Chapter 21

Deception and Reality: A Challenge for the Information and Knowledge Management Function

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Decisions are based on information. The decision maker naturally assumes that it reflects reality. Yet data, which is used to create information, is easily manipulated, and the context can be changed to influence knowledge derived from the situation. The use of deception is not new, but the advent of electronic information systems has made its potential more pervasive. This paper investigates the dilemma the information management function faces in ensuring the integrity of the data supplied, the information derived, and the knowledge created from their systems.

THE PROBLEM

“Trust no one. In today’s volatile global markets, deception, misrepresentation, and outright dishonesty are among the few constants” (Rothkopf, 1999, p. 82)

Rothkopf’s statement exemplifies the theme of this paper. Deception, whilst associated with military action or stage magicians, also has potential in any organisational area. The increasing reliance on electronic storage, manipulation, and communication of data has made these systems vulnerable both to attack from others (Denning, 1999), and self-deception from reliance on unreliable data or misinterpretation of “reliable” data.

As a framework for studying the impact of deception on an organisation, Beer’s (1984, 1985) Viable System Model (VSM) provides an integrated functional of information flows. The VSM has been used extensively over the last two decades to analyze shortcomings in organisational structures. It is used in functionalist mode in this paper. The VSM specifies five main functional areas:
• Policy making;
• Intelligence and planning;
• Control (and audit);
• Coordination; and
• Operations.

The operational, coordinating, and controlling functions are there to ensure the efficient and effective running of the system. Information regarding the operational performance of the system is synthesised and fed into the controlling function, which then sends it to the intelligence and planning function. This is all internal information. The intelligence and planning function takes this and information from the external environment, analyses it, and offers the policy making function some alternative scenarios. The policy making function then makes decisions and passes it thought the intelligence and planning function to be interpreted and presented to the controlling function to enforce the policies on the operational units. Beer’s model does not include information flow from the intelligence and planning function into the environment, but this is important to most organisations as a means of manipulating their environments. Figure 1 summarises the data flows into and from the intelligence function. This paper interprets the intelligence function as that which analyses information to make decisions and, hence, real world changes. It is a fundamental management function.

It is the assumption of this paper that the information/knowledge management function in an organisation is responsible for all information whether internal or external in nature, and whether it is flowing around the organisation internally, or to or from the external environment. It does not assume that this is all done by a single entity within the system. When viewed from this perspective the opportunities for manipulation of data and its misinterpretation are manifold. The information/knowledge manager has to ensure the integrity of internal systems, information flowing from the organisation, and that flowing into the organisation. If this all encompassing nature of this function is accepted, there appears to be a need to integrate such functions as security, public relations, advertising, and information systems. This will ensure a system, which coordinates, secures, distributes, and uses information, in whatever form, effectively.

This paper will use the model of data, information, and knowledge developed by Boisot (1998). Here data describes attributes of “things”: knowledge
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