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The Political Dimensions of Information Systems in Public Administration

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Many information management and generalist managers ignore the political aspects of managing information systems. But this chapter shows that political factors are often the most crucial in determining how successful information technology is. The purpose of the chapter is to provide awareness of the political context of information systems decisions. The political aspects of computing are discussed with respect to two major categories: (1) Internal, organizational politics concerning issues involving organizational members; (2) External politics concerning how the governmental organization relates to its councils or boards, external groups, and general citizenry. Several examples of internal politics are given including the structuring of the information function, the purchasing of information systems, interdepartmental sharing of information, and communication flows. External examples of politics are given concerning relationships with legislatures and citizenry such as disputes over funding, computer disasters, privatization, the Internet and telecommunications planning.

Introduction

Generalist administrators perceive computing as a technical area separate from the hurly burly of politics. We argue in this paper that the critical success factors for information management practitioners are nontechnical issues involving organizational and external politics. In order to be

effective, information managers and the generalist administrators to whom they report need to give more attention to these political issues than they have in the past. Otherwise, these managers are unlikely to achieve important goals with their systems.

In part, this traditional, technician's view of computing derived from the fact that, in the past, computing was constrained to the production of routine reports and billings. A major empirical study in the 1980's (Lucas, 1984) found that information service departments had little prestige and visibility in most organizations. Decisions about information systems did not constitute a critical success factor for most private or public organizations. Consequently, decisions about information technology (IT) could be safely delegated to technicians and generalist managers did not need to be involved much.

Over the past decade, computing has become much more important in governmental as well as private organizations. This is not to say that computing was ever nonpolitical. Detailed studies of cities in the 1970's (Laudon, 1974) & 1980's (Danziger et al., 1982) found cases involving computing and politics. But computing was less central to public organizations then. Most employees had minimal contact with computing. Computing is now used as a major means of communication (e.g., use of e-mail and the Internet) and for support of major decisions (e.g., what if analyses for budgeting and labor negotiations, forecasting of revenues). As the importance of and expenditures devoted to computing have grown, IT has involved more organizational and external politics.

The purpose of this paper is to help both generalist and information managers understand the political context of computing. Politics concerns issues of power rather than technical issues. We break the politics of computing into two major different categories: (1) Internal, organizational politics concerning issues involving organizational members; (2) External politics concerning how the governmental organization relates to its councils or boards, external groups, and general citizenry. We have avoided giving many prescriptions to managers on how to behave politically not only because research about politics is sketchy but also due to the fact that politics is highly contextual . The course of action that should be pursued depends on the complex interplay of political resources of the actors involved, ethical concerns, legal issues, as well as economic and technical factors.

A Note on Sources and Methods

Our study makes use of our own experiences as well as drawing on literature concerning public information management. We found very little formal research in recent years that explicitly focuses on the politics of information management. Indeed, most of the major and rigorous academic studies that have focused on the politics of computing date back to the mainframe era (e.g., Danziger, 1977; Dutton & Kraemer, 1985). In some more recent studies of computing, political aspects are touched on and we draw on examples drawn from the literature to illustrate our points. Due to its lack of coverage in traditional academic journals, we make use of periodicals such as computer magazines and newspaper articles concerning computing. Also, many of our examples are based on our own 18 years of experience and

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