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Strategic issues in customer relationship management (CRM) implementation

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Abstract *The number of customer relationship management (CRM) implementations has grown dramatically in recent years. However, few academic studies of the issues associated with the implementation of the concept are available. This paper offers a modest contribution through the analysis of a case study of a CRM implementation at a UK-based manufacturing company. The case study illustrates that CRM is a complex and holistic concept, organised around business processes and the integration of information technologies. The study also highlights that implementing CRM requires effective leadership, sourcing, targeting and evaluation strategies.*

Introduction

In recent years many organisations have identified the need to become more customer facing with increased global competition. As a consequence, customer relationship management (CRM) has risen to the agenda of many organisational strategies. Definitions of CRM and CRM systems are wide ranging and shall be explored in greater detail in the next section. Fundamentally however, CRM systems can be viewed as information systems aimed at enabling organisations to realise a customer focus. In 1998 global corporate expenditure on CRM was estimated to be in the region of US$1.9 billion (IDC and AMR Research, 2001) and it is predicted that by 2004, it will reach approximately US$23.5 billion (Datamonitor, 2001)[1]. Clearly, an increasing number of diverse organisations are adopting CRM yet surveys are beginning to highlight the potential risks. Even though CRM systems are proving an incredibly popular choice for implementation, success is proving illusive. One study of 202 CRM projects found that only 30.7 per cent of the organisations said that they had achieved improvements in the way they sell to and service customers (Dickie, 2000). Moreover, a recent and broader survey estimates that 70 per cent of companies will ultimately fail (Giga, 2001). The Giga survey revealed that: companies generally underestimate the complexities of CRM, lack clear business objectives and tend to invest inadequately in the provision of CRM software. While the findings by Giga highlight a fairly gloomy scenario, it is clear that not all organisations are facing failure. First Manhattan are just one of the many examples of diverse companies highlighted by Newell (2000) that have applied CRM methods and experienced success. It is

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clear that there is still a need for further empirical studies of CRM however, only a few are available. The availability ranges from the study of Abselon (Van Bennekom and Blaisdell, 2000) to that of IBM (Ciborra and Failla, 2000). It is against this background that the author offers a case study analysis of the selection and implementation of a CRM system at a manufacturing company.

In the next section the paper considers the concept of CRM and how CRM systems are reported on in the literature. Following this, the research approach of a single descriptive case study is reported, and the data presented. The empirical data is used as a basis for an analysis of the reported thinking in the literature in an attempt to identify similarities and disparities between the two. This leads into the conclusions of the study and recommendations for further research.

An overview of CRM

CRM is a highly fragmented environment and has come to mean different things to different people (McKie, 2000). One view of CRM is the utilisation of customer related information or knowledge to deliver relevant products or services to customers (Levine, 2000). While such definitions are widespread, they tend to offer a narrow insight into the goals or basic characteristics of CRM. As CRM evolves, richer definitions are emerging, with an emphasis on the goals, logistics and complex character of CRM. According to Light (2001), CRM evolved from business processes such as relationship marketing and the increased emphasis on improved customer retention through the effective management of customer relationships. Relationship marketing emphasises that customer retention affects company profitability in that it is more efficient to maintain an existing relationship with a customer than create a new one (Payne *et al.*, 1999; Reichheld, 1996). The idea of relationship marketing within CRM is fairly strong and has led others such as Newell (2000) to explore strategic methods for maintaining or improving customer retention. Another view of CRM is that it is technologically orientated. Sandoe *et al.* (2001) argue that advances in database technologies such as data warehousing and data mining, are crucial to the functionality and effectiveness of CRM systems. For example, Fingerhut has four million names of repeat customers, each with up to 1,000 attributes, stored in a data warehouse that can hold 4.5 trillion bytes (Davenport *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, Peppard (2000) suggests that technological advances in global networks, convergence and improved interactivity, are key to explaining the growth of e-business and CRM. The increasing use of digital technologies by customers, particularly the Internet, is changing what is possible and what is expected in terms of customer management (Tamminga and O'Halloran, 2000). The appropriate use, for instance, of automation technologies, such as interactive voice response systems and Web-based frequently asked question pages, could be popular with customers and highly cost effective (Petrissans, 2000). Despite the appearance of two extremes, the ELMS case study will demonstrate that in reality CRM is a complex combination of business and technological factors, and thus strategies should be formulated accordingly.

CRM implementation issues

CRM normally involves business process change and the introduction of new information technology, consequently effective leadership is important (Galbreath and Rogers, 1999). Because leaders monitor the external environments of an organisation they are often the best placed to set the vision or strategic direction for CRM projects. In addition, leaders are influential in the authorisation and control of expenditure, the setting and monitoring of performance and the empowerment and motivation of key personnel (Pinto and Slevin, 1987).

As CRM reaches into many parts of the business it has been suggested that organisations should adopt a holistic approach (Girishankar, 2000). The holistic approach places CRM at the heart of the organisation with customer orientated business processes and the integration of CRM systems. Ciborra and Failla (2000) conceptualise CRM beyond a front office contact management system. For others, CRM goes further, to constitute operational, analytical and collaborative elements (Trepper, 2000). Holistic approaches to CRM help organisations co-ordinate and effectively maintain the growth of disparate customer contact points or channels of communication. However, problems of channel conflict have been identified whereby customer experiences differ depending on the sales channel (Peppard, 2000).

Another implementation issue is that of sourcing. Many organisations have few alternatives but to outsource a significant proportion of their CRM solution as they lack the resources to develop CRM software. According to MacSweeney (2000) 60 per cent of in-house CRM systems fail. Timing is also important, as developing CRM software in-house can be a lengthy process and there are rewards to those that can respond rapidly and appropriately (Howle, 2000). CRM is also reputed to be facilitating the outsourcing of more business operations directly to the customer, highlighted by the UPS customer self-tracking system with annual savings of US$164 million (Hamm and Hof, 2000) and by the enormous savings in Internet banking (Downes and Mui, 1998).

According to Newell (2000) CRM is a useful tool in terms of identifying the right customer groups and for helping to decide which customers to jettison. Clemons (2000) estimates there may be a tenfold difference between the most profitable customers and the average. The idea that you cannot have a profitable relationship with all customers and the practice of targeting customers with a differentiated product or service is already widespread in many financial services, e.g. banking, insurance, credit cards etc. It is less established in many other business sectors such as manufacturing. One method for identifying customer groups is the notion of distinguishing between transaction and relationship customers. Transaction customers are highly volatile and have little loyalty, other than that related to obtaining the best price. Relationship customers have far more potential for loyalty as they are often prepared to pay a premium price for a range of reliable goods or services (Newell, 2000). Once relationship customers are recruited they are less likely to defect, provided they continue to receive quality service. Relationship customers are also more cost effective than new customers because they are already familiar with, and require far less persuasion to buy the company's products or services. Peck *et al.* (1999) are among those who argue that for many organisations it would be beneficial to distinguish between the two types of customer and focus on relationship customers. According to Newell (2000) there are often three distinct types of relationship customers: the top, middle and lower groups. The top group (top 10 per cent) consists of customers with excellent loyalty and of high profitability for the organisation. CRM is needed to retain and offer them the best possible services in order to avoid them defecting to hungry competitors. Middle group customers (next 40-50 per cent) are ones delivering good profits and who show good potential for future growth and loyalty. These are the customers who are probably giving some of their business to competitors. The idea is to use CRM to target middle group customers effectively as they are the greatest source of potential growth. Lower group relational (bottom 40-50 per cent) customers are those who are only marginally profitable. Some may have potential for growth but the expense and effort involved in targeting such numbers, hinders the effectiveness of servicing existing relational customers in the top and middle groups. CRM should be used to identify this group and seriously consider the response required. Transactional customers contribute either nothing or have an adverse effect on profitability. The consensus therefore is that CRM needs to identify transactional customers to help organisations respond appropriately.

Another dimension is the ability to deliver the strategy successfully. CRM strategies are only effective if they deliver positive outcomes. It is no longer good enough just to say that you are customer focused, but it matters what you do. Newell (2000) discusses a range of CRM case studies that used customer knowledge to deliver relevant products and services. Blockbuster recognised that their customer's top priority was the ability to rent their first-choice movie, when they visited a store. The industry norm for achieving this customer service was around 80 per cent. The company implemented an information system called "Centre stage" to improve stock availability of first-choice titles. The centre stage system stores customer data to help predict the likely demand for specific movies. The company then stocks the relevant number of products and now delivers significantly improved availability, while other competitors don't. Blockbuster strongly believes that CRM has enabled them to remain a market leader. The consensus appears to be that the fundamental goal of CRM is to improve organisational profitability through efficient and effective customer relations. If the CRM strategy is struggling to influence profitability, after a reasonable period of time, then the organisation is clearly failing. Organisations in this position should immediately consider changing direction and adopt alternative strategies. The position for those organisations that have failed may result in a series of circumstances that are hard to recover from. Such companies may find they have a disproportionate number of unprofitable customers that others have jettisoned. The path back to growth may require far more radical approaches. If a CRM strategy can be shown to improve profitability, then the organisation is obviously on the right path and succeeding. Companies in this healthy position should avoid complacency. They would be wise to devote sufficient resources and time to CRM and remember that effective CRM strategies are iterative and continually evolving.

Research method

The central research question for this study was: What are the strategic implications of the implementation and use of CRM systems? In the light of this, a case study approach was adopted as it enables the researcher to pose questions relating to what happened, how things happened and why (Yin, 1994). The case study therefore illustrates a UK-based manufacturing company's experiences with its CRM implementation. The data for the study was collected over the period of a year beginning at the selection stage and reaching closure at go-live. Throughout the study, data was collected via a number of channels including many interviews with members of the project team and others within the company. Interviews were conducted with the directors of sales and finance, the managers of sales, marketing, IT, HRM and logistics, several field sales engineers and sales administrators. In addition numerous project meetings and briefings were attended in line with Silverman (1998) who states that researchers should focus on what people do, in addition to what they say they do. Documentary evidence, such as requirements specifications was also considered. Review meetings were also held with key contacts at the organisation, to review the case data as it was transcribed from note form. This combined approach helped to generate data that was rich in detail and high in rigour (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

CRM case study

The case study was conducted throughout 2000 and raises specific issues of one company's experience of CRM. However, some of the issues raised are of interest to others that seek to adopt CRM, will contribute to further discussion and be of use in terms of further case study research.

ELMS Limited is a small- to medium-sized UK manufacturing company. ELMS are traditional in respect that they have a hierarchical command structure and work is conducted in departments rather than around customer-orientated business processes. Communications within management levels and departments are perceived as excellent and the company claims to have strong organisational co-operation with low levels of staff turnover. ELMS are facing increasing global competition resulting in the loss of some key customers. A strategic decision was made that the company had to be more proactive and proficient in their operating market and decided that its front office operations were in need of re-engineering. It decided that the best solution would be to explore the case for adopting CRM.

The first major issue for ELMS was the lack of knowledge pertaining to the concept of CRM. Strategic managers had a basic understanding of CRM. The IT department had little time to research CRM or to develop software solutions as it was often overstretched and struggling to maintain existing systems. The sales and marketing devoted little time to the concept of CRM as they were increasingly burdened with trying to meet customer requirements with fairly ineffective *ad hoc* support and communication systems. Thus, it was decided to use external consultants to acquire knowledge of CRM. The first stage of consultancy was to evaluate the position at ELMS and explore the case for adopting CRM. ELMS were dissatisfied with the outcome of the initial consultancy for they believed the findings failed to tell them anything they didn't already know, provided little in the way of knowledge about CRM and proved to be a fairly expensive exercise. ELMS decided to end the contract and to seek an alternative approach. The company decided that a more cost effective and productive strategy would be to acquire more CRM expertise within the company, despite the existing work pressures. A small project team was created including a strategic manager and personnel from sales and marketing and IT. They were asked to acquire knowledge of CRM and were given additional training at a range of residential courses.

The project team's first decision was to source a CRM packaged software solution and they entered into negotiations with two software vendors. After negotiations and demonstrations at the company, a vendor was selected and a package chosen. In addition, the vendor would be used to provide a range of additional services including installation and minor configurations.

Unfortunately, the ELMS CRM sourcing strategy was limited in many areas. Too many members of the project team failed to become sufficiently active in the selection process. Despite initial training, the sales and marketing project team members still lacked knowledge of the full implications of CRM in relation to their business requirements. They failed to appreciate the need to evaluate the software from a business perspective, perceiving the exercise as a technical issue. It is also the case that the project team put enormous faith in vendor assurances and verbal promises, perhaps because the vendor contacts were fellow sales representatives? The IT manager lacked expertise to sufficiently perform the necessary evaluation of the business requirements and was primarily concerned and focussed on the technical issues pertaining to the software. After selecting the vendor and software package, the CRM project team was expanded to include more personnel and was responsible for business process change, migration activity, testing, implementation and the initial maintenance of the software system.

The first major problem for the project implementation team was the selection of the project team itself. The project team was selected at random and this caused some discontent. Uncharacteristically for ELMS, some of the excluded staff felt undervalued by senior managers, others felt they lacked influence and queried the method for valuing their intellectual capital. Some of those with high levels of pertinent knowledge, such as sales engineers, did not feel engaged or empowered. This resulted in a fear of CRM, that it was about efficiency or cost-cutting exercises. This resulted in a perception that CRM would replace or de-skill their knowledge and contributions to the organisation and result in staff redundancies. In reality the selection process and lack of initial communication was more due to the inexperience of project management within the company. The project team failed to respond to such concerns immediately and although the fears were ultimately misplaced and later resolved, this was an unfortunate start to the project. For ELMS the CRM systems migration was a complex operation. The migration exercise relied heavily on the commitment of the key employees to resolve issues such as the effective cleansing and the codification of customer data. Because of the delay in enlisting the support of key staffs, the migration exercise drifted, taking four times longer than projected.

After implementing the CRM system, problems began to occur at the operational and analytical level. The company failed to appreciate the significance of using CRM to effectively target customers and of the need for systems integration. Targeting customers via CRM was only identified as a requirement after purchase, unfortunately the package fails to perform this task effectively. Furthermore, the software package is unable to integrate with many other enterprise applications. This results in duplication of tasks and the maintenance of multiple systems with the prospect of data inconsistencies. In terms of targeting and integration, the company are faced with the prospects of paying additional costs for software configuration or to abandon the system, write off the expenditure and source a new CRM package.

Regarding operating CRM, the next issue involved changing business processes to align with the CRM system. For ELMS there were difficulties in moving to a process orientation. The need to re-engineer was problematic due to organisational legacies. Despite the appearance of excellent co-operation between departments, front-office employees were regularly criticised for failing to appreciate the resource capabilities of the company and making promises to customers that could not be met. Back-office employees were also criticised for complacency and because they were often shielded from customer and competitor demands, there was little incentive to test the capabilities of the logistic operations. For ELMS, the reality of deploying CRM was to move towards a customer-facing culture. By the end of the study this had not been realised. The transition will take much longer and require more effort than expected.

The research findings highlight that the ELMS CRM strategy, hampered by an ineffective software tool is largely failing to meet the company expectations. The latest redesign of the corporate Web site is fairly revealing, it lacks functions that competitor sites offer such as: online quotation and order capabilities, technical help sections and customer comment facilities. Thus, the company is struggling to compete effectively in its environment and is prone to the loss of its relational customers to their savvy competitors. At the end of the study, it was apparent that the level of competition for customers had increased. Some competitors were using CRM successfully to collect detailed data about customers. Competitors were becoming more knowledgeable about who and where the relational customers were and in respect of the nature of their requirements and expectations. Consequently, they were targeting such customers with a range of more attractive goods and services. One particular competitor had used CRM to tailor a range of offers to customers that were innovative and highly seductive. Traditionally, customers in this sector experienced high installation and maintenance costs with products. The competitor now offers customers products free of all costs, in return for exclusive rights to use the products to generate advertising revenue. At the end of the project, the failure of the ELMS CRM system to deliver such a response was a serious cause for concern, resulting in a major threat and evident erosion of a significant market position.

In general, although the ELMS CRM system is fairly beneficial in terms of some responses to external forces, its achievements are fairly limited. The software facilitates unprecedented storage of customer data, although it is restricted in terms of operational, analytical and collaborative capabilities. The strategy has involved a shift towards a holistic work ethic. Nevertheless, there is a significant amount of business process change that needs to occur to make the CRM strategy more effective. It would appear by the end of the study, that ELMS are far from delivering a truly customer-centric culture and are losing ground to some of their competitors who have.

Discussion

The case study highlights the similarities and differences between the theory and practice of implementing effective CRM strategies. For ELMS, leadership became an important and problematic activity. There are lessons to be learnt from Galbreath and Rogers (1999) in terms of the adverse consequences of not creating a vision or strategic direction for the project. The project management success factors framework of Pinto and Slevin (1987) may also have been useful in helping to overcome the inexperience in terms of project management, the failure to address project ownership issues and the need to recognise the problems in organisational communication. Furthermore the need to acquire expertise in sourcing and to learn from previous experiences is also highlighted. To their credit ELMS did recognise that they lacked certain competencies in certain areas and they were open to the idea of seeking external expertise, training and consultancy wherever necessary. However, by the time they entered into their second sourcing contract with software vendors, they had failed to learn sufficiently from the costly experience of their first. This was evident in a number of ways. First ELMS failed to negotiate with more software vendors to get the most appropriate and competitive solution. They did not insist on observing the software working in another organisational setting, thus missing an opportunity to learn from adopters. They failed to trial the system or negotiate a performance-related contract. Finally, they failed to have a contingency strategy in place to resolve problems or to implement alternative solutions. Such pitfalls did result in compromises in the functionality of the system. However, it should be said that ELMS still believed that the decision to outsource was a major success with levels of functionality acquired within a timeframe that were far in excess of what would have been achieved in-house. The research also shows that vendor claims that CRM can be rapidly and effectively implemented are highly misleading. It is no surprise that organisations such as ELMS are failing to prepare for CRM appropriately. The case supports the theory by Girishankar (2000) that CRM is a holistic and complex strategy and also supports Light's (2001) view that CRM involves business process change and IT integration, for ELMS this will take a considerable time to achieve. Finally the empirical study highlights the importance of targeting and delivery as argued by Newell (2000). Although the ELMS CRM system is weak in delivering such analytical capabilities, evidence was emerging that competitors were more effective here and that they were using such capabilities to poach profitable customers.

Conclusion

The results of the study are cause for concern, for they support the findings of other surveys that show a high failure rate for CRM. This research was conducted because of the relative lack of CRM empirical studies, particularly within this business sector. This modest contribution has identified and analysed some of the approaches and theories relating to CRM and CRM project implementation. The study confirms that CRM is a complex and holistic concept requiring appropriate business processes and integrated systems. In addition, the study demonstrates the relevance of the need for effective leadership, sourcing, targeting and evaluation within CRM strategies. The ELMS case is an archetypal study of a CRM implementation that has failed to deliver in these core areas and where many lessons can be learnt by other adopters. It is an interesting example of the affect of CRM and how it is forcing companies to change. Despite a decade of developments in respect of business process change, systems integration and information sourcing, it is only now with the threat of CRM centric competition, targeting customers effectively, that ELMS are exposed by their indifference to change in such areas. The impact of CRM is real and so are the problems for certain organisations in terms of successful implementation. This is a disturbing scenario because of the accumulation of diverse and complex factors that now need addressing, the lack of expertise to resolve them and the lack of time in which to respond appropriately. Thus, there is a great need for additional empirical research within CRM to identify the extent of such issues, the state of organisational effectiveness and for additional insights. This particular research is ongoing and will aim to develop and expand on the issues raised by conducting more empirical studies.

Note

1. The author recognises the deluge of figures and predictions regarding the uptake of software and that these can be contradictory, as highlighted in other studies such as Markus and Tanis (2000). The figures presented here are used solely as an outline for the growth of CRM.

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