Chapter VIII

Soft Evaluation: A Systemic Approach for Postimplementation Review

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author describes an alternative approach to evaluating Information Technology (IT) projects, which involves developing a holistic view of IT interventions. The main methodological problem in evaluating any intervention is to choose the right indicators for the measurement of success or lack of it. These indicators will obviously be linked to the aims but will also be relevant to the objectives chosen to achieve these aims. Acknowledging the difficulty of choosing appropriate measures of performance, the author proposes the use of Soft Evaluation. The approach used brings together formal work in evaluation with a qualitative process of investigation based on Soft Systems Methodology in order to allow us to make judgements about the outcomes of an implementation in a systemic manner and from a number of different viewpoints or perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, Information Technology (IT) evaluation, preimplementation appraisals and postimplementation reviews, has been characterised as economical, tangible, and hard in nature. The literature review on IT evaluation shows a great bias toward using economical and tangible measures that represent the management’s view of what is “good” and “bad,” which has been described as narrow in scope.
and limited in use. Smithson and Hirschheim (1998) explain that “there has been an increasing concern that narrow cost benefit studies are too limited and there is a need to develop a wider view of the impact of a new system.” Ezingeard (1998) emphasises the importance of looking at the impact of IS on both the overall system and the whole organisation.

This chapter starts by looking in depth at evaluation in general, trying to identify different views and shed more light into this grey area of the systems development process. Second, Soft Evaluation will be introduced, emphasising its approach and building blocks. Third, a case study is introduced to demonstrate how this method can and may be used. Finally, a number of lessons and conclusions are identified from using soft evaluation in a real-life situation, and a refinement of the initial method is presented.

**IT EVALUATION**

Evaluation is not a new concept or a new property of the information age. Evaluation in Information Systems Development Process (ISDP) has existed from the early days of the “Waterfall Model” or the “Systems Development Life Cycle.” The concern at this level is to measure whether the IT solution meets its technical objectives and to what extent. In such activity, instrumentation is highly appreciated and particularly chosen. These classical but widely popular models show the classical but simplistic perception of IT/IS evaluation that controlled IT/IS research for years. Product oriented, instrument-led and unitary are the main characteristics of such a perception. Mainly, evaluation was seen as a by-product of the decision-making process of information systems development and installation. Most of the evaluation tools and techniques used were economic based, geared to identifying possible alternatives, weighing the benefits against the costs, and then choosing the most appropriate alternative. Although these models have recognised the importance of evaluation and included evaluation as a separate step or a series of steps, they still did not address the need and objective of evaluation or even the “how about?.”

Patton (1986) draws a parallel between evaluation and research arguing that “Research is aimed at truth. Evaluation is aimed at action.” Patton goes on to argue that “program evaluation is the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs for use by specific people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions with regard to what those programs are doing and affecting.” Reith (1984) explains that “the purpose of evaluation is, straightforwardly, to provide feedback.” St. Leger et al. (1992) explain that evaluation is “the critical assessment, on as objective a basis as possible, of the degree to which entire services or their component parts fulfil stated
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