



Chapter IV

A Review of Research Issues in Evaluation of Information Systems

Vassilis Serafeimidis
KPMG Consulting¹, London, UK and
University of Surrey, Guildford, UK

INTRODUCTION

Information technology (IT) and information systems (IS) have become an organizational necessity in order to support routine data processing operations, initiatives for competitive advantage, business transformation exercises in products, organizational structures, work-roles, and patterns of relationships between organizations. IS are critical components of business, taking part in increasingly complex organizational changes, redefining whole markets and industries, as well as the strategies of the firms that compete within them (e.g., increasing focus on the use of the Internet). As information becomes embedded in organizations, in their products and services and in their relationships with partners and customers, IS cannot be separated from human intellect, culture, philosophy and social organizational structures.

The cost of IT has plummeted dramatically since the 1960s, while its potentials have increased, generating enormous investment and increasing the pace of IT adoption by organizations. According to the Gartner Group, in 1998 the average IS budget was 4.17% of the organizational revenue. This trend is expected to continue, as most organizations have passed 'unharmed' the Millennium landmark and attempt to conquer the arena of *eBusiness* (KPMG Consulting, 2000).

Organizational resources are expected to be invested in anticipation of the highest future gains. The initial enthusiasm for IT, during the 1970s and 1980s, has been overtaken by a sense of pragmatism in the 1990s. Senior management seeks solid justification of the business value of IT, IS departments have been questioned concerning their contribution to business success, and system developers and business users have been forced to become much more familiar with both IT's potential and constraints.

It has been realized that successful IT outcomes do not occur by default; they are highly uncertain and in order to achieve organizational success, IS has to be managed effectively and be considered broadly. This issue is very important, particularly today, where IT outcomes refer to an 'ecosystem' of networked partners. The additional difficulties in

identifying and measuring potential benefits and costs, deriving from current organizational practices, forced many organizations to establish management control mechanisms. Among these mechanisms are the thorough appraisal of potential IT investments and the evaluation of their deliverables.

The role that evaluation plays as an organizational process varies. It is strongly related to other management and decision making processes. The management expectation from IS evaluation is about establishing by quantitative and/or qualitative means the worth of IT to the organization (Farbey et al., 1993; Willcocks, 1994) and IT's contribution to the organizational growth. This can be achieved by effective IS evaluation which ranks alternatives (Clemons, 1991) and forms a central part of a complex and incremental planning, decision-making and control (diagnosis) process (Blackler and Brown, 1985; Hawgood and Land, 1988). Evaluation is then a crucial feedback function (Angell and Smithson, 1991; Baker, 1995), which helps the organization learn (Earl, 1989; Hirschheim and Smithson, 1987; Farbey et al., 1993; Walsham, 1993) and thereby reduces the uncertainty of decisions. This feedback helps trace and understand the underlying factors leading to the success or otherwise of an IT investment. In many cases (Farbey et al., 1995; Gregory and Jackson, 1992; Powell, 1992a) evaluation is a mechanism for gaining commitment and, in highly politically influenced environments, for legitimization and in some other occasions is a mechanism for exploration and discovery (Serafeimidis, 1997).

This chapter discusses the role of evaluation in the management of IS investments and its gradually increasing importance as part of the IS governance. It reviews extensively the related literature (published during the last decade) across conceptual and operational dimensions. The following section outlines a framework for discussion which provides a structure for the review. Then the authors examine the traditional formal/rational evaluation approaches referring to the technical and financial focused developments. The interpretive research epistemology has been adopted by many researchers to provide more valid alternatives to IS evaluation. These alternatives are presented in detail and critically discussed in detail in this chapter.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Information systems evaluation is a highly complicated phenomenon. In order to examine the extensive literature in the area and clearly identify the problems, it is essential to have a conceptual framework for discussion. The framework adopted here is based on a definitional approach, starting from a working definition of evaluation, including the assumptions underlying the evaluation approaches and methodologies.

However, despite the huge number of articles written in the area, very few authors have taken this approach and attempted to draw the boundaries of the phenomenon under study because of its elusiveness and broadness. IS evaluation is highly subjective and context dependent, as well as covering a wide area of situations and activities. As IS have been integrated into modern organizations their evaluation has become more important than before, and also qualitatively and structurally different. Evaluation involves a large number of stakeholders both internal and external to the organization each with their own particular values and objectives. A good definition is adopted from Remenyi and Sherwood-Smith (1997).

“Evaluation is a series of activities incorporating understanding, measurement, and assessment. It is either a conscious or tacit process which aims to establish the value of or the contribution made by a particular situation. It can also relate to the determination of the worth of an object.”

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