

Socio-Technical Implications of Event Management Technology

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Abstract

In the field of event planning little research has been conducted on the unintended socio-technical effects of implementing web-based event management software. It is vital that organizations are aware of these potential effects in order to develop organizational policies that will enhance the value and utility of these technologies both inside and outside of the workplace. By evaluating current literature and research on both the field and the technologies, it becomes evident how tools, such as Cvent, are affecting the way in which event professionals communicate, interact, learn, and feel about their work. However, by proactively implementing organizational policies, event planners can avoid or reduce the negative consequences and supplement the positive consequences of these technologies.

Overview

Over the past decade, the field of event planning has experienced an enormous expansion across the globe. Today, company executives understand that as a marketing tool, events have become vital to their organizations' success. Encompassed within this budding industry are meetings and conventions, fairs and festivals, expositions and entertainment events, fundraising and cause-related events, community and commercial events, sports and leisure events, social and life cycle events, and corporate incentives and marketing events (Silvers, Bowdin, O'Toole, & Nelson, 2006). With such a wide variety of exciting options and opportunities, event planning has grown from a nearly invisible niche to a 102.3 billion dollar industry.

Paralleled with this growth is the development of event management technology. These technologies are revolutionizing how event professionals plan, market, and execute events as well as how they communicate, relate, and connect with each other and their clients. One of the most popular technological developments in the field is the web-based suite of programs developed by Cvent Inc. Over the past decade Cvent has become the largest event registration company in the United States (Cvent, 2007). With over 1,000 features, Cvent simplifies, automates, and streamlines some of the most time consuming event tasks such as site research, event invitations and registration, event reporting, and budget management.

Event registration has typically been a long and expensive process. The development and execution of a successful event used to necessitate collaboration among multiple planners, outside organizations, and technologies. For example, picture all of the steps required to create, print, and send event invitations. After all of the basic event information was planned, the event manager would send this information to a graphic designer who would use a computer to produce a custom invitation. When the invite was finalized, the manager would bring the

design to a professional printing company where expensive color copies would be printed on cardstock. A few days later, the manager would pick up the invites and bring them back to the office, where another employee would physically place each invitation into an envelope, obtain the finalized guest list and print out mailing labels. Once the proper postage was paid and attached, the invitations would finally be sent out, days or even weeks after the original invitation was created. This complicated and unnecessary process wastes valuable time, energy, and money. Instead these resources should be used more effectively and efficiently to develop, plan, and execute events.

The emergence of event software like Cvent automates and streamlines this entire disordered process. Planners choose from 150 invite templates, customizable with company logos and colors, or develop and import their own design. Cvent then automatically inserts the necessary data into the invites, such as the registrant's name, event dates and times, etc. (J. Rouhafzai, personal communication, October 10, 2007). Cvent's electronic invites are customizable based on the interests or needs of individual registrants. For example, planners can alter the event's highlighted elements in the invitation based on the profession, sex or age of the registrant. These e-vites (email invitations) are not mass emails, but are sent as one-to-one messages directly from the event manager to the registrant (Schnall, 2007). With Cvent, event managers can also manually enter registrants, allowing event planners to invite individuals through whichever medium will most effectively convey their message.

With Cvent's intuitive site navigation, as well as its form wizard, creating registration forms is quick and easy. The simple online registration pre-populates attendee information from Cvent's database, such as name, address, phone, and email. The live registration technology allows registrants to choose what they want from multi-day, multi-session, multi-priced customized registration paths. From this data or through short mini-surveys, event managers can gather vital information about attendees. After registration, Cvent automatically sends personalized follow-up, reminder, confirmation, and thank-you emails on dates specified by the event manager. The streamlined and automated registration process frees up days that previously had been filled with tedious administrative tasks.

Manual payment transactions are often a time-consuming and monotonous task for an event management team. Cvent utilizes VeriSign technology to instantly and securely collect payments online. As always, managers can manually enter payment information if registrants choose to send cash or checks via traditional mail. The system can also automatically refund, discount, modify or un-register individuals in real-time (J. Rouhafzai, personal communication, October 10, 2007). This streamlined and automated process saves time and provides managers with up-to-the minute payment information.

Cvent's technology also facilitates seamless communication between venues and event attendees. Event professionals can easily block off rooms and minimize no-shows because the system automatically manages room availability as well as guest hotel preferences and roommate requests. Registrants benefit from direct connections to venues, facilitating real-time hotel and travel reservations. Cvent also saves time and money by automatically generating personalized itineraries and door-to-door directions with the click of a button.

One of the most substantial affordances of Cvent technology is the advanced data analysis capabilities that generate reports to visually display valuable statistics. With over 100 standard reports and an unlimited number of custom reports, event planners have the capability to produce quick and accurate reports needed to make strategic event decisions. Detailed attendee lists, wait lists, and menu choices are just a few examples of the automatic reports that

Cvent can create with ease (J. Rouhafzai, personal communication, October 10, 2007). Visual representations of data, including charts and graphs, allow an event team to easily assess event trends from any location with internet access. Reports can be created and shared within seconds with no additional time or expense, without the need for a traditional spreadsheet.

As any event professional knows, staying within the budget is one of the most difficult and stressful tasks of event management. Cvent allows for easy comparison of budgeted versus actual expenses and automatically quantifies often overlooked expenses such as taxes and gratuities. Event professionals can utilize historical expense data to increase negotiation power with potential venues and, in turn, lower prices. The product also features budgeting capabilities that track funds and monitor expenses across multiple categories (Krantz, 2006). Event managers can use these tools to come in at or under budget and maximize the return on event.

Benefits

The most fundamental benefit of automating and streamlining event management tasks is decreased costs and labor. Relying on email communication saves time and money by mitigating postage costs and printing delays typical of regular mail invitations. In addition, these automatic messages save resources by both minimizing back-and-forth phone calls or letters and by allowing quick asynchronous communication to a large number of people at little to no cost. Confirmations, reminders and thank-you messages are sent via email, freeing up valuable time and saving money. Automatic reporting and budget management tools are additional affordances that save both time and money. Planners no longer need to spend time creating spreadsheets and manually entering data. In addition, they save time by eliminating media switching. With Cvent, an entire event can be planned by using only one technology instead of switching from one technology to another and relying on outside services. With over 1,000 features packed inside one technology, Cvent eliminates media switching and makes the event planning process easier, cheaper, and faster than ever before. However, simply integrating Cvent into the organization does not guarantee that employees will benefit from these new tools and processes.

According to activity theory, the implementation of any technology will not be equal throughout all organizational contexts. Individuals, organizational norms, culture, division of labor, and objectives shape how a tool is utilized within an organization. Using this conceptual framework, it is clear that the application of event management tools such as Cvent would differ greatly depending on the organizational context and culture. Therefore, an organizational culture valuing efficiency and productivity would experience different socio-technical effects than an organization valuing the maximization of human capital.

When employing event management software, organizational cultures have the potential to negatively or positively impact employee's work/life balance. For example, an organization that values productivity will implement Cvent in order to benefit from its cost and time saving capabilities. Organizational cultures centered on productivity and efficiency often lead to environments in which employees feel extreme competition and pressure to work overtime, especially in organizations where there is less job security and stability. In these business settings, Cvent enables individuals to work whenever and wherever they can, believing that working longer hours is necessary in order to advance, further blurring the line between work and non-work (Wallace, 2004). If management does not take steps to ensure that employees are not overusing the network, the organization can actually experience a decrease

in production and work quality from their overworked employees. On the other hand, organizations implementing Cvent with the objective of maximizing human capital can enable employees and organizations to regain the work/life balance, and in turn increase job satisfaction and productivity. Employees would benefit greatly from Cvent's internet-centered capabilities and the ability to choose when and where they want to work, depending on what was most convenient or productive for them. The flexibility and freedom associated with creating their own work schedules and working from home or the office provides employees with a sense of autonomy and control over their lives. Organizations can benefit from decreased turnover and absenteeism, reduced overhead and more satisfied employees (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2008).

By using the internet, consumers are now able to shift the power structure and information asymmetries of the traditional business landscape. Now that consumers have the capability of quickly comparing the price and quality of products and services across the globe, competition between organizations has increased dramatically (Wallace, 2004). In order to gain the competitive edge in today's internet-centered business environment, organizations must carefully develop and nurture customer relationships. As stated earlier, a valuable affordance of Cvent is that it automatically personalizes email invitations with the recipient's first name and customizes highlighted event features based on previously acquired data about the interests, age, sex, profession, etc. of the registrant. Automatic personalization is one of the most effective new technologies in electronic customer care and electronic customer care management (Salmen & Muir, 2003). Personalized messages strengthen the client's sense that they are communicating with another human being, fostering a greater sense of trust, thus increasing the probability of a positive customer relationship. Furthermore, the orientation towards the interests and needs of the client also builds trust and customer satisfaction (Salmen & Muir, 2003). For many event planning firms, personalization and customized customer relations provide planners with the opportunity to stand out and differentiate themselves from other firms. Organizations can use Cvent's email customization to bolster social presence and client relations to eventually gain competitive advantages (Wallace, 2004).

Organizations can also gain competitive advantages by utilizing the reporting and survey capabilities of Cvent to facilitate data mining, computerized data analysis to "extract interesting relationships, trends, and behavior patterns" from data and use them to predict new outcomes (Wallace, 2004, p. 145). Within the stages of development, marketing, and execution of each event rests a mountain of hidden data that can be used to make positive changes and inferences about future events. In the past, the majority of this data was either never collected or never interpreted. Now, with technologies such as Cvent, event planners can gain valuable knowledge about their events, markets, and registrants with the click of a button.

Cvent reporting capabilities allow event professionals to create over 70 standard reports in just seconds. Waitlists, invitee charts, participant lists, and email invitation success rates are just a few of the reports that Cvent can generate automatically. In addition, planners can produce an unlimited amount of customized reports, including analysis across multiple events, filtering data by any variable (Cvent, 2007). This data can help planners identify trends in attendee interests. For example, a planner can customize a cross-event report distinguishing the percentage of registrants who traveled more than three hours to attend an event. Perhaps this data will help planners in the future when choosing an event location that appeals to the greatest number of people in a particular demographic category.

Online registrant mini-surveys are another option for event planners using Cvent technology. After opening an email invitation, potential guests can be prompted to answer a few short questions about themselves and the event. The data collected from these surveys help to gain insight as to what attracted attendees to an event and why some individuals declined to attend certain events. For example, if 75% of individuals who declined to attend cited location as the reason, event managers can use this data in the future to cater more effective events (J. Rouhafzai, personal communication, October 10, 2007). The unique and invaluable data acquired from Cvent's survey and reporting features enable event professionals to learn more about their clients and their preferences, interests, and satisfaction. In addition, since this data is collected privately from the organization it cannot be replicated, which, when utilized effectively, leads to significant competitive advantages (Salmen & Muir, 2003).

Today all organizations are concerned with identifying, capturing, sharing and managing knowledge, an intangible yet vital asset. Within any organization there exists explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is formal and systematic, and can be documented and shared with others. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is an elusive type of knowledge that resides inside the minds of experienced and talented event planners and is not easily shared (Wallace, 2004). When an employee leaves an organization for any reason, they usually take the majority of their knowledge with them, leaving the organization with a substantial loss of intellectual capital. With new technologies, businesses are trying to capture this knowledge by encouraging employees to share this information via organizational knowledge management systems. Although not designed as a stand-alone knowledge management system, Cvent's tools can be used as an invaluable part of a larger knowledge management system.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most valuable affordances of Cvent is its robust reporting capabilities. These reports play an important role in transforming data into valuable organizational knowledge. Data begins as raw numbers, but as more meaning is added via reporting and analysis, data becomes information. When this information is interpreted by an event professional who compares the information with contextual variables and personal experience, the information becomes knowledge. These reports are then saved onto the network as a pseudo-archive allowing future event professionals to review and analyze past findings. This reviewable explicit knowledge adds to organizational memory and can significantly contribute to a larger knowledge management system.

The biggest obstacle to effective knowledge management within event planning companies is not caused by any inadequacy of Cvent or any other event management technology. Rather, a fundamental barrier within the event planning industry prevents individuals from sharing knowledge with one another. Event professionals are almost always rewarded for possessing valuable and unique knowledge that comes with years of experience in the field. When rewards are based on an individual's expertise and knowledge, sharing this unique asset will only diminish their organizational value. Therefore, event professionals will often refrain from sharing any type of inside or tacit knowledge with colleagues. Patricia Wallace (2004) termed this type of behavior as knowledge "hoarding" (p. 154). Even though knowledge hoarding detracts from the overall success of the firm, most individuals will not sacrifice their knowledge for the good of the organization. In an industry that still lacks formal academic credentials and a formal knowledge system, it is unlikely that experience-based rewards will change (Silvers et al., 2006). However, implementing technologies that enable knowledge sharing and organizational policies that support and reward sharing will help overcome this obstructive and unproductive industry wide behavior.

Problems

Cvent is a technology that simplifies event management processes by automating and streamlining various tasks. With the integration of event management technologies many lower-level employees are finding that their job responsibilities are becoming obsolete, especially those working in data entry and data management, a net-centered organizational effect referred to as disintermediation (Wallace, 2004). Angie Smith (Biba, 2007), manager of event management and operations at Cisco Systems, describes the benefits of this phenomenon:

The return on investment for me was that [before], I had one full-time headcounter.

Whereas moving to the integration of Global LINKS [an event management software similar to Cvent] allowed me to eliminate the person. I no longer needed that person [because] a piece of technology could do that for us (p. 33).

Disintermediation due to technological advancements transforms the organizational structure and value chain of event management firms. Although these new technologies save organizations time and money, it is important to also be aware of how this Tayloristic spirit can often increase distrust, stress, and dissatisfaction among employees.

Today more than ever, organizations are relying on electronic communication rather than traditional methods of communication, such as letters, phone calls, and face-to-face meetings. Email has bypassed these methods because of its ease of use, low cost, and near-instantaneous exchange for collocated or geographically dispersed individuals. Event planning technologies, like Cvent, are almost exclusively email centered, meaning that entire organizations are transforming the way they communicate with each other and their clients. Additionally, event teams no longer need to be collocated in order to effectively plan, market, and execute events because of the ubiquitous online access to critical organizational information. Gone are the days and problems associated with paper invitations, memos, and reports. Instead, virtual and collocated event planning teams are facing a new set of problems caused by the reliance on a low bandwidth communication medium and a continual decrease in high quality human interactions (Wallace, 2004).

Essentially, email is nothing more than a text-based message, sent from one individual to another. Without the context, guidance of non-verbal cues, or aid of conversational repair work, characteristic of richer communication methods, emails become particularly susceptible to misinterpretation. In addition, the informal and impersonal quality of email makes it inappropriate for certain communications. Some events or clients require a more traditional and rich form of communication symbolic of the event's importance, such as a retirement banquet or a wedding (Wallace, 2004). Furthermore, relying solely on email can alienate key registrant demographics or colleagues, who may have little to no email access or knowledge. Therefore, event managers must first determine the context, characteristics, and media preferences of the receiver before choosing the appropriate communication medium.

Regrettably Cvent does not support a variety of media rich communication methods. Even though event professionals can opt to print traditional invitations or reports using the templates generated by Cvent, the only medium specifically employed by Cvent is email. The system provides no other electronic communication mediums such as video conferencing, chat, or groupware. Relying solely on email communication will only increase the probability that employees will experience email overload, a socio-technical implication caused by the overuse of email. Employees working in email dependent organizations are bombarded with a constant stream of messages in their inbox so numerous that it is nearly impossible for them to manage.

Extended email overload causes anxiety, frustration, and decreased morale and productivity (Wallace, 2004).

Web-based networks such as Cvent act as a central repository of organizational information, housing critical data about employees, clients, and events. Entrusting such vital information to an online technology necessitates the integration of a variety of security measures in order to protect and secure this critical data. Security threats can come from a range of sources including email viruses, hackers, and network crashes. Fortunately, Cvent provides a number of security precautions including up-to-date firewall protection, intrusion detection systems, hourly data back-ups, SSL encryption and full-time security personnel (Cvent, 2007). However, no web-based network is completely safe from viruses or intrusions. Even though Cvent claims their network has never been down, there is no guarantee that the system is completely safe and secure.

It only takes one employee downloading an infected email attachment to crash an entire network, compromising the information and data about the organization and its clients. Names, email addresses, phone numbers, and credit card numbers are all examples critical information susceptible to intruders or hackers. If the network were to crash due to a virus or hacker, the entire event management process would be halted indefinitely. Critical organizational tools and information housed within Cvent's network would be inaccessible, costing millions of dollars in damage, lost production, and repair work. Using on a web-based technology as a central repository of vital organizational tools and information is convenient and time-saving, however, the potential problems associated with housing such critical data on an insecure system must be considered before it is implemented.

Current Research

As stated earlier, the field of event planning has experienced a tremendous growth over the past ten years. Unfortunately, research regarding this budding industry has not grown at the same rate. Research regarding the field is scarce and insufficient and research regarding event management technologies is non-existent. Very few researchers have analyzed the social, organizational, and individual benefits of this exciting new industry and its technologies. Hopefully, within the next few years, research on this subject will expand to reflect the relatively recent development of the industry. Until then, individuals can analyze the potential effects of event management software by comparing similar research on more popular technologies and practices such as e-vites, viral marketing, and electronic customer care systems.

Reccomendations

After evaluating the socio-technical implications of event management technologies on the workplace it became clear that successful integration of such technologies requires careful strategic planning. Therefore it is important to formulate organizational policies and practices that will support positive use and hinder the negative use of these tools. Based on the analysis of current research and literature it is recommended that organizations implementing event management technologies:

1. Encourage limited use of network outside of office

One of the most powerful affordances of any web-based technology is that it can be accessed at any time and at any place. The ability to log-in to the company's network after-

business hours allows individuals to keep on top of a busy work schedule, often resulting in increased job satisfaction and productivity. At the same time, however, these technologies also enable workers to further blur the divide between work and non-work. As discussed earlier, certain cultures, characteristics, and contexts are particularly susceptible to supporting this kind of behavior, such as organizations utilizing a scientific approach to management.

Event management is often a profession that requires employees to be “on-call” 24/7 because problems can arise at anytime day or night. Although it is impossible to change this characteristic of the job, it is important that organizations impose a clear boundary between work and non-work and provide options that decrease the negative effects of the 24/7 environment (Wallace, 2004). Providing employees with a set of guidelines and encouraging norms that disapprove of excessive outside network access helps protect work/life balance. For example, one of the most effective practices is permitting flexible work arrangements that allow employees to choose their own hours and/or work from home. As discussed earlier, the flexibility and freedom associated with personal creation of work schedules and locations provides employees with increased autonomy and control over their lives thus reducing the negative effects of “24/7 syndrome” (Wallace, 64).

2. Restructure rewards to reflect the value of knowledge sharing

Effective knowledge management systems require that individuals are willing to share individual tacit knowledge for the benefit of the entire organization. However, in an industry such as event planning, in which rewards and advancement are based upon personal knowledge and expertise, the possibility of a successful knowledge system is very low. Employees will not be willing to share their experience and inside knowledge with their colleagues because it will only decrease their organizational worth. In order to raise the overall human capital of the organization through the use of event planning technologies as a part of a knowledge management system, organizational rewards systems have to be changed in order to reflect the value of knowledge sharing. If they are not encouraged or rewarded, employees will resist building the knowledge management system because of the personal cost to them (Wallace, 2004). Providing rewards for employees that demonstrate a clear commitment to the advancement of the organization as a whole rather than the individual will help build an environment in which sharing knowledge is advantageous to all. Once employees begin to support the new system, the overall knowledge and worth of each individual as well as the organization as a whole will increase dramatically.

3. Utilize email only when appropriate

Over the past decade, email has become the most popular communication tool in the workplace because of its low cost, convenience, and speed. Event planning technologies such as Cvent almost exclusively support the use of email communication in their application. Consequently, event professionals using these technologies will be more likely to rely on this method of communication rather than any other, a socio-technical effect termed media sticking (T. Shapiro, personal communication, September 7, 2007).

As described above, there are several negative consequences of heavy dependence on email communication including conflict escalation and email overload. In order to prevent these negative effects and email media sticking, it is important that organizations encourage or require individuals to utilize richer forms of communication such as phone calls, face-to-face meetings, or video conferencing. These channels offer the sender a variety of means to communicate their message, decreasing the likelihood that their message will be misinterpreted. Most importantly, communication via high bandwidth mediums is conducive to

building stronger employee and client relationships, a characteristic of any successful event planning organization (Wallace, 2004).

4. Educate workforce about network potential security threats

As discussed earlier several security threats can potentially shut down access to web-based event planning technologies such as Cvent. Viruses, intrusion, and network crashes are all potential dangers that cause millions of dollars in damage. Thankfully, Cvent routinely updates the security features and provides 24-hour network security personnel dedicated to preventing network failures (Cvent, 2007). However, the “key ingredient to help prevent virus attacks, intrusions, lost data, and unauthorized use” in the workplace is employee education (Wallace, 2004, p. 49). Organizations should educate employees about these potential threats, how they occur, and how they spread. Employees should be also provided with tips to stay secure, such as frequent password changes and installing firewalls on computers networked from home. The first line of defense against viruses and intruders are the security and IT professionals of Cvent. Employees educated and attentive to potential security threats comprise the second line of defense against potential network damage. With both of these countermeasures working in unison, the possibility of network downtime causing decreased production and revenues is greatly minimized.

Conclusion

When implementing any new technology, organizations must first consider both the economic and the social implications from integrating the technology. Event management technologies have the potential to affect more than just the bottom line of an organization and management should be attentive to the significant social consequences of internet-based software. Technology that is blindly implemented by an organization without careful consideration, preparation, and planning can cause serious negative ramifications for the organization. Thus, a more thoughtful integration of organizations and technologies must be coordinated in order to maximize the potential of both the technology and the individuals using it.

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