Chapter 6

Understanding User Attitudes toward Information Systems:
A Grounded Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

People develop attitudes toward things in many ways. While direct experience can be the foundation of permanent attitude formation, both indirect experience and referential input from others are strong influences on both attitude development and changes in personal attitude. The psychological factors that govern attitude are varied. They are documented in the scholarly literature of many fields, and frequently reference the study of people and technology. Research in the use of information systems (IS), however, does not typically aggregate the psychological factors influencing user attitude. The purpose of this chapter is to bring together the divergent empirical evidence of IS user attitude formation. A grounded theory approach is used to formally identify and analyze this evidence. Such analysis can provide a more cohesive understanding of what is known about user attitudes toward information systems, and can offer an ontological framework for more formalized study of the relationship between people and information systems.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological research tells us that even though attitude development can seem capricious at times, attitudes themselves are not easily changed once they have been established. This is true not only when referential experience is accurate, but when it is inaccurate as well. This phenomenon has implications for both developers and managers of information systems (IS). Words such as "trust," "dependability," "like," "hate," "confusing," "easy to use," and even "love" all appear in the published literature addressing people's feelings about information systems. But what do such labels actually mean? How believable are they?

And do they really have any strong relationship to how information systems can be developed, launched, and managed?

Whether or not IS engineers pay heed to the emotional or psychological reactions of users toward information systems is of less importance than is having a clear understanding of how such reactions can impact the successful launch and acceptance of information systems. A failure to comprehend the attitudes of users toward specific IS platforms, whether in the enterprise or on the Internet, can result in rejection of a system by the audience it is intended to serve. Such rejection is particularly painful when the system is intended to make life easier for users in a certain information environment. Conversely, attention to what users have to say about information systems can enhance both the level of use and the marketability of them. Appreciation of user attitude, if modeled within an empirical framework, can ensure both meaningful product development and successful product launch.

This chapter documents the many ways in which IS users develop attitudes toward information systems in order to provide a framework for studying this phenomenon. It offers a detailed breakdown of the manner in which attitudes toward IS are discussed across cognate disciplines. The tools of discourse analysis and bibliometrics are utilized to document a number of characteristics of user attitude study. These include a taxonomic representation of the components of user attitude, and a survey of epistemological views evident in the literature on user attitudes toward information systems across disciplines. Qualitative analysis of the published research on user attitude is provided as a framework that can continually inform the development of information systems theory. Such grounded techniques can provide a reliable understanding of what the phrase "user attitudes toward information systems" actually means across all domains that inform information systems scholarship.

BACKGROUND

Users of information systems develop personalized attitudes toward IS in much the same way they develop attitudes toward other things (Jank, 2010b; Hjørland, 2007; Hemingway, 1998). These attitudes result from neurocognitive reactions to situations and things, and mental assignments of personal feelings constructed within emotional and relational paradigms (Salzer & Burks, 2003; Bhattacherjee, 2001). Such attitude formation with respect to information systems is discussed in the scholarly literature across disciplines. Examples include research on systems analysis and design (Fidel, 2006; Stone & Stone, 2005), human-computer interaction (Pantic & Rothkrantz, 2003; Schmidt, 2000), human-information interaction (Jank, 2010b; Albers, 2008), medical information systems (Miller & Sim, 2004; Moehr, 2002; Cork, Detmer, & Friedman, 1998), and social computing (Wang, Carley, Zeng, & Mao, 2007; Bradley, 2006). This discourse provides convergent epistemological views that frame human attitude development toward information systems largely in terms of activity-based interaction with technology, and functionality of systems.

More divergent scholarship documenting attitude formation on a personal and emotional level is evident in domain-specific discourse. This scholarship can beneficially inform the development of grounded theory in IS. In these communities of discourse, emphasis is less on the interactive nature of information systems and more on the behaviors exhibited by users of these systems in ways that are particular to their spheres of activity. Topics found within this sort of scholarly discourse include feelings of trust (Griffiths, 2007; Nicolaou & McKnight, 2006), affect (Nicholas, Huntington, Williams, & Dobrowolski, 2004; Wagner & Flannery, 2004), and willingness to use information systems (Zviran, Glezer, & Avni, 2006; Santosa, Wei, & Chan, 2005).

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