difficulties) tend to destabilize the function, as, for example, changing market conditions can destabilize efforts to improve organizational performance.
4. A feedback loop is created from the function to the structure so that, while the structure maintains the function, the function in turn reinforces the structure.

Elster was critical of functionalist explanation for according a weak role to human agency. Rather than seeing structures as distinct from individuals and hence impinging on their freedom of action, he preferred 'rational choice' arguments, which see individuals as intentional, goal-seeking actors who make deliberate rational choices about how they will behave and to what effect. Thus he argued that a functionalist explanation could be persuasive if and only if it met the following requirements (Elster 1983):

1. The function is both a consequence of the structure and beneficial for the social group. These conditions follow from the definition of a function.
2. The function is unintended by the social group and it (or at least the way it feeds back to maintain the structure) is not recognized by group members. In short, the action cannot be explained as rational choice or intentional goal-seeking behaviour.
3. The causal feedback loop through which the function maintains itself is a property of the group but no more than a by-product of individual actions. In other words, the function needs a structure to maintain it, which constrains the behaviours of members of the social group.

Douglas (1986) resolved some contradictions in the criteria proposed by Stinchcombe (1968) and Elster (1983), in particular regarding the position that functionalist explanations are not rational choice arguments. Specifically, Stinchcombe emphasized people's motivations to achieve the function in the face of forces threatening to destabilize it, which in Elster's view meant that the function had to be intended by the social group, and thus a rational choice. However, Douglas showed that people could like or desire the benefit of a function without liking or desiring the function itself, as in the way that conspiracy beliefs – an undesirable function – benefit latent groups (informal collections of people with common interests) by keeping them together. In effect, the conspiracy beliefs are a consequence of weak leadership and strong group boundaries, which characterize latent groups and make them prone to desertion and treachery by their members, while the expulsion of such traitors reinforces those same characteristics.

Although functionalist ideas may be implicit in much theory and research within the IS field (Knights and Murray 1994), a functionalist perspective has rarely been invoked explicitly in IS research (Markus 2004). An early reference appeared in the seminal paper by Hirschheim and Klein (1989), who presented functionalism as one of four paradigms of IS development. Later, Drummond (1996) adopted a functionalist perspective as one of three views for analysing the failure of the TAURUS (Transfer and Automated Registration of Uncertificated Stock) project at the London Stock Exchange. More recently, Markus (2004) provided a further example, which informs the functionalist explanation presented in this paper. In the interim, anecdotal evidence suggests that functionalism has sometimes been conflated with positivism – even though certain functionalists do not necessarily adopt a positivistic approach (Hirschheim and Klein 1989). In short, despite intense debates in several branches of the social sciences about the merits or otherwise of functionalism and neofunctionalism, the adoption of either paradigm within IS research is limited. Indeed, in light of Markus's detailed exposition of the requirements of good functionalist explanation, very many instrumental analyses of IS phenomena fail to qualify. For example, a focus on the linkages among individuals, organizations and their environment is prevalent in much of the literature on strategic IS planning, yet key aspects of functionalist explanation are missing (Markus 2004). Specifically, strategic alignment models are not functionalist explanations because the function – that is, improved organizational performance – is neither an unintended consequence of the action nor a phenomenon that is unrecognized by participants. In providing a functionalist explanation of the case that follows, we adopt the above criteria derived by Markus from the works of Stinchcombe, Elster and Douglas. We then highlight the limitations of our explanation from an alternative position on human action and social order.

## **Case Study Narrative**

Abadia (a pseudonym) is a large financial service provider in Britain with recent pre-tax profits of about £2 billion. During the 1990s, the organization operated in wholesale banking and wealth management/long term savings as well as the retail banking sector. Following strategic changes dating from 2000, Abadia decided to focus on personal banking, which had been its traditional area of expertise. At the time of this research in 2001/02, its retail banking

division employed over 15,000 staff throughout the UK, several thousand of whom worked at company headquarters in the British Midlands.

Retail banking was not only the oldest but also the most profitable part of Abadia's business. It dealt with a customer base of over 15 million people and provided services which included current accounts, credit cards, share dealing and money transfers. Retail customers had access to a network of approximately 700 branches, about 3000 ATMs, a number of telephone call centres and Internet banking facilities. By 2001, Abadia had engaged in several joint ventures, where its management believed that partnering with other organizations could improve the service offered to retail customers. Managing these sourcing relationships was a significant activity within Abadia. Thus, at the start of this research, many members of the organization had already made both a theoretical and practical engagement with the key ideas of relationship management.

Following the reorganization in 2000, all of Abadia's IT professionals became part of an expanded, centralized group IT division of 3,500 people. Some members of staff, who had previously been co-located with the business units, were relocated to offices sited about two miles from the headquarters of Abadia's retail banking operation. A group IT director was appointed internally, with the mission of achieving economies of scale while improving the service offered to the various business units of the bank, including customer service, retail sales, and information management. The new group IT division comprised units concerned with solutions delivery, infrastructure, IT architecture, and customer support. Thus, IT activities were separated from the business and, in the rationalization process that took place, established boundaries of working were reconfigured.

The new group IT director had experience of working in both IT and retail banking roles within Abadia. Her expressed aims were to create 'one team' of IT and bank staff working together, and to take the group IT division to a 'world class' position, as expressed in ISO9001 and CMM (Capability Maturity Model) accreditation. She initiated a cultural change programme, called 'Changing the Way We Work', which derived a set of values and behaviours that everyone in the division was expected to adhere to. Staff were measured and rewarded according to how well they performed their 'technical' tasks and also by the extent to which their behaviours were judged to foster collaborative working within Abadia – the 'one team' approach. The ideas were influenced by a parallel programme within the retail banking division called 'Living the Brand', which measured and rewarded staff according to their perceived value adding capabilities.

Within this context of organizational restructuring and cultural change programmes, Abadia implemented a relationship management initiative. This initiative was a response to findings from an internal survey that highlighted communication difficulties affecting collaboration between banking and IT staff. The candidates appointed as RMs were thought to have a combination of business and technical skills as well as the personal credibility to build effective relationships between IT staff and banking system users. Implemented alongside a change programme within the retail banking division – the Retail Transformation Programme – the relationship management effort we examine in this paper aimed to facilitate communication among diverse units with the ultimate goal of optimizing the use of resources and the delivery of benefits to the organization. Following a description of our research methodology, we examine the unintended consequences of that effort and present insights about why communications problems persisted despite management initiatives designed to eradicate them.

## **Research Methodology**

The data for this research were collected between Autumn 2001 and Autumn 2002 in two phases of six months each. At the time, the research team was involved in the implementation and evaluation of the relationship management initiative referred to above. The project was funded by a leading UK research council. It sought to understand and address the issues related to collaborative working between the business and IT divisions of Abadia and derive wider implications for managing cross-functional collaboration in contemporary organizations.

During Phase 1 data were collected via semi-structured interviews, which provided an overview of the nature of the interactions among two divisions employing nearly 20,000 staff. Interviewees were asked to comment on issues arising and whether, and how, they felt RMs could help. Internal documents provided further details of the organization's history and context. During this phase 34 interviews were conducted, involving 1 Board director, 15 sub-Board directors and 18 middle managers from both the retail banking and group IT divisions. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed and a presentation was made to Abadia's management elaborating the issues identified in the internal survey, their perceived causes and the potential for an RM role to address each issue. At the same time, Abadia recruited three RMs.

During Phase 2 of the research, the RMs were observed while carrying out their work. In addition to the researchers' field notes, data were collected via a questionnaire and follow-up telephone interviews that sought to evaluate the relationship management initiative. Again, managers from both the retail banking and group IT divisions took part in this exercise. In all, 13 questionnaires and telephone interviews were completed during this phase.

These data were collected by a research team that worked with Abadia to develop best practices for relationship management interventions. The authors of this paper were subsequently involved in the data analysis as a means of providing alternative insights on why communication problems persisted despite the RM initiative. Our analysis involved the use of qualitative methods and a grounded approach, as suggested in the constructivist perspective of Charmaz (2000) more so than the positivistic methods of earlier proponents of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). As such, we saw grounded theory as a set of flexible heuristics rather than a prescription and as an emergent rather than deterministic approach to data analysis (Barrett and Walsham 1999; Orlikowski 1996).

Initially, our analysis focused on identifying themes relating to IT-user communication, in particular perceptions about working practices, supporting structures and especially the role of the RMs and the extent to which the RM initiative seemed to be meeting intended goals concerned with improving IT-user collaboration. We read all interview transcripts, project reports and supporting documentation to identify issues and themes relating to the above topics. We also had discussions with members of the team that collected the research data. We grouped the emerging themes about the use of RMs according to the nature of the outcome achieved and its contribution (or otherwise) to IT-user collaboration. Through an ongoing process of reading the IS literature, re-examining the data, engaging with colleagues and subsequent reflection, a line of argument started to emerge. One of our key findings was a link between the use of RMs and the desirability of certain unanticipated outcomes to participants in the RM initiative. Our reading of the literature suggested that functionalist explanation provided a means of abstracting our findings. Such an argument could explain the endurance of a particular governance mechanism (in this case, the RMs) despite consequences that its protagonists did not intend. Importantly, though, we felt that this case highlighted some of the limitations of functionalist explanation as well as its strengths, as discussed in the remaining sections.

## **Analysis**

### ***Consequences of Relationship Management***

The RM initiative was expected to improve communication between staff in the IT and business divisions. The issues that needed to be addressed were summed up by the IT director of the retail bank as follows:

IT people ... needed to ... understand the broader organizational context within which the company was operating [and] also ... the communication styles of Retail Bank staff. ... Retail Bank staff ... needed to respect the difficulties of implementing formal systems within their own dynamic environment and learn to communicate more effectively with IT staff.

Some short-term improvements were achieved. For example, the view that:

Relationship management gives me a focal point to someone who understands how things can be resolved (Call centre manager).

RMs were thought to have a number of attributes and skills contributing to this outcome. For example, staff within the retail banking division claimed that the RMs produced informative reports, could deal with technical problems and offer solutions, and drew attention to the issues they raised owing to their status and authority. Moreover, the RMs were thought to have the interpersonal skills necessary to gain acceptance for their role within the organization. Indeed, proponents in many parts of the retail banking division claimed that although IT staff did not understand the importance of their job, the RMs appreciated the significance of their role.

Nevertheless, the RM initiative also had unintended consequences. More specifically, the use of RMs allowed IT and user staff to focus on core tasks, but those same circumstances were responsible for increased alienation between departments, loss of control over priorities for IS development, and failure to develop staff competences while the need for RMs mushroomed. The unintended consequences of the RM initiative and their contributory factors are discussed next and then summarized in Table 1.

### **Increased Alienation Between Departments**

Although the RM initiative was set up to mediate IT-user communication, it tended to replace it. Thus IT and user staff reduced their commitment to meetings, to taking telephone calls, and to personal interaction about business issues and possible IT solutions. Moreover, they perceived that this way of working was more 'efficient' (Programme Manager) since it enabled them to 'concentrate on what needs to be done' (Systems Development Manager). Indeed, some argued that the status quo was irreversible:

If we had to go back [prior to relationship managers], you wouldn't know where to go and you would have to spend time building individual relationships with people – to me, this would be a pain (Programme Manager).

Crucially, staff remained oblivious to the adverse consequences of the way they used RMs, and especially to how their approach to RM implementation increased alienation among them. Specifically, knowledge sharing and understanding between groups was not cultivated, and formal communication procedures (such as service level agreements between departments) remained underdeveloped, despite efforts by the IT department to establish them. Neither IT nor retail banking staff felt appreciated by the other, yet both groups seemed oblivious to the way that these repercussions resulted from their increasing tendency to limit their engagement in IT-user interaction. The tension between groups is expressed by an employee from the call centre:

The [IT department] have good intentions but do not understand the importance of our job, while [one of the RMs] appreciates our role.

### **Loss of Control over Priorities for IS Development**

Abadia has a formal system for evaluating and prioritizing new projects, of which more than 300 are initiated every year. Nevertheless, retail bank staff sometimes bypassed the formal process, since they felt that IT staff would try to place constraints on their requirements for new initiatives and thus limit the scope of the proposed projects. IT staff, on the other hand, felt that they were responding to competing demands for scarce resources in a situation where demand always outstripped supply. The upshot of this problem was that the IT department often lacked crucial information necessary for the planning and delivery of projects.

RMs were given the objective of addressing this issue, through identifying the knowledge needs for effective IT-user collaboration. However, the unintended consequence of their efforts was that bank staff acknowledged in the RMs the requisite capabilities to understand business priorities; hence they filtered ideas for new projects through the RMs on an informal basis. Thus, rather than enabling tighter monitoring of priorities for IS development, the RMs were implicated in further subversion and a loss of control of the prioritization process. The deteriorating relationship is summed up by an operations manager who remarked:

Once upon a time, when they [business staff] had a problem, they would come to us and we would discuss it. We worked hard to get there. Now all we know is what relationship managers tell us.

### **Failure to Develop Staff Competences While the Need for RMs Mushrooms**

Abadia's RM initiative did not engender the type of collaboration between IT and user professionals envisaged at the outset. In particular, the RMs generally failed to facilitate discussion between the two groups or to engage active participation from a wide audience. Thus staff potential in important areas related to cross-functional teamworking remained underdeveloped.

Furthermore, RMs became involved in conflict resolution, since disagreements among staff from different departments were not uncommon. However, by adopting the role of front line support for everyday issues, RMs were prevented from taking a more strategic approach to communication problems. Indeed, their intermediation, while tactically effective, had the unintended consequence of failing to foster the identity building and reciprocity among staff needed for ongoing collaboration. This issue is related to the earlier consequence of increased alienation between departments, since it was argued that RMs:

... decreased instances of aggravation, but perpetuated the 'us-them' mentality (Project Manager).

Moreover, it meant that RMs got involved in a wide range of minor operational matters, giving rise to a cycle of increasing dependence on the RMs and a mushrooming need for them. In this way, the RMs built strong social



networks with key internal staff and with Abadia’s suppliers, while IT and business staff became more entrenched in isolated professional groups.

In terms of the two models of relationship management identified by Iacono et al (1995), Abadia’s RMs embodied conflicting and contradictory aspects of both types in an ineffective hybrid model rather than demonstrating the skills to enact roles as intermediary or change agent as situations required. Specifically, the RMs worked at the operational level, but since there were only three of them they were spread too thinly to make an impact on systems development and maintenance processes for the hundreds of projects Abadia undertook annually. Equally, though, they were unable to engage in the experimentation and innovation necessary to overcome bureaucratic constraints and reconfigure organizational structures and processes.

**Table 1: Unintended Consequences of the RM Initiative and their Contributory Factors**

Unintended consequences	Contributory factors
Increased alienation between departments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RM initiative allowed staff to focus on core tasks</li> <li>• Less communication between IT and user groups</li> <li>• Knowledge sharing and understanding between departments not cultivated</li> <li>• Neither IT nor the business felt the other appreciated them</li> </ul>
Loss of control over priorities for IS development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RMs defined knowledge requirements for IT-user collaboration but themselves became the focal point for such interactions</li> <li>• Formal procedures were bypassed or subverted</li> </ul>
Failure to develop staff competences, while need for RMs mushrooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RM initiative lacked facilitation and participation qualities that would help develop staff potential</li> <li>• RMs became involved in conflict resolution</li> <li>• RMs did not work at strategic level. They were used as first line support for everyday problems</li> <li>• Cycle of increasing dependence on RMs, who were involved in a wide range of issues</li> <li>• RMs built strong networks with staff and suppliers making themselves indispensable.</li> </ul>

***Destabilizing Tensions***

The use of RMs gave rise to added bureaucracy, duplication of work, a loss of staff visibility to senior management and conflicting expectations about what an RM role might achieve. Nevertheless, RMs were used extensively within Abadia. Such persistence in the face of destabilizing tensions is a requisite part of functionalist explanation, described earlier.

Added bureaucracy arose because staff had to work with another layer of management introduced by the RMs. Specifically, they had to book appointments with RMs in order to raise issues, and then wait several days while RMs contacted the appropriate people and arranged meetings to discuss the issues. Furthermore, RMs introduced new reporting requirements, adding to the number of documents produced for or by the IT department. IT managers claimed that these changes resulted in conflicting procedures and duplication of work, as in the case of service availability reports. Moreover, they argued that RMs were intervening in work already performed by the systems managers in their departments who handled communication with the retail business:

There have been some instances of stepping on other people’s toes ... I would say that we have always had relationship managers in place, but they were called systems managers before.

Some employees came to feel that they had lost their visibility within the organization because RMs did their networking for them, were frequently used to escalate problems, and hence were perceived as a “gateway” to senior management. Staff from both the IT and business divisions began to suspect that RMs kept people apart rather than bringing them together. More specifically, RMs were viewed as being ‘in the way’ of lateral communication within the organization and of cutting links between staff and senior managers in the vertical hierarchy.

Such tensions were compounded by the lack of clarity about the role of RMs in the organization and the associated difficulty of determining the appropriate RM to talk to about a particular issue. Such ambiguity added further delays to the communications process. In short, RMs did create more opportunities for knowledge sharing and collaboration than had existed prior to their introduction, but at the cost of more bureaucratic procedures in which they were an essential (and even, indispensable) link. While employees questioned the added value of RMs to the organization, they also engaged in some negotiation of roles in an effort to come to terms with the RM implementation. Such destabilizing tensions threatened the RM initiative but did not undermine it, since the initiative also provided the benefit of allowing staff to focus on core tasks.

### ***The Elements of Functionalist Explanation***

The RM initiative examined in this paper was adopted because the management of Abadia believed that introducing such a role would improve communication between IT and the rest of the organization and ultimately lead to improved organizational performance. In reality, the problematic situation of poor communication between departments was reinforced, as people from both IT and the business units delegated responsibility for effective communication to the RMs. In effect, as people focused on core tasks, they developed a heightened sense of allegiance to their professional role at the expense of organizational goals, resulting in professional entrenchment. Thus, the RM initiative did not improve communication in the way intended (although some short term improvements did occur). In short, the RMs became a necessary interface between alienated departments rather than a means of facilitating communication and integration among them.

Our analysis has the key elements of functionalist explanation – a problematic activity (structure); a function; destabilizing tensions; and a causal feedback loop (Stinchcombe 1968) – and the required elements of a persuasive explanation – the function is a consequence of the structure; is beneficial, unintended and unrecognized by the social group; and results from group rather than individual action (Elster 1983). Specifically, the problematic activity was the persistence of communication problems and further alienation among groups of staff following introduction of the RM initiative. This initiative served the wider social need (the function) of allowing both IT and user staff to concentrate on their core tasks with the RMs facilitating interaction between them. The opportunity to focus on core tasks reduced the communication overhead for staff, which in turn reinforced the use of RMs (the structure) for everyday functional needs. IS research acknowledges the use of third parties to allow a focus on core competences. Indeed, its benefits for the social group are a central tenet of the IS outsourcing literature (Currie and Willcocks 1997; Lacity and Hirschheim 1999; Prahalad and Hamel 1990). However, the RM initiative was not introduced to achieve these benefits or to provoke the negative consequence of professional entrenchment. Rather, the aim was to improve IT-user communication, with a view to increasing transparency and accountability within the organization. Crucially, staff seemed unaware that, by focusing on core tasks and delegating responsibility for effective communication to the RMs, their own reduced interaction with other colleagues distanced them to the point of alienation. Instead, the number of RMs was increased because staff perceived value and benefit from the role, despite the tensions discussed above that threatened to destabilize it. These elements are summarized as items A-H in Table 2 together with an illustration of how they applied in the Abadia case.

## **Discussion**

In this paper we explain the persistence of problems with IT-user collaboration by peoples' allegiance to their professional identities, even at the expense of wider organizational goals. In our case, such allegiance was maintained despite destabilizing tensions, such as additional bureaucracy and loss of visibility internally. In these circumstances, staff devised workarounds to get the job done in the face of limitations in the formal mechanisms. For example, faced with a bureaucratic prioritization process, they would absorb development work into infrastructure projects, since the latter were subject to a less scrutiny on the basis that they were deemed necessary (rather than desirable) to Abadia's operations. Thus, Abadia's relationship management initiative persisted until the company was taken over by a foreign bank and a major reorganization took place, in which many jobs were shed, combined or redesigned. Up until that time, Abadia's management perceived value in the RM role and indeed some improvements in communication did occur. Moreover, the RMs were used so extensively by staff that their number was increased from three to eight.

**Table 2: Functionalist Explanation of the Negative Consequences of the RM Initiative**

Essential elements	Illustration
Structure to be explained (A)	The use of RMs to mediate IT-user interaction resulting in the persistence of communication problems and further alienation of departments after the introduction of the RM initiative
Function (B)	The RM initiative served the wider social need of allowing both IT and user staff to concentrate on their core tasks with RMs facilitating interaction between them
Destabilizing tensions (C)	The use of RMs gave rise to added bureaucracy, duplication of work, a loss of staff visibility to senior management and conflicting expectations about what they might achieve. Nevertheless, RMs were used extensively
Causal feedback loop (resulting from group rather than individual action) by which the function maintains the structure (D)	The opportunity to focus on core tasks reduced the communication overhead for staff, reinforcing the use of RMs for everyday functional needs
Warrants that the function is a consequence of the structure (E)	The use of an intermediary to allow a focus on core tasks is acknowledged in IS research, e.g. in the outsourcing literature
Warrants that the function is beneficial for the social group (F)	Focusing on core tasks heightened peoples' sense of identity and belonging to a particular group and hence their professional allegiance. The benefits for a social group of focusing on core tasks is a central tenet of the IS outsourcing literature
Warrants that the function is unintended by the social group (G)	Staff did not set out to achieve a focus on core tasks nor to provoke negative consequences from the use of RMs, such as alienation between departments. Rather, RMs were appointed to improve communication among groups
Warrants that the function (or at least the feedback loop between function and structure) is not recognized by group members (H)	People were aware that they had more time to focus on core tasks. However, they remained unaware that their reduced communication with other departments distanced them to the point of alienation, and indeed they increased the number of relationship managers (because they perceived value and benefit in the role).

Our analysis differs from both managerialist and institutionalist arguments. The former explains the persistence of a social structure in terms of its capacity to produce intended outcomes, while the latter explains its enduring nature as the replication of an already accepted social or cultural practice. By contrast, functionalist arguments explain persistence in terms of consequences, in particular consequences that are unintended and unrecognized by members of the social group. Such explanations have been criticized for underplaying the role of human agency and social conflict (Markus 2004). In our case, one might question whether Abadia's IT and user professionals – who, as they strove to get the job done, became more alienated from each other – could remain unaware of how their behaviours contributed to this outcome. The answer to this question is not straightforward, given the size of the divisions concerned (about 20,000 people in total) and the fact that they were geographically dispersed. Nevertheless, in this section, we outline how such questioning might lead to an alternative explanation of what occurred.

Our case study revealed the managerialist rationality that inspired the RM role. It also identified the consequences of the RM initiative. A strong social constructivist position would identify such outcomes as socially shaped, see conflict as endemic in social relations, and hence view the consequences as the result of a contest for resources among diverse actors (Avgerou and McGrath 2007; Knights and Murray 1994). Delegating responsibility for communication to the RMs would be viewed as a political act, reflecting the interests of the actors involved, which

typically would be different and even conflicting. While such action may have unintended consequences, individuals would be viewed as knowledgeable reflective actors, who attribute meaning to events and behaviours and always have some potential to change their social circumstances.

Moreover, the behaviour of the RMs would also reflect the power dynamics of the social context. Their role as mediators of communication between the IT department and the retail bank left open to question whether such intermediation would be required on a long term basis. Faced with such uncertainty, their efforts to develop strong social networks and cross-functional knowledge seem less about facilitating interaction than about making themselves indispensable – what Callon (1986) refers to as an obligatory point of passage in the network. The way they became involved in conflict resolution and other day-to-day operational issues may be viewed as further evidence of their need to be seen as an essential link in the chain, because ‘they need to justify what they are doing’ (head of IT service development). However, it also seems to indicate tactical use of the RMs by staff – as the arbitrators of ongoing squabbles – while the process of developing and implementing information systems continued in much the same way as before the RM initiative was introduced.

In this explanation, managers, IT specialists, user staff and the RMs have conflicting goals. The increased transparency and accountability that managers sought through the RM initiative was not achieved. Rather, staff misused and subverted the RM role, swamping the RMs with issues, the resolution of which would be convenient for the staff involved without making an impact on the *status quo* for prioritizing, developing and deploying information systems. RMs accepted such an alternative definition of their work on the basis that it allowed them to show some ‘quick wins’ in resolving minor disputes. Managers then increased the number of RMs in response to a growing demand for their services, although the RMs were simply sucked into a dysfunctional hierarchy which modified the original goals of the RM initiative.

The above remarks are not intended to represent a full alternative analysis of the case, but simply to use the material to highlight some key criticisms of functionalist explanation from the perspective of social constructivism – an approach seen as diametrically opposed to functionalism (Knights and Murray 1994). These alternative positions indicate the different research orientations of the members of the research team involved with this case and the contrasting explanations they developed. Crucially, though, they highlight both the potential and limitations of functionalist explanation, which provides an account of the social dynamics through which structures start to stabilize based on shared values, limited awareness, and a weak role for human agency rather than the conflicting goals and reflexive acting inherent in social constructivist accounts.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we examine relationship management as a governance mechanism premised on adding value through building effective relationships between IT staff and user groups. In our case, the RM initiative was a strategy to improve IT-user collaboration as part of a wider concern about strengthening Abadia’s IT management processes and ultimately enhancing overall organizational performance. The RMs were appointed because they were thought to have the requisite business and technical knowledge and negotiating skills to facilitate communication among the diverse units and hence build the relationships necessary for a more effective collaboration process. However, this initiative did not achieve the intended improvements in either process or performance. Rather, it heightened professional allegiances, resulting in increased alienation between departments, a loss of control over priorities for system development, and a failure to develop staff competences in collaborative working, while the need for RMs mushroomed. Yet the initiative endured until Abadia was subject to acquisition by a much larger foreign bank when significant rationalization took place. Our findings have the following implications.

First, previous studies suggest that hybrid management roles such as RMs tend to reinforce existing boundaries rather than bridging between them (Currie and Glover 1999). Such arguments attribute the persistence or abandonment of these initiatives to their success (or otherwise) in achieving intended outcomes and, more widely, to prevailing norms about career progression in the society in which they are introduced. By contrast, we argue that governance mechanisms may endure because they provide a beneficial function, but one that is at most a by-product of the managerialist rationality that inspired them and may even serve to undermine it, although this feedback loop is unrecognized by participants. Thus, managers may find that their governance initiatives gain support from members of staff who attribute a meaning to them that unintentionally subverts planned outcomes.

Second, our findings suggest that management initiatives should be evaluated in terms of process as well as outcome. This is a familiar argument, but it is nonetheless significant while there is limited research on the

unintended outcomes of IT governance mechanisms, and hence on the processes through which such outcomes are achieved. Our work contributes to such an evaluation. Our argument differs from a managerialist argument that Abadia's initiative failed to realize its plan as the result of a flawed implementation process, and from a social constructivist argument that it was subverted through reflexive political action by participants. Rather we suggest that it provided an unintended benefit to staff – of extra time to focus on core tasks – but that function was the very mechanism that served to isolate colleagues in their specialist units and, ultimately, distanced them from the goal of more effective collaboration. Such an evaluation of process and outcome can provide a useful alternative perspective on how and why social structures persist despite negative consequences for those involved. Hence it may enhance our understanding of some of the enduring issues associated with organizational change related to the introduction of ICTs.

Third, the RM initiative tended to foster professional entrenchment resulting in increased alienation between members of different departments. Crucially, though, the introduction of RMs seemed to legitimate such allegiance to one's professional role, deflecting attention from how such behaviours may contribute to negative outcomes for participants and detract from wider organizational goals. Teaching programmes vary in the extent to which they address such issues, with information systems programmes often having a 'technical' focus, while business programmes emphasize concerns with finance, marketing and human resource management. In research also, scholars highlight the need for more understanding of different traditions (Weber 2004). In our case, much debate took place among members of the research team about why communication problems persisted within the organization – reflecting the researchers' different views about the role of human agency and social conflict. Our approach to this co-existence of traditions was to use the case material to outline what an alternative analysis might look like, which seemed more useful to us than simply presenting the theoretical arguments for and against functionalism. We see merits in this approach for teaching and research. Students can be introduced to co-existing research traditions by means of alternative perspectives on the same case study or phenomenon. Such an approach makes theoretical arguments more accessible by providing contrasting examples of what it means to take a position on the key paradigmatic dimensions of action and order. In parallel, further research might explore the nature of professional identity, in particular how such identities are constituted and the way they come into play during the collaborative efforts involved in IS development and implementation.

Finally, we suggest that functionalist explanation offers a useful starting point for arguing about persistent problems in organizations associated with the introduction of IT governance mechanisms, such as relationship management. Such generic explanations are not geared to addressing exceptional behaviour, positive feedback, and peoples' tendency to form cliques and work towards their personal development and advantage. Nevertheless, they focus on how particular behaviour patterns start to stabilize and the unintended, negative social consequences that can result, and therefore they raise interesting and under-researched questions within the IS field, which in the longer term may lead to theory development.

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