INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN SUPPORT OF
COMMUNICATIVE ACTION THEORY:

A PRACTICAL INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

This research reports a case investigation into a successful Belgian company, Colruyt, which made extensive use of information technology (IT) in support of its unusual organizational vision. Our analysis suggests that this vision accorded with the social theory called communicative action theory (CAT) which puts great emphasis on the individual’s actions and contributions to company goals. Despite a great deal of work on CAT within the IS research community, there is little published experience in the issues involved in actually implementing CAT. Our case based results show that IT is indispensable to the realization of CAT ideals. Our findings have direct relevance to any company in a business, which relies predominantly on its human resources to achieve business success. Hence our study is of interest to managers, practitioners and researchers alike.
1 INTRODUCTION

Early applications of Information Technology (IT) sought to automate routine tasks and hence such projects contributed significantly to improving operational efficiency. As the potential of IT to act as a tool in support of managers and experts began to develop, goals changed to include organizational effectiveness (Smithson, and Hirschheim, 1998). Later, competitive advantage developed as an additional goal when the potential of IT to transform business activity became clear (Zuboff, 1988; Scott Morton, 1991; Walton, 1990; Ciborra, and Jelassi, 1994; Tapscott, and Caston, 1993; Keen, 1991). All these aims centered on business activities and were directed at using IT to improve organizational performance in terms of its primary goal of producing goods and services.

A growing body of literature on the impact of these developments on organizational structure and job roles attests to the transformational potential of IT on our work lives (Zuboff, 1988; Yetton et al., 1994; McLuhan, 1964; Duimering et al., 1993; Scott Morton, 1991; Liker et al., 1992; Channon, 1996). However, the aim of much of this work is to describe the nature of the changes wrought by IT on people and organizational structures or to identify what job changes to make in order to improve the payoff of IT investment in terms of business goals such as profit and growth. Our research takes a different point of view - it investigates the extent to which IT may be used to achieve both business goals and predefined organizational goals. Just as IT can be used to further business goals it can also be utilised to nurture a particular organizational environment. For this to happen an organization must have both business and organizational goals. Because few companies in this century were concerned with both, there is little experience on how IT might be deployed to create and support particular types of work roles and organizational structures.

Many current organizational structures derive from the ‘Taylorist’ model designed in the early part of this century (Taylor, 1929). The basis of this model is the division of labour into repetitive tasks, which can then be carried out by any unskilled worker. Operational efficiency of the whole organization was the ultimate design goal. To achieve this organizations need to resolve the problem of co-ordination of many people. Large and complex hierarchies are the usual solution with power associated with seniority of position rather than expertise or experience.

Changing business conditions and dissatisfaction with the Taylorist model and its effects on people’s working lives has led to much theoretical discussion about, and experimentation with alternatives. Almost all seem attempts to vary the Taylorist model in order to make the work environment more ‘humane’, without sacrificing business success. Critical social theory (CST) represents an important and influential school of thought, which totally breaks with the Taylorist tradition, in that the individual and his role are important factors in the overall design of the business. Thus ideals of open human dialogue take on far greater importance than in Taylor’s model. Communicative Action theory (CAT) developed by Habermas (Habermas, 1973, 1979, 1984, 1989) stems from CST and offers a picture of what society would look like if it were operate according to CAT ideals.

Our proposition is that for medium to large sized organizations in particular, IT is essential for the realization of the ideals embodied in CAT. Without IT we suggest that the practical problems of
achieving this ideal are overwhelming. To investigate this proposition we needed a large and successful company which professes organizational aims similar to those described by CAT and which had had some success in achieving this vision. If this company made substantial use of IT to support its business and its organizational vision of CAT, this would then offer significant evidence in support of our proposition. Because the Colruyt company appeared to come close to this description we chose it as our case. The company has been successful over a long period of time and has grown to employ over five thousand people with a multi-billion dollar annual turnover. Its founder and chief architect, Jo Colruyt, had values that ran counter to Taylorism and conformed far more closely to CAT ideals. Furthermore Jo Colruyt attempted to realize these ideals at his company using IT. Basing the study on this case also sets the limitations of our work since it is restricted to one company, in one industry, and in one country.

There is still little published work on the realization of CAT ideals in practice. Habermas himself offered little guidance on how to achieve his ideal society. We know little on how he saw the various aspects of his theory working within a functioning state, let alone how a single organization would operate within a social environment which was essentially not based on CAT ideals. Hence an important part of our research has been to develop a model showing the key characteristics of an organization adhering to CAT ideals. To our knowledge ours is a first attempt of its kind.

This research is important because organizational change is now essential to the success of ever more companies. For many products and services, the human contribution is becoming the most significant resource, ahead of other resources such as capital and plant. Human conditions and work environment are clearly assuming much greater importance than in the past. What is needed is an understanding of the conditions that enable staff to deliver the maximum contribution they are capable of, and then to put these conditions in place. This is a central concern of CAT. Therefore, our results have direct relevance to any company in a business, which relies predominantly on its human resources to achieve business success.

This paper reports on the results of our investigation and analysis of the Colruyt company. The aim was to establish the degree to which this company supports our research proposition that IT is essential to the working out of its organizational vision. The paper is arranged as follows. Section two is an in depth discussion of the theory of communicative action. Section three constructs our model for an organization based on CAT ideals. Section four introduces the Colruyt company and describes the research methods used to investigate it. Section five discusses the evidence for CAT at Colruyt using the model developed in section three and section six evaluates the extent to which IT is crucial to the implementation of CAT ideals at the Colruyt company. The final sections discuss limitations of the work, the contribution it makes to IT research and the implications of the results found for the use of IT.

2.0 CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTION THEORY

In this section we draw on the many excellent reviews of Critical Social Theory (CST) (Horkheimer, 1972, 1974) ) and Habermas’s theory of communicative action (CAT) (Habermas, 1973, 1979, 1984, 1989) in order to identify those characteristics of the theory that have
implications for organizational behavior. CST proposes an ideal by which to organize human relationships. It seeks not only to understand social behavior but also to critique it and the situations from which it arose. Ngwenyama and Lee (1997) place CST in perspective in the following way: “traditional social theory aims at explanation whereas CST aims to go beyond understanding by making explicit unjust and inequitable situations.”

A key purpose of CST is to help individuals emancipate themselves from all forms of domination arising from such sources as ideology, misinformation, and economic or physical coercion. It seeks to provide individuals with ways of freeing themselves from false or unwarranted beliefs, assumptions or constraints (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997) so that they may be enabled to act according to their own beliefs, values and understanding. At the core of CST is the belief that each individual is an intelligent agent capable of independent and rational action. Within this view of the world, each individual is expected to take an active role in every incident, taking full responsibility for their own actions and the subsequent outcomes.

Habermas’s CAT is grounded in CST (Alveson and Willmott, 1992, Hirschheim and Klein, 1994). His concern is the individual and how each can deal with the circumstances around him so as to achieve emancipation from structures of domination (White, 1995).

2.1 ACHIEVING APPROPRIATE ACTION

According to CAT the actor has five main types of social action available to him; instrumental, strategic, communicative, discursive, and dramaturgical action. In every situation, he is expected to use these action types in an appropriate fashion.

All actions are embedded in an organizational context. It is this context that defines the possibilities for social action and gives meaning to it through its organizational policies, norms, culture, and routines. It determines the power, authority, and status of its members and what is proper and improper behavior. It is against the backdrop of organizational context that the actions of individuals become possible, interpretable, and meaningful. The meaning each actor attaches to his or her actions and to the actions of others is an important facet of organizational life. Participants in a common incident may attach differing interpretations according to their varying perception of the organizational context. For communicative action all must not only have total command of the context but have reached a mutual understanding (Rockmore, 1989) of it so that there is agreement as to the terms and language used. Each can then exercise critical self-reflection to detect and analyze distortions in the message. Mutual understanding is a crucial step in the process of achieving consensus, without which emancipation cannot occur. The reason for Habermas’s focus on communication now becomes clear. One of the purposes of the action type, discursive action, is to achieve exactly this.

The quality of communications between individuals and groups is a key concern for Habermas. Communications can suffer from distortion in several ways. They can be factually inaccurate, unclear or incomplete or simply a false report. The sender may be insincere or lack the authority or position to carry out the communicative act. For Habermas it is necessary for the receiver to emancipate him or herself from this distortion before planning their own actions. The means to do this is by applying the relevant validity checks. The individual initiating one of the five action types makes it an appropriate action by meeting the series of validity claims associated
with it. The receiver or participant must test these claims before accepting the action. Each of the five action types has its unique set of validity claims (these are described in greater detail in the next five sections). The individual draws on his knowledge of organizational context, the situation itself and the orientation of the sender to critically assess the action. By correct application of these validity claims, distorted communication cannot remain undetected. Should an individual have unresolved doubts about the action he or she can start a discussion with the initiator and other interested parties with the aim of clarifying and agreeing on what is appropriate. One of the purposes of discursive action is to help achieve this harmony.

For CAT several norms for individual behavior must be met. Individuals are allowed to express their opinions fully but are expected to defend their proposed actions in terms of the relevant validity claims. Further each is expected to ‘honor the outcome of open rational argument’ (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997). According to CAT, breakdown in communication occurs when actors fail to observe the norms or fail to apprehend the actions of others. The next five sections discuss in greater detail instrumental, strategic, communicative, discursive, and dramaturgical action types.

2.2 ACTION TYPES

**Instrumental Action**

By engaging in instrumental action, which occurs in the nonsocial world, the actor seeks to bring about a wished for condition (Habermas, 1984). Often a desired condition can be obtained by performing one of a number of possible alternative actions. Under the circumstances just mentioned an individual brings about the desired condition by performing that act, namely the instrumental act, which he deems most appropriate, effective, and efficient given the particularities of the situation. The instrumental act is success-oriented and the individual predicts the results and human behavior arising from the performance of an instrumental act by using causal, probabilistic, or logical relationships. An essential aspect of instrumental action is that it intervenes in an objective world involving facts and humans as abstract or real objects, respectively. The actor assumes a position outside the situation and discounts how his presence affects the outcome of his actions. An essential prerequisite to successful instrumental action is that the actor has an accurate set of facts or a true picture of the relevant relationships (Table 1). Hence the validity norm to be met is truthfulness. It then follows that instrumental acts are classified as purposive rational acts (White, 1988, 1996). The individual, by performing the instrumental act, aims to advance his personal interests. Instrumental action is entirely goal-oriented.

**Strategic Action**

Strategic action occurs in the social world and involves two or more individuals who seek to bring about a desired state of affairs. Strategic action is goal oriented and directed toward success. The individuals comprehend that they are anchored in a social context and by engaging in strategic action each assumes a rational and strategically responding counterpart. Each individual adapts his performance of strategic acts in response to the strategic acts of his counterpart. The success of a strategic act depends on the extent to which it complies with prevailing contextual social rules and norms. The important validity claim in the case of strategic action is correctness. That is to say has the actor been granted the authority explicitly or by organizational norms to act...
in this way (Table 1)? As pointed out by Habermas (1984, p.85), the concepts underlying strategic action find their expression in decision making models used in economics and sociology.

**Communicative Action**

Communicative action aims to bring about consensus through rational argument under ideal speech conditions, which are characterized by symmetric power relationships among the interlocutors (Habermas, 1973, 1979, 1984, 1989). This is the action type that most closely conforms to CAT ideals.

It aims to bring about a specific type of interpersonal relationship in which there exists a shared understanding or consensus about a situation (Habermas, 1984, p.86). This shared understanding concerns states of affairs, organizational realities, and prior decisions made (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997). Shared understanding is closely tied to agreement on essential aspects of social reality and it occurs when the actors agree on a common definition of the objective reality of facts and events, the social reality of norms, and the internal reality of intentions, emotions, and personal needs (Table 1). Truth of facts, rightness of norms and sincerity function as the validity claims for communicative action (Kunneman, 1986, p.230).

A central aspect of communicative action is that consensus is obtained by discussion under conditions of symmetric power relations. This implies that agreement is not imposed by the more powerful individual on the weaker one. Habermas (1984, p.287) stated:

“...Communicatively achieved agreement...cannot be imposed...whether instrumentally through intervention in the situation directly or strategically through influencing the decisions of opponents...Agreement rests on common convictions.”

Communicative action can turn into strategic action when, for example, an actor creates the false impression that all the validity claims are open to being tested by critical argument (Kunneman, 1986, p.68). If other individuals fail to notice this fact, they will continue with their communicative action. The deceitful actor can successfully perform the strategic action under the guise of communicative action insofar as he is able to hide his true motives from others.

**Discursive Action**

Discursive action plays a central role in supporting and furthering communicative action. It aims to establish a set of common norms for all participants. It entails the explanation and discussion of the validity norms that govern communicative action. It is the main tool for ensuring that successful communicative action will occur (Table 1). Its success relies on the sincerity of the actors. Hence the validity claim is sincerity.

In response to, for example, a communicative action that appears dubious, the participants can choose among three alternatives: they can 1) discontinue their communicative action and cease to strive for common understanding; 2) abandon their communicative action, cease to strive for common understanding and shift to strategic action; or 3) engage in discursive action and seek common understanding by creating conditions which enable a rational discussion concerning the adequacy of the validity claims.

Habermas (1984) introduced the term discursive action to refer to discussions concerning the adequacy of validity claims. Such action should satisfy the following requirements: 1) all concerned have an equal chance at signaling the need for discursive action whereby validity claims can be tested by argumentative methods, 2) all concerned can critique any assumptions and have an equal chance at introducing alternative opinions, 3) all concerned can enjoy equal power so
Dramaturgical Action

Dramaturgical action deals with the subjective worlds of individuals (Table 1). It is the presentation of self in a public forum (Habermas, 1984, p.90; Outhwaite, 1996, p.134). This type of action performs a function that is of great significance for communicative action. It disseminates understanding about the individual’s strengths and weaknesses and hence enables each to gain legitimacy in situations and for subjects and actions for which this is appropriate. The more an organization makes use of communicative action the more significant dramaturgical action becomes.

Concerning dramaturgical action Habermas (1984, p.136) stated:

“[Dramaturgical action] is a social interaction whereby those involved constitute a ‘public’ for each other...The actor seeks to be seen and accepted in a certain way by his public.”

For example, a systems analyst practices dramaturgical action when he projects an image of the specialist with privileged access to the skills necessary to satisfy the user’s information requirements. The actor purposefully controls for his public audience the disclosure of his experiences, thoughts, cognition’s, wishes, attitudes, and emotions to which he alone has privileged access (Outhwaite, 1996, p.136). In this manner the actor aims to create a shared understanding between himself and his audience (Habermas, 1984, p.329). CAT would suggest that every member of an organization would engage in dramaturgical action to some extent in order to establish legitimacy toward action. This means that everyone projects a reasonably accurate image of himself to the other members of the organization toward which he acts. Dramaturgical action helps establish an individual’s role or contribution to the organization. Dramaturgical action is evaluated by testing the validity claim of sincerity (Habermas, 1984, p.447). Dramaturgical action can take on strategic overtones when the actor uses it to influence and steer his public to see him in a certain light (Outhwaite, 1996, p.142).

2.3 COLONIZATION OF THE LIFEWORLD

Habermas (1984) suggests two world constructs - the lifeworld and the system. The lifeworld designates the shared social world of individuals which is maintained primarily by three steering mechanisms — instrumental action, strategic action, and communicative action.

The system refers to the environment which is dominated by economic, market, and administrative rules (Habermas, 1984). Whereas the lifeworld is ruled by communicative rationality, the system is governed by a functional rationality (Braaten, 1991). Thus, different forms of rationality characterize the lifeworld and the system.

Habermas contends that money and administrative procedures increasingly invade the lifeworld where they replace communicative action. This results in a breakdown in communicative action between individuals. The causes of this communicative breakdown can be understood if one appreciates that the lifeworld and the system operate on different forms of rationalizations. Rationalization is an essential concept of Habermas’s theory and it designates the internal logic of a method of coordination (Cooke, 1994).

Concerning the lifeworld rationalization centers on the cultural reproduction of society with a primary focus on understanding. Alternatively, system rationalization centers on the
material reproduction of society with a primary concern for effectiveness and efficiency. Mixing the two worlds interrupts communicative action. Thus, the cultural reproduction of the lifeworld, which relies on understanding achieved by communicative action, becomes dominated by noncommunicative procedures. This in turn leads to alienation and a loss of legitimacy (Braaten, 1991).

3.0 ORGANIZATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION THEORY

CAT is very precise on certain issues and therefore organizations committed to it will not look like other organizations in certain aspects. Some ways of working would be ruled out under CAT whereas other ways would be absolutely essential. From the theory we can to some extent deduce several characteristics of organizations aiming at CAT ideals. Figure 1 gives a framework showing the major aspects of a typical company and we use it to analyse what an organization aiming at CAT ideals would look like.

3.1 ORGANISATIONAL VISION AND STRATEGY

Many companies claim to have a business mission and a strategy to realize it. Few would appear to have an equivalent organizational vision. The application of Habermas’s vision of an emancipated society to the operation of a typical company would yield organizational aims that start with the role of individual staff members rather than formal structure. The concern for operational efficiency shown in Taylorism is replaced by a concern for the way people are asked to work and in particular how they relate to each other. However, for the company following CAT ideals we expect some degree of tension between the demands of the organizational vision and those of the business strategy. Achieving a balance between these two potentially conflicting demands may prove difficult.

3.2 VALUES

An organization committed to CAT ideals would want to develop and nurture certain values within its own workforce. These values centre on how to treat people, their roles and the way they interact with each other. Furthermore the organization must be seen to operate by these values.

Open communication on all subjects would be the norm. There would be no ‘taboo’ topics. Discussion of all subjects pertaining to the health and operation of the company would be a feature of daily life. Two subjects would be of especial concern to organizations committed to CAT ideals that other organizations do not usually discuss - norms and the potential threat of colonization. Social structures and norms must and will change continuously. According to CAT it is important that such changes are made explicit and are recognized and agreed to by all. Colonization of the lifeworld is an ever-present threat to each member of the organization. With CAT its effects must be countered as vigorously as is practical. Open discussion of how the organization’s values impinge on the other areas of his life is a way of countering colonization.

Truthfulness and sincerity will be held in high esteem and self-reflection will be valued. Achieving consensus rather than attempting to get agreement by personal domination is an absolute
requirement. Commitment to the organization's goals is also an absolute necessity. Furthermore there will be no room in such organizations for those whose participation or contribution is lacking in significant ways.

The problem for the organization comes in dealing with individuals who fail to conform to these values. It cannot tolerate major deviations from norms, as this will undermine the remaining group memberships’ commitment. But in all its dealings with individual staff the company must conform to and be seen to conform to these values.

### 3.3 ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

Habermas has been criticized for never clearly stating how to achieve an emancipated society (White, 1996). As Hirschheim et al., (1996) have noted Habermas offers little guidance on what type of organizational design would best support CAT ideals. Habermas however does clearly specify the features of an emancipated society.

CAT norms imply near symmetric power relations. Only under these conditions is it possible that each individual’s contribution to any debate will be taken seriously and given its due weight, irrespective of position within the organization. A traditional hierarchical, many-layered organizational structure works directly against this. Such an organization is set up to enforce the domination of employees all the way down the chain of command. A flat and fluid organizational structure reduces the power asymmetry and increases cross communication among its members. Ad hoc team formation to respond to changing business demands would be a feature of such organizations. Self-managed teams are perhaps the closest approach to an organizational form within which CAT ideals could flourish. Each team member plans and manages his work, while liaising with other team members as needed. Team leadership moves around among the membership as the group thinks right and there is no formal power asymmetry.

However, conditions for ‘ideal speech’ will always be difficult to achieve. A structure with even a few layers of command offers those individuals at senior levels the opportunity to wield power through their position in the organization. These individuals can generate their own ways of exercising undue influence through their history of past successes, special expertise and personality. This behavior can occur in any group including self-managed teams. Wilson (1997) in an interesting critique of the value of emancipatory principles for information systems design claimed that an organization could never fully realize CAT principles as ‘power relations are inherent in social relationships’.

### 3.4 PEOPLE

For all staff to join in the debate it is imperative that they have the skills to contribute effectively and a comprehensive understanding of the organizational context. Self-reflection and personal self-knowledge; interpersonal skills such as assertiveness, verbal and presentational skills and leadership skills; an ability to learn from personal criticism, a willingness to assume responsibility, decision taking abilities, ability to make rational judgments are some of the requisite personal skills. A full understanding of all aspects of organizational life is not possible nor is it easy to assess what a good approximation would be.
Organizations committed to CAT ideals need a high level of these skills scattered throughout all functional areas. Furthermore such organizations will have to create ways of encouraging staff to acquire these skills and contextual knowledge through such mechanisms as training days, workshops and seminars. Some people find it particularly difficult to acquire these types of skills and sometimes no amount of training will help. For these individuals the only recourse is eventually to leave the organization.

The desired work roles are totally opposed to those of the Taylorist model. The greater the control that actors can exert on the design of their job the better as far as CAT is concerned. Organizations committed to these ideals would encourage job design that passed the maximum possible authority and responsibility to its employees.

3.5 BUSINESS PROCESSES

In organizations committed to CAT ideals business processes fall into three categories; instrumental, strategic and communicative action. For Habermas the most significant requirement is that these actions are carried out appropriately. Instrumental action is normally appropriate for routine activities such as inventory control. Strategic action normally occurs when participants are involved in negotiation. A key requirement for strategic action to be appropriate is that all participants are aware of the nature of the action and agree that this is the best way to proceed. Such is the case for example when dealing with external stakeholders like customers. In a company committed to CAT we expect to see communicative action spread throughout all levels of the organization. In particular actors would explicitly recognise it as an option and only reject this approach in cases where one of the two alternative action types were openly agreed to be more appropriate. Communicative action (and discursive and dramaturgical action) becomes more appropriate as the complexity of business situations increase. In our view communicative action is particularly needed in situations which call for significant changes and that involve many staff. It offers the best way to harness the expertise, and support of many actors in decision making and implementation.

Furthermore there will be processes that exist mainly to support the needs of CAT. These will include for example systems designed to allow public discussion concerning correct action and norms. It must be possible for all staff to discuss how and when to use the three types of action discussed above. It must also be possible for the results of these discussions to be disseminated throughout the organization. A system that addresses the handling of communicative breakdown would also be needed.

Habermas offers no guidance on such important practical concerns as decision taking methods, recruitment, promotion and termination. Neither does he help on the subject of conflict. If several individuals come to a major clash in judgment over some proposed action, even when they completely agree on context, norms and language, a solution cannot be reached by solely using communicative action. Any organization has to work out its own method of resolving such conflicts. Nor do organisations always have the luxury of time to hold the extended discussion that communicative action demands, in situations where immediate action is imperative.
3.6 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
The selection and design of new information systems is essential to the future success of any organization. At the design stage systems reflect current organizational priorities and world views, which in turn commit organizations to ways of carrying out operations for many years into the future. Therefore, the process by which new systems are selected is of extreme significance.

The implication of communicative action theory on information systems is twofold; through its impact on system selection criteria as well as on the way in which new systems are selected and designed. A similar view concerning information system selection and design arose from the Utopia project where workers played an active role in deciding what kind of technology would be needed and how it could support them in their work (Botsman and Rawlinson, 1986; Howard, 1985).

Some systems would be selected and developed mainly to support those characteristics of organizational structure, people and business processes identified in previous sections as important to the realization of CAT ideals within the organization.

Researchers such as Hirscheim et al., (1996); Klein, and Hirschheim, (1991); and Lyytinen (1992); and Wilson (1997) have discussed how IS design and to a much lesser extent IS project selection would benefit from using CAT methods. We would expect organizations committed to CAT ideals to follow system design methods such as ETHICS that aim to involve the full participation of the users throughout the process (Hirschheim, and Klein, 1994).

3.7 SUMMARY
It seems that organizations aspiring to CAT ideals can never completely reach them. However the exercise of attempting to meet these goals will have a powerful impact on all aspects of organizational life. The concern for individuals and their behavior leads to a focus on the way business processes are organized and discharged as well as the end product. Investments in staff communicative and interpersonal skills become a high priority. Developing processes that keep staff informed on the overall business and organizational context and which support the full discussion of all relevant issues becomes of great importance. In this scenario, IT offers a valuable contribution as a tool to underpin many of the needed processes.

4.0 RESEARCH METHOD
The approach taken was to carry out an in-depth investigation of one company that appeared to operate along CAT ideals. Our case study’s primary objective is investigating the extent to which Habermas’s CAT ideals have been realized at the target company Colruyt and the extent to which IT has enabled this to happen. The focus is on corporate and individual decision making processes, including implementation, personal empowerment, privacy, and company educational programs aimed at developing and maintaining a structure for decisions making. Because understanding and interpreting the general human experience of members of the firm are key, an interview-based qualitative research method suited our research purpose best (Cathering and Symon, 1994; Cavaye, 1996; Gummesson, 1991; Jonsson and Solli, 1993; Remenyi and Williams, 1996; Walsham, 1995).
4.1 THE COLRUYT COMPANY

The Colruyt company started in 1965 as a single food discount store - a revolutionary concept for Belgium at the time. The company is extraordinarily successful. Since the 1990/1991 fiscal year its market share, annual sales revenues and profits have shown a high rate of growth. More remarkably, during this period the rate of growth in profits (30% annually) has increased at over twice the rate of sales revenue. Moreover, even though total employment increased steadily, sales per employee increased even faster. Finally annual sales increased by 9% per square meter, signaling a more intensive use of available sales area (Table 2)

Competing on price is the essence of the company’s strategy. On-site comparison of product offerings in Colruyt stores showed that the company competes on product differentiation as well. The company sells its products in unique package sizes, with substantial amounts of useful information, by sales clerks who offer a personal service. In short, in Mathur's (1992) terms the company’s strategy is one of differentiation in product, content, and support.

Mr. Colruyt had clear philosophical views on the type of company he wanted to be part of. His views shaped the company at its inception, and many of the company’s more unusual characteristics can be traced to his influence. His major philosophical views stem from his boyhood in Catholic Belgium and his Marxist experiences during and immediately after World War II, when he was a member of a communist cell in Paris. Catholicism led to Mr. Colruyt’s concern for the rights of customers, his belief that everyone in his company should participate in corporate life as much as he is able, and to his conviction that work should be meaningful for everyone in the company.

From his Marxist experience arose the desire to minimize alienation among his employees. Thus, Mr. Colruyt advocated that employees throughout the company should have a significant input into how to perform their daily tasks. He stressed the abolition of monotonous work procedures and he advocated their replacement by IT and other forms of automation. During his Marxist days he learned to argue conflicting worldviews vigorously. These convictions appear to have led him to focus on the importance of communication and a concern for how people relate and interact with each other.

Thus, since the company's inception upper management has focused on rational discourse, reducing power differences among employees, encouraging personal initiative toward action at all company levels, and emphasizing relations between human rationality and emotionality. It is important to note that the high value put on communication among company employees was conceived ahead of any concern for its practical implementation. After serious debate upper management settled on IT to effectively and efficiently implement meaningful interpersonal communication. Hence, in sharp contrast to its competitors who introduced information technology into already existing organizations, the Colruyt company defined its business around IT (Colruyt, September 1983).

4.2 RESEARCH APPROACH
The case study is based on a number of important company documents and interviews with a representative cross section of employees at Colruyt. In response to a highly critical study published by the union that included numerous charges of abusive company practices (Adele, et al., 1984), the Colruyt company published a book explaining its activities (Penneman, 1985). It took the form of a compilation of policy statements on corporate operating philosophy with respect to customers, employees, unions, and society at large together with many of the existing employees’ views on how these beliefs and values impacted them individually (Penneman, 1985). These two books are very significant sources of information because their contents cover some twenty years of company policy. The books combined with newspaper and trade journal articles, provided a road map for composing a series of semi-structured interviews. They identified the levels of management and staff which it was important to interview and the direction and content of the interviews.

The study’s first stage started with interviewing the former general director of information applications who, over a twenty-five-year career, had served the company in a variety of high level functions (Lengeler, May 1992, March, 1993, May 1994). Topics covered during the interviews included company objectives and beliefs and the use of IT. Thematic analysis of this three-hour interview gave rise to a rich set of questions for the next interview. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and subjected to in-depth textual analyses.

The study’s next stage was an interview was with the divisional market manager and centered on divisional policies, procedures, and work processes, including user requests for IT applications, budgeting, and prioritizing application development. This manager gave an online demonstration of one of the most important and unusual company-wide systems. This system, the interactive system for information dissemination (ISID) stores day-to-day information concerning the running of the company. It is accessible to all company employees, including union stewards. The marketing manager discussed in great detail how daily work activities are supported by ISID (De Hertog, May 1992).

The results of the first two interviews enabled the design and planning of the last set of interviews. The analysis also helped to identify who were the most appropriate members of staff for the remaining interviews. These included Mr. Colruyt (May 1993), who was the president of the board of directors, the general director for distribution, the director for warehousing, a store manager, and several checkout clerks. We also made several on-site observations in different Colruyt shops, its warehouse, other facilities, and competing stores. Our research strategy allowed us to obtain multiple views, which enabled triangulation. Each interview was analyzed and the results used to adjust, refocus, and redirect the plans for the remaining interviews.

5.0 EVIDENCE FOR COMMUNICATIVE ACTION THEORY AT COLRUYT

This section discusses the evidence for CAT at Colruyt. It describes some of the solutions that the company found to the practical problems of CAT implementation and the varying reactions of stakeholders such as the Union and individual members of staff. The analysis follows the framework developed in section four.
5.1 ORGANISATIONAL VISION AND VALUES

Perhaps the most striking corporate characteristic is the degree to which Mr. Colruyt's fundamental personal ideals accord with CAT ideals. It is these ideals that he has built into the company culture and norms over a period of thirty years.

His conviction that work should be meaningful and challenging for everyone within the company has lead to his insistence on the norm of participation. Individual employee identification and personal involvement with the company have been part of the company's culture from its very inception. The following quote shows the depth of commitment required from all employees (Colruyt, May 1993):

“...The person has to participate in a very real way, or else the individual is placed on the sidelines; or even worse - he is singled out or rejected! A nonparticipating individual gets run underfoot in a competitive environment.”

Mr. Colruyt’s desire to minimize job alienation and his belief in the value of debate led to his advocating employee input into the design of the daily tasks. He demanded employee involvement in any debate over aspects of company operations that concerned them. The company seminar program offers an occasion on which all company norms are up for discussion. Seminar attendees are presented with the chance to discuss the validity of corporate norms and to change them. These seminars are very successful, hugely popular, and attended at some point by almost everyone in the company. Mr. Colruyt (May 1993) stated that the seminars are so central to the organizational life that his senior management has to attend these seminars regularly to stay abreast of changing company values.

Mr. Colruyt stressed the importance of self-reflection for his managers in the following quote;

“The executive acts publicly but he also has a continued need for introspection. He should understand the functioning of his own personality. Not in terms of theories or management training courses but rather on the bases of observing his own day-to-day functioning. He should know how his thinking functions...What are the strong and weak sides of his intellect...Where does he need help discharging his responsibilities and when he can rely on his own strengths...He should understand his emotions, his working hypotheses...his creative potential. [However], he should avoid at all cost the mistake of wanting to change himself, to improve himself so as to be a better man...There should be a definitive acceptance of himself as a person.”

The astonishing end of the above quotation illustrates the widespread beliefs concerning management throughout the Colruyt company.

The company is aware of the potential towards colonization. For example instrumental efficiency and the use of power which may be appropriate for achieving production quotas are inappropriate in situations involving human relations. The company seeks to counter the threat of colonization through the seminar program, which teaches staff ways to act without being unduly influenced by company, ideology, or group norms.
However some forms of colonization do occur as this quote from a low-level employee (Alen, July 1984) demonstrates:

“The right to privacy and respect for fellow employees is something about which we are daily informed by the top brass. However, the right to privacy appears to go only one way.”

The clerk explained that top management expects to be treated politely by lower ranking personnel but do not necessarily reciprocate. In this example power differences allowed top management to pursue instrumental efficiency at the expense of individual courtesies. Furthermore the union charges that Mr. Colruyt has consistently applied an aggressive and direct way of dealing with personal matters (Adele et al., 1984). These are examples of colonization because company power relations were allowed to penetrate the clerk’s lifeworld.

Both Mr. Colruyt’s organizational vision for his company and the values that are explicitly discussed and set up as the ideal are consistent with CAT ideals. However it would be difficult to establish how far these values are adhered to in practice.

5.2 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Mr. Colruyt (September 1983) observed that the supermarket was an American invention, which was introduced in Europe before the widespread commercial use of information technology. Hence in many organizations IT was introduced later into already existing structures, where it often met with considerable resistance (DeSanctis, 1984). The Colruyt company, however, took a different approach to IT implementation. At the start of the first discount store in 1965 the company’s top management took the calculated risk of organizing its new venture around the potential and the limitations of the then existing IT. This meant that each store item had associated with it a punchcard. When customers put an item into their shopping cart, they also pulled the appropriate keypunch card. Both were then presented at the checkout. Keypunch cards were later replaced by universal product codes, which were then processed by checkout readers. Mr. Colruyt (September 1983) contended that the definitive choice for IT had proven to be a very fortunate decision. He felt that by using IT the Colruyt company had become the most efficient and effective food retailer in Belgium.

The Colruyt company places great importance on system selection. Most informatization projects are started at the request of the user, who can be a checkout clerk, a district manager, or a store manager. The proposer (normally a user) fills in a standard form (Lengeler, 1994) which asks for a comprehensive range of information. Among other things the form requires a description of how the information system will improve job performance, a calculation of the system's contribution to the company's bottom line, estimates of its development and annual system maintenance expenses, and the amount of financial resources that the proposer is willing to contribute toward its development. This request is then submitted to a steering committee comprising high level managers, end users, and information specialists. The steering committee rarely rejects information systems requests, which show a positive cost-benefit analysis. If the believability of the cost-benefit figures is in doubt, this issue is resolved by judging the reliability of the person behind the estimates. Management determines a person's reliability by comparing the cost estimates against actual cost figures for previous software
projects. System development is user controlled and with many information systems staff familiar with the business and the user community on account of job rotation assignments, the communication problems of developers and sponsors are minimised.

We give an example of a system that is more important to the organizational vision than they are to the business strategy. In keeping with the idea that information should be available to anyone, the Colruyt company developed an interactive system for information dissemination (ISID) similar in function to modern groupware packages. The idea for this system originated with Lengeler (1993) in the early 1980s after he had worked in many parts of the company on a variety of assignments. He saw the system’s potential for meeting the company’s desire for open, clear and efficient communication. ISID ensures access to information in effective and efficient ways. Company policy ensures that information regarding all decisions, actions, or events is captured by ISID. For example interoffice correspondence, outbound and inbound communication, and minutes of meetings are captured by ISID. Documents less than one year old are stored online. Any document older than one year is stored on optical disk (Table 3).

In keeping with decentralized decision making, 80% of the information stored is accessible to all within the company, including union stewards. The remaining 20% of information is confidential and access is limited to a restricted subset of employees. The system is absolutely essential to the company - each month one hundred thousand documents and one million document pages are printed. The system’s capabilities are also impressive - documents less than a year old can be accessed in one second or less, a very short time indeed, considering that the online data base consists of one million documents. Access time increases to fifteen seconds for documents over a year old, which are stored on optical disk. This is certainly not excessive considering the optical disk-based database holds more than ten million documents.

The company makes a large investment in IT. Many systems are not dissimilar to other food retailers and can be justified on productivity gains. But there are clearly many other systems that have been installed to meet the organizational vision. Mr. Colruyt believed that the improvement in effectiveness gained through employee performance more than balanced the high costs of software development, system implementation, employee training and system maintenance. The systems selection process is user driven, as CAT would predict.

5.3 ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

The Colruyt organization is a scaled-down version of a hierarchical structure in which there are relatively few levels. This has important implications for the role of the executive. As the following quote (Colruyt, May 1993) concerning the basis for executive decision making, makes clear.

“An executive is someone who decides and communicates his decision to subordinates, colleagues, and superiors. First [he] contemplates the decision, next [he] explains [the decision], then he summarizes the decision in written form which is then stored [in ISID]...Furthermore, an executive needs to be [a] humble [person]...The demands are enormous...[His] expertise has to embrace many areas of knowledge . . . His performance
should be 100%...[However] if the executive is very lucky his performance will be 30%...Thus the executive should be able to accept that he falls short 70% of the time.”

Notice that the quote specifically deals with corporate norms: the executive derives his decision making authority from the group. This authority must be tempered by the realization that the executive is a fallible human being with definitive personal limitations.

Throughout the Colruyt company one finds groups of individuals who work at solving problems. These work teams are the prime way in which corporate change is effected. The rigidity of conventional bureaucratic structures is much reduced by the work team concept. A work team including cooling engineers, meat preparation supervisors and meat preparation clerks might be formed to resolve frequent food cooler malfunctions. Memoranda and other documents concerning the team’s objectives are distributed automatically to all other group members in electronic and printed form through the use of ISID. Joining such work teams is at the discretion of individuals and is not controlled by the existing work group members. Functional teams are normally temporary entities organized around particular issues.

The company has made significant progress in reducing power asymmetries, but cannot be said to have totally eliminated them.

5.4 PEOPLE

The Colruyt company makes huge investments in training its employees. Seminars are available on self-empowerment, self-expression, decision making, and on assertiveness to help individuals deal with their emotions. These seminars have minimal theoretical content but focus instead on building communicative competence under practical day-to-day conditions. The seminar program seeks to instill in individuals a capacity for self-reflection and offers an occasion on which all company norms are up for discussion. An employee quote exemplifies this concept (Denayer, 1985):

“Attending the many in-house courses are among the best of my experiences at the company. I learned to understand myself. I learned that my emotions play an important role concerning my relations, communication, and contacts with other company employees. This process has made it possible to get insight into others, to understand others and to create an open dialogue with my cohorts.”

Our discussions with employees found no evidence that any feel compelled by their managers to attend a particular seminar, or any seminar, for that matter. When asked what the employee might do if material presented during a seminar goes counter to his personal opinions, a store manager responded (Le Roy, May 1993):

“[My experience indicates] there is only one thing to do, [which is] leave! Or else [I] discuss the matter with [the instructor or other seminar attendees]. Yes, [such actions] are possibilities. [After all], forcing someone to attend a four-day company seminar is ludicrous if [the employee] does not absorb anything.”
As previously noted, the company practices job rotation, which enhances understanding among individuals because of a shared life world (Rogge, October 1984; Van de Perre, July 1984). Practical experience on the shop floor is a requirement for information systems analysts and top corporate managers. Middle and top managers get direct experience in the IS department. Systems analysts spend years in different functional areas. These examples of job rotation show the massive investment made in employee development. They also demonstrate the company's commitment to helping employees learn in day-to-day operative settings (Jonsson and Gronlund; 1985, Jonsson; 1991, Jonsson, and Macintosh, 1997).

Because of the nature of the company’s business involving many routine repetitive tasks, designing job roles that give some degree of control to the employee is a challenge. How well the company has met this is best illustrated with the sales clerks' job. They have real but limited power over their working environment. This is exercised in two main ways - over product prices and over the choice of job. The company’s commitment to the customer of competitive pricing is discharged by reducing the price of any product to match competitors. The job of implementing this pledge falls to the clerk, who must judge the customer’s evidence and decide whether to alter prices. He must then log this action and notify the information system that keeps all pricing information (both Colruyt’s and competitors). Sales clerks work in shifts as a team and have the joint responsibility of agreeing how team members are to be distributed between the two jobs, re-shelving and working at the checkouts.

All these actions show the high level of commitment that the company has to its employees, as an organization committed to CAT ideals would have.

5.5 BUSINESS PROCESSES

Retailing is essentially an instrumental business relying heavily on good logistics. Hence we would expect to observe many instances of appropriate instrumental action types. Of far greater interest is the occurrence of the remaining action types. Communicative, discursive and dramaturgical action types are at the heart of Habermas’s theory and strategic action types are a common feature of all organizations. What routines and procedures have been developed to support appropriate behavior? Perhaps even more significantly can the organization detect communicative distortion and inappropriate action types and take action to ensure non repetition? In the following, we give examples of the five action types. For each action type we consider how far its validity claims were met and discuss organizational routines invoked by the actors concerned.

Instrumental Action in the Sales Function

Store clerks strive to keep customer waiting time at the checkout counter to an absolute minimum. At the end of each shift an information system provides the store clerk with the waiting times of those three customers who spent the longest time in the checkout queue. This information system supports the company's aim to provide employees information that enables them to measure their daily performance. Job performance measures are normally not available to anyone but the store clerk (Colruyt, April 1984). This practice is based on the presumption that empowered individuals should have control over their work environment, which includes having
access to performance measures. Furthermore, because the performance measures are intended to motivate the store clerk to provide maximum service to the company's customers, their accuracy is most important. Hence, the necessary validity claim of the performance measures is truth (Table 1).

**Strategic Action in the Sales Function**

In our view when anyone terms a situation ‘political’ he implies that all the individuals concerned are acting strategically. For many occasions this is a legitimate approach. In the following case a Colruyt employee and a customer act in a strategic manner which is expected by all parties.

At times customers make unusually large purchases, for example ordering ten cases of beer for an office party. In this situation, it is not unusual for the customer to request a discount. The clerk finds himself in a situation where strategic action is appropriate. The clerk has the authority to grant discounts and he has access to his supervisor for advice when needed. Hence, the validity claim of rightness of corporate norms is met. There are arguments for and against granting the discount and it is the job of the clerk to balance these conflicting arguments. The clerk has at his disposal an information system, which will tell him the effect of the proposed price discount on profits. The customer, however, can choose to reject any offer made. Opportunities for checking and discussing validity claims of accuracy reside in the availability of an information system.

**Communicative Action in decision making**

The teams described in the section on people (6.3) are a major vehicle through which many decisions for change are made. The chair calls the meeting. All staff affected by the decision must be notified via ISID in time to contribute to the discussion. The administration of the work group subsequently formed is handled by ISID and hence its progress and actions are part of the public domain. This offers many opportunities for comment and reflection by both members of the group and those outside it. Reflection is key to many of the validity claims necessary for communicative action and we see it being used in this way at Colruyt. The chair does not necessarily make the final decision; neither does the group. The Colruyt company first practiced, but eventually abandoned, group decision making. However, group consensus on decisions is still sought. Under the current procedure one individual either volunteers or is nominated by the group to make the final decision. This individual finalizes the decision and communicates it to all affected individuals using ISID. This procedure avoids decisions for which no one feels responsible but links decisions to specific individuals. Mr. Colruyt (May 1993) noted:

“It is always an individual [who finalizes the decision]. The decision is announced a few days after the final meeting. [Because] a group decision is some of this, a little of that. That is [a sure recipe for] catastrophe.”

It is believed decision making during meetings does not enable careful deliberation, which in turn puts the decision maker under undue stress. Scheduling decision making to occur three to four days after a meeting lessens such stress. Finally, emotional stress is relieved by making it discussible during the pursuit of rational argument. The final decision is reported to all staff again via ISID and the decision maker is responsible for implementation.

An interesting example decision shows the detection and discussion of an incident of
communication breakdown. In this case, the decision maker managed to subvert this process, turning the communicative action into a strategic one. By careful timing he managed to complete the process during the absence of a key member of staff while he was on holiday. According to Mr. Colruyt (1993) this was later detected and analyzed from the documentation stored in ISID. The resulting very public discussion left the original decision unaltered, but established that in future actions of this type were unacceptable.

The system at Colruyt is a fascinating attempt to make the decision making procedures satisfy the validity claims of communicative action - accuracy, contextual appropriateness, and individual sincerity. To achieve this it has armed its staff with the requisite skills, knowledge and information to contribute effectively. The company has also sought to create the conditions in which all individuals involved have a good chance of being heard. The appointment of one person to be decision maker and implementer is an interesting approach to solving one of the major problems that bedevil organizational life - effective action. It seems that we are far better at planning than achieving results. Individuals begin to reduce their involvement in discussions about change as they begin to perceive that either the decision has already been made or that action is unlikely. Colruyt’s open decision making process and clear allocation of responsibility for action is a notable attempt to fight this tendency.

**Discursive actions concerning appropriate behavior**

There are many examples of discursive action at Colruyt. In July 1984, Mr. Colruyt dispatched via ISID to all his employees a statement on personal and company privacy. The message was a reaction against certain union members who had used ISID to obtain internal company documents. The contents of these documents had been made public without company consent. Colruyt’s message was in effect a discursive act because he invited the union members in question to discuss privacy norms during the next meeting with company representatives. The intent of Mr. Colruyt’s writing was to engage the union in a discussion with a view to obtaining agreement about the standards of proper behavior. This meets the validity claims of accuracy of information, correctness of norms, and sincerity of intent. First, accuracy was a matter of public record. Second, as CEO Mr. Colruyt clearly had the authority to engage the union in discourse. Third, sincerity of intent could be deduced from all his previous actions and public statements.

This action by Mr. Colruyt shows his commitment to proceeding by consensus where possible and to striving for accurate communication both necessary building blocks for communicative action. The existence of and support for discursive action types is essential for communicative actions to flourish.

The following entails an incident surrounding the translation of a certain document from Flemish into French. As Table 2 shows, a significant minority of the workforce is French speaking (20%) and the company maintains a full-time staff of translators for ensuring that all documents are available in ISID in the two languages (DeHertog, May 1992). A French speaking employee came across an ISID document, which had been translated, from Flemish into French. After pointing out legitimate shortcomings in the French translation, this employee then followed up by severely berating the document’s translator. While scanning recent ISID documents Mr. Colruyt noticed the exchange of ire. He responded on ISID to the note’s author, the group of translators
and the company managers. He stated that one should refrain from getting emotional on ISID. Mr. Colruyt then initiated the start of a discussion on how to handle situations of this sort - a classic example of discursive action. This meets the validity claims of accuracy of information, correctness of norms, and sincerity of intent. Accuracy was a matter of public record. As CEO Mr. Colruyt clearly had the authority. Finally, sincerity of intent could be deduced from all his actions and public statements.

Successful communicative action implies a high degree of shared context. Mr. Colruyt’s personal conviction of the importance of effective communication in achieving this are well documented. A typical statement on this subject follows (Colruyt, May 1993):

“It is urgent that we learn to communicate. Not because of some lofty ideal but by way of practical everyday discourse. Check whether the words [used] mean the same for all parties: they seldom do. [Communicate to achieve] understanding of the position of the other before going full steam ahead with action.”

The seminar program is also a major vehicle through which discursive action can take place.

**Dramaturgical actions exemplified by Mr. Colruyt and by sales clerks**

Dramaturgical action is practiced throughout the Colruyt company. Thus for example, Mr. Colruyt presented himself to his managers and to his workers. His uses of dramaturgical action were copied by other members of upper management and many employees of lower rank.

For example, in a company communiqué sent to all personnel members in electronic form via ISID Mr. Colruyt (April 1984) explained:

“Newspaper reporters seek to assign me superhuman qualities: the ‘great intellect’ who planned and organized the company’s twenty-year growth and who continues to control the enterprise to this day...I explain that the great strength of the company is ‘open’ communication...actually realized by computer-based and other communication techniques...It enables the continuous exchange of ideas among company workers and, hence, frees us from the limitations of our own thinking...and this becomes the ‘great intellect’ We [perform] better than others because we continuously communicate in different ways, with immediacy, efficiency, and without the loss of time.”

The question here is what Mr. Colruyt was projecting and why this has validity. The quote shows a company founder who assigned the causes of success to team work, which is made possible and supported by computer-based communication techniques. The central idea is that communication makes the exchange of knowledge possible and enables the individual worker to transcend his intellectual limitations. The effective and efficient use of this knowledge, which is generated among workers, is then augmented by an organization characterized by networks, the delegation of power, a common vision, and consensus. This dramaturgical act has validity because it is contextually correct and it appears to reflect Mr. Colruyt’s sincere beliefs. It is contextually correct because Mr. Colruyt was the company’s CEO and hence his role was to create and disseminate the company’s vision. His sincerity is shown through the consistency of this quote with all his other statements and actions.

The sales clerks offer a second example of dramaturgical action. When dealing with
clients the clerks practice a different form of dramaturgical action than when they interact with each other. One clerk (Leveau, June 1984) described his relationship with clients in this way:

“There is not a single client who enters our store without being greeted by a clerk with a sincerely meant ‘good day.’ Clients seek out and shop at Colruyt stores because of the goodwill, politeness, and friendliness which they receive nowhere else...[Later on] at the checkout [clerks] don’t [treat] the client as automatons...We engage him or her in conversation and [the client] helps us with our checkout task.”

This has validity on account of the clerk’s sincerity, his contextually defined authority and the extent to which the statement reflects corporate vision concerning the treatment of clients.

Utilisation of IT within business processes
Information systems have been developed for all parts of the business. They automate or support almost all activities. The examples of the various action types given here show just how far IT has penetrated the company operations. All levels of staff routinely use systems in support of their jobs. As the strategic action of the sales clerk illustrates the systems are not only widely accessible but in many cases the users are expected to interrogate and to take responsibility for data updates.

Summary
The support for and the many examples of discursive and dramaturgical actions at Colruyt establish that communicative action is a real option for all staff. It is clear that communicative actions do occur. However it would be difficult to assess how often they occur or whether there are occasions calling for communicative action when it is not practiced. It is equally clear that there are times when there is distorted communication. Again how often this happens would be difficult to establish.

5.6 COMMUNICATIVE ACTION THEORY: ALTERNATIVE VIEWPOINTS

It is important to state that not all stakeholders hold the same opinion about the company’s vision. Table 4 compares and contrasts company, union, and employee views concerning several important topics. These comparisons are essential to a balanced treatment of the company. They also show the limitations of the practical implementations of CAT ideals.

As we have argued elsewhere, the Colruyt company has a unique corporate culture (Table 4). Two important aspects of the corporate culture are open communication and great employee involvement in corporate affairs. Realizing these two objectives requires employees who are assertive, self-reflective, and communicatively competent to analyze situations critically and to express ideas cogently. This degree of worker involvement leads to employees who are unusually critical, which in turn results in a very demanding work environment. The employee view is that open communication is a fact but that it led to a company atmosphere and a communicative style, which is very much “in your face.” That is to say, interpersonal contacts are characterized as very aggressive, unusually blunt, and at times offensive. We want to make clear that the view is held by a minority of workers. Most employees appreciate this no nonsense approach. The Union however maintains that open communication has indeed resulted in a demanding work
environment especially for shop floor workers.

An additional aspect of the corporate culture is a wide-ranging decentralization of decision making. The company holds that decentralized decision making counters worker alienation and gives individuals a much greater freedom on the job than would otherwise be the case. Workers who have made public statements agree with the company’s opinion and profess that control over their work and its simplification is part of their job. The Union, however, accuses the company of Taylorism and argues that company management determines job content and that workers have little choice but to blindly carry it out. In other words, the Union charges that workers are hoodwinked to believing that they have control but in reality they do not.

We have shown that the company makes extensive use of computer-based information systems. Not every one welcomes them. For example the company sees ISID as supporting its philosophy of reducing bureaucratic rigidity and decentralizing decision making throughout the company. Company workers attest to the usefulness of the system for providing everyone with the information needed to do his job. The Union, however, claims that the system invites abuse because it enables the easy creation of employee dossiers. In fact, the Union as well as some workers recall an example of such abuse. In this incident one employee gathered information and data on a colleague which he then used to construct a dossier. Management did not approve of such system use and put a stop to it.

Our analysis of Table 4 demonstrates the comparatively high degree of agreement between employee and company views. The union, however, tends to have a totally different view from either the company or its employees. This, undoubtedly, arises from the Union’s stated objective which is to demonstrate that “modern software technology” enables and encourages the managerial practices of old style US cotton mills (Adele, et al., 1984). An alternative view is that Colruyt’s organizational vision and its implementation have completely undermined the role of Union.

5.8 SUMMARY
The Colruyt company has aimed for organizational ideals that are consistent with CAT ideals. Its efforts have met with considerable success. What was essential to success was Mr. Colruyt, worker education policies and the extensive use of IT.

6.0 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTION AT COLRUYT

This section discusses the role played by information and communication technologies at the Colruyt company. Of all the information systems at Colruyt, ISID is the most significant because it supports open communications and in particular communicative, discursive and dramaturgical actions directly. It acts as a communicating channel, company memory and corporate knowledge base.

As a communicating channel it has the same properties as E-mail - potential transmission to any size of group simultaneously and a record of communication exchanges that become part of the
company memory. So the company has a centrally kept electronic record of many important exchanges available to all staff. Through this channel many activities take place; the company’s presents its organizational vision, staff discuss values and norms and changing ideas on company functional models, administrative procedures such as those needed for group decision taking are made publicly available to all interested individuals and all employees swap ideas on social and company issues.

The record of important transactions kept on ISID offers an opportunity for reflection unmatched by any other channel. Reflection is key to many of the validity claims necessary for communicative action. The example of communicative breakdown quoted in an earlier section when communicative action turned inappropriately to strategic action (6.5) illustrates the potential of ISID to reduce distortion. It was because the decision makers action was recorded on ISID that the incident became available to a wider audience enabling the organization to discuss the incident. As a result it was able to lay down rules for future conduct that would deter repetition. Hirscheim and Klein (1994) speculate that IS could help to mitigate distortion by facilitating the widest possible debate of organizational problems.' This is what happened here. Lyytinen and Hirscheim (1988) went further when they suggested that IS could support discursive action through the dual role of providing the means for criticism and learning. They identified three ways in which IS could contribute to discursive acts; by establishing new channels for communication, redistributing access to existing information and providing new information relevant to the subject at hand. These are all accomplished by ISID.

Communicative action calls for an ‘ideal’ speech situation where all parties involved have an equal chance of being heard (White, 1995). This implies that individuals should have equal access to knowledge and operate under symmetric power relations. ISID, the company’s memory and knowledge base, was specifically developed to reduce power asymmetry by making information available. The system is accessible to all employees. Colruyt stated (June 1984):

“Knowledge is power. To effect power decentralization requires information decentralization...Hundreds of employees become invested with a great deal of power toward taking initiatives...[These employees] experience this as an enormous enrichment of their personal life and work life.”

Systems such as inventory control, the competitive price database automate much routine work and can have the effect of setting staff free for more satisfying work with responsibility and interest. This seems to have been an explicit aim of the company and has in general been reached.

We have argued elsewhere (Janson et al., 1997) that this early espousal of IS enabled the company to become skilled in the development, implementation and use of new systems. The examples quoted in the previous sections establish how well the systems have been integrated into the working lives of the appropriate staff. McLuhan (1964) suggested that to get maximum value from new technologies like IS, users must embrace it and use it as a natural extension of themselves. The importance of user mastery of new information systems in obtaining organizational value has been well-recognized (Yetton et al., 1994; Zuboff, 1988; Walton, 1989; Hales, 1991 Ostermann, 1991). Colruyt’s high level expectations for its employees and willingness to invest in them together with its long time use of IS have created a sophisticated user
population, well able to fully exploit new systems for instrumental and strategic action. This combined with their organizational ideals has led to an unusually high level of system use. For example database interrogation and data update are widespread responsibilities. The use of the pricing system by sales clerks is an illustration of this.

At the Colruyt company systems discharge at least three key roles in support of communicative action; first in automating routine and repetitive instrumental tasks, second in storing and disseminating information supporting contextual knowledge and reflection and third enabling communication between individuals. In addition their organizational vision has resulted in the creation of a sophisticated user population, with access to all systems, which makes intensive use of them and takes considerable responsibility for their maintenance and upkeep.

7.0 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Our study has several significant limitations. First, it is study based on a single case in the food retail industry. Jo Colruyt founded and guided the company during a thirty-year period and, hence, he was able to mold its development around his own strongly held belief system. Thus, executives who assume responsibility for existing organizations are much more limited in what they can do because they inherit an already established corporate culture and philosophy.

Second, according to Jo Colruyt, relative stability is an important characteristic of the retail industry. This implies that decision making under extreme time pressures is uncommon. Hence, lengthy group discussions made necessary by implementing CAT ideals may be costly but it is normally not problematic. The same cannot be said for industries that operate in a more turbulent market.

Third, the company exists in a national culture, which still attaches great value to ideas, which arose out of the Protestant reformation and the enlightenment. These ideas include respect for individuality and personal responsibility, an attitude that no one is any better than anyone else, a need to make a societal contributions, an assumption that problems can be solved by rational individuals working together, and a belief that work has sanctifying value. In addition, Belgium ranks relatively low on Hofstede’s (1985) power distance and risk aversion dimensions. These limitations suggest that extending our findings to other companies, industries, and cultures should be done with extreme caution. However, we would expect that CAT ideals might be successfully implemented in countries other than Belgium, which have national cultures ascribing to ideals just described.

Finally, our study does not make value judgments concerning CAT ideals. That is to say, we do not say whether these ideals are good or bad. Consequently we do not evaluate whether the Colruyt company’s effect on society are good, bad, or neutral. We have limited our study to analyzing a company, which has come close to successfully implementing CAT ideals and in the process has made extensive use of IT.

8.0 CONTRIBUTION TO IS RESEARCH
The main thrust of much of the existing CAT IS research has been largely theoretical. A considerable body of recent work contends that information technology (IT) should be able to support practical communicative action among the members of an organization (Auramaeki, Hirschheim, and Lyytinen, 1992; Deetz, 1992; Dietz, 1991; Klein and Hirschheim, 1991; Lyytinen and Hirschheim, 1988; Lyytinen, 1992; Ngwenyama, 1993; Koningsveld and Mertens, 1992; Kunneman, 1985, 1986; Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997; Hirscheim and Klein, 1994). A particular focus of this work has been that of the IS design process. The implications and value of using a CAT approach to the design process has been developed by a number of authors.

Our work has a highly practical focus drawing on extensive case work over several years and offers insight into the practical realisation of CAT ideals. Whereas previous work was on the potential effect of CAT on IS development, this paper offers some conclusions as to how IT can support the realisation of CAT ideals. This is valuable because Habermas’s writings and the theoretic contributions of other IS researchers are not particularly specific on how CAT ideals can be put to practice.

This work contributes to a neglected avenue of research in email and computer mediated communication. Rudy (1996) in a comprehensive survey of the literature on email research pointed out that little work had been carried out on the effects of email at the organizational level. Most work concerns the effect on and use of email by individuals ie media effects (Short et al., 1976, Sproull and Kiesler, 1992) and media choice (Daft et al., 1987; Markus, 1994; Lee, 1994). Of the studies that Rudy cites (Huber, 1990; Perrin, 1991; Feldman, 1987) all appear to be theoretical and produce predictions on what type of impact CMC will have on organizational life. Our work focuses on a different aspect, which is what CMC can do in support of organizational objectives.

Further work with the potential for interesting results includes an extension to the Colruyt case which would investigate two subjects; the company’s organizational development after the founder has passed away and an in depth study of the information system design process used at the company. An important avenue for future research is the study of other case examples of organizations espousing CAT ideals preferably within other industries and countries. This could be used to confirm or extend or refute our findings. Of particular interest would be the identification of a more broad range of information systems that clearly support CAT ideals.

9 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE APPLICATION OF IT

A most important implication is that information and communication technologies are indispensable to the implementation of CAT ideals in corporate life. Companies with this type of organisational vision should expect to invest considerable financial and human resources in information and communication technologies. Moreover, this case shows the advantage of integrating this technology completely into everyone’s day-to-day activities. It is very important that all IS applications should be accessible to everyone within the company. Effective integration does not come easily or quickly. In this case success is the result of more than twenty years of corporate effort.
The implication for IS development is that in companies with workers empowered in keeping with CAT ideals, suggestions for IS projects will originate from all levels the company. Our case analysis amply demonstrates that the role of empowered workers at this company would not be limited to suggesting new IS applications. On the contrary, they would also specify and control important project characteristics such as completion date, and development and maintenance costs. Empowered individuals assume far greater control over IS application development than is ordinarily the case. To get these results organisations must investments in their workers.

10 CONCLUSIONS

IT is essential to Colruyt’s operations. McLuhan (1964) predicted that the adoption and full exploitation of IT would lead to the erosion of hierarchy and the authority of knowledge in place of delegated authority, which are characteristics similar to organizations adopting CAT principles. This does not seem to have been the path taken by Colruyt. Mr. Colruyt started with a vision of a company consistent with CAT ideals and used IT to support this. These ideals fostered independent individual action, which in turn created the conditions for widespread use of the available information systems. The way the company now operates is the result of a long period during which corporate culture and philosophy and IT have been used to reinforce each other.

References


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Le Roy, P. (May 1993) Interview with authors, Halle, Belgium


Figure 1: Organizational Framework

- Vision & Strategy
- Values
  - Organizational Structure
  - People
  - Business Processes
- Information & Communications Technology
### Table 1. Communicative Action Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Act</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>World View</th>
<th>Type of Knowledge</th>
<th>Validity Norm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Presentation of State of Affairs</td>
<td>Oriented to Success</td>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Technical, Practical</td>
<td>Truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>Influencing Counterpart</td>
<td>Oriented to Success</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Practical, Strategic</td>
<td>Correctness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td>Establishing Interpersonal Relations</td>
<td>Oriented to Understanding</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Normative, Practical</td>
<td>Sincerity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discursive</td>
<td>Establishing Common Norms</td>
<td>Oriented to Understanding</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Normative, Practical</td>
<td>Sincerity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramaturgical</td>
<td>Representing Self</td>
<td>Oriented to Understanding</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
<td>Aesthetic, Practical</td>
<td>Sincerity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics and specifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Monthly volume                             | X  **Documents: 100,000**  
X  **Printed pages: 1 100,000** |
| Response time                              | X  **On-line documents: 1 second**  
X  **Archived documents: 15 seconds** |
| Data base storage                          | X  **Recent documents: direct access storage**  
X  **Old archive: optical disk** |
| Data base structure                        | X  **Three VSAM file types:**  
X  **Glossary: keywords, documents numbers**  
X  **Text: texts, document numbers**  
X  **Title: keywords, document numbers** |
| Document search                            | X  **On keyword with Boolean operators** |
| Document confidentiality                    | X  **Restricted: keywords and contents accessible only to individuals named in the document** |
| Document access                            | X  **Restricted: 5%**  
X  **Confidential: 15%**  
X  **Non-confidential: 80%** |
| Terminals                                  | X  **Total number: 700**  
X  **Per store: 3** |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Company View</th>
<th>Union View</th>
<th>Employee View</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IS for customer service times</td>
<td>Customer waiting times used by the clerk to improve customer service.</td>
<td>Measuring customer waiting times encourages Taylorism.</td>
<td>Only I have access to the information and I need it to do my job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate seminars on communication, assertiveness, and self-reflection skills.</td>
<td>Seminars are for self-improvement and attendance is voluntary.</td>
<td>Seminars are a form of corporate brainwashing.</td>
<td>I am not obliged to attend any seminar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate culture</td>
<td>Open communication is encouraged, this greater involvement in corporate affairs makes individuals more demanding of their work environment.</td>
<td>Open communication results in a demanding environment for everyone, but especially for shop floor workers.</td>
<td>Stressing open communication has led to an aggressively blunt manner of dealing with others by many, which some find offensive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decentralized decision making, reduced worker alienation, and increased job control are goals.</td>
<td>Management conceptualizes the content of work and the worker performs the task blindly.</td>
<td>Work simplification is everyone’s responsibility and also part of my job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate philosophy</td>
<td>Employees are taken seriously.</td>
<td>Employees are treated inhumanely, systematically abused, falsely accused of dereliction of duty, theft, and they are subjected to a hostile work environment.</td>
<td>[Someone] with job motivation and personal commitment is given the change [by the company] to realize his ambition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information system for Information dissemination (ISID).</td>
<td>Power concentration in the Bureaucratise system becomes totally decentralized through ISID.</td>
<td>ISID enables the easy creation of numerous documents which then cause information Overload for the workers.</td>
<td>ISID gives everyone access to information needed [for the job].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Everyone receives the information necessary to discharge his work responsibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Information is made available to the lowest possible managerial level.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>