Facilitators of IT-Business Alignment Between End-Users and IT Staff: A Framework

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INTRODUCTION

Achieving IT-business alignment has been a long-standing critical information management issue. Little research exists examining the facilitators of alignment between IT staff and end-users and their impact. This work-in-progress study investigates mechanisms and relationship dimensions that are significant to the facilitation of alignment between the primary organizational constituents directly involved in the use and implementation of IT. A model is introduced which will be further developed to examine the degree to which these components are in place in organizations and their relevance to achieving organizational outcomes. This study has the potential to provide academicians and practitioners with further insight into how an organization's support processes between IT and business can facilitate the effective preformance of the IT function.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature reveals two theoretical perspectives that are particularly relevant to the study of the components of alignment facilitators between IT staff and end-users, resource-based theory and institutional theory.

Resource-based theory, or a competency-based perspective, prescribes that each firm is a collection of unique resources and capabilities and these resources are the main driver of a firm's value and performance. With the resource-based perspective, a company maintains a unique combination of resources and competencies that enables it to obtain and sustain regular and profitable outputs (Wernerfelt, 1984; Grant, 1991). Employee knowledge and skills can be a distinct resource, which can provide an on-going competency (Kogut and Zander 1992; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). The relationships between IT staff and end-users may be valuable resources that can produce profitable outputs (Mata, Fuerst, & Barney, 1995; Ross, Beath, & Goodhue, 1996).

Institutional theory prescribes that there is a collection of ideas forming a perspective of the mechanisms supporting and restricting social behavior. It emphasizes the social and cultural aspects of the organizational environment, which influence its existence. Institutional theory not only applies at the organizational level, but individuals, work units, and departments can be subject to institutional forces. Scott (2001, as cited in Bjorck, 2004) identified four types of "carriers" or manifestations of institutional activities, which may act as mechanisms that cultivate "taken for granted assumptions" about IT staff/end-user partnerships:

1. Symbolic systems (such as rules, values, and expectations, etc),
2. Relational systems (such as governance systems and authority systems, etc),
3. Routines (such as protocols, standard operating procedures, jobs, roles, etc) and
4. Artifacts (objects used to comply with mandated specifications, for example a handbook or manual).

Additionally, institutional and diffusion theory suggest that the diffusion of management practices evolves from an ad-hoc adoption to becoming interorganizationally ingrained based on an organization's need to conform to the requirements or expectations of its institutional partners, alliances, and competitors (Zeitz, McAulay, & Mittal, 1999).

This study proposes a model with five interrelated constructs as show in Figure 1.
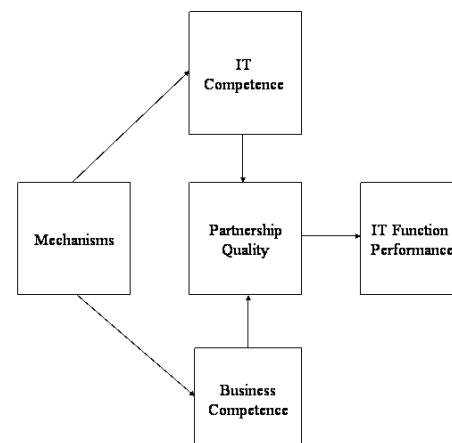
The Mechanisms construct refers to organizational mechanisms that may facilitate IT staff and end-users learning about business and IT and cultivating their relationships. Some of these mechanisms are peer reviews, pre and post implementation meetings, process flowcharts, user labs, and IT and business journals (Nambisan, Agarwal, & Tanniru; 1999; Sledgianowski, Luftman, & Reilly; 2006).

The IT Competence construct refers to the degree of IT knowedge and IT experience in end-users (Basselier, Benbasat, & Reich 2003). Basselier et al (2003) found that business managers with higher levels of IT experience and IT knowledge had greater intent to create and strengthen partnerships with IT and promote the use of IT in their organizations.

The Business Competence construct refers to the degree of IT staff's business knowledge (Basselier & Benbasat; 2004). Basselier and Benbasat (2004) found that IT professionals with higher levels of organization-specific knowledge and interpersonal and management knowledge had greater intent to develop partnerships with their business clients.

The Partnership Quality construct refers to the degree that information and knowledge sharing, understanding, trust, and shared goals exist between IT staff and end-users (Ravichandran & Lertwongsatien, 2005). Nelson and Cooprider (1996) found that IT and business managers with higher levels of mutual trust and influence had higher levels of shared knowledge, which led to increased IT performance.

Figure 1. Research model

The IT Function Performance construct refers to systems performance, information effectiveness, and service perfomance (Chang & King; 2005). Chang and King (2005) suggest that organizational users of IT services and systems are in the best position to measure the performance of the IT function since they are the primary stakeholders of the IT function and represent the largest group using their services.

This study proposes that a relationship exists between an organization's facilitating mechanisms and their IT staff's business competence and end-users IT competence. These, in turn, influence partnership quality and ultimately have an effect on the perceived performance of the IT function.

IT-business alignment literature suggests that concern with how IT can enable and drive the objectives of the firm should not be limited to the strategic level. Leonard (2000) suggests that positive relationships between IT professionals and end-users play an important role during the IT-business alignment process.

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