EXPANDING IT IMPLEMENTATION THEORY:
THE ROLE OF THE SALES CYCLE

The study of IT implementation is a core activity in information systems (Zmud, 2000) and implementation itself represents a major component of an organization’s expenditures on new information technology. Various perspectives on implementation have been developed over time that seek to explain implementation outcomes such as systems use, user satisfaction, systems quality, and budget and schedule performance. Regardless of the outcomes they seek to explain, implementation theories share a common architecture where a set of contextual variables constrains management activities, which themselves are represented by various implementation variables. By direct influence and/or interaction, contextual and implementation variables determine the value of the outcome variables of interest to the theory (Aubert et al. 2004).

This causal architecture characterising IT implementation research is unnecessarily restrictive, especially when considering implementation of purchased packages. In the environment of purchased applications users evaluate functionality to be purchased rather than specifying functionality to be built. Instead of managing technical specialists, they negotiate with sales people. The subjects of this negotiation are often the variables identified as contextual in implementation theory. For example team composition (individual characteristics), delivered functionality and workarounds (task-technology fit), and project size and the availability of organisational resources for the project are often specified contractually between the vendor and the organisation.

The paper applies case data to several major implementation theories to demonstrate how different contextual variables are influenced by activities in the sales cycle. Using this data the paper argues that accounting for the activities of the sales cycle in an expanded definition of implementation (acquisition + deployment) has two distinct advantages. It provides a more complete picture of the dynamics of the implementation process and permits researchers and practitioners to more clearly understand the relationships in order to better influence implementation outcomes. It also informs the sales process and can influence the conduct of that process so that it can be managed to better support successful implementations. Bringing the two activities together provides a more coherent research perspective on IT implementation success and provides vendors and buyers of information technology with a larger degree of control over the sales and deployment process.
