Chapter III

Politics, Accountability, and Information Management

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Abstract

This chapter provides examples of the politics of managing information in public organiza-
tions by studying both its internal and external aspects. Within the organization, politics
is involved in structuring decision making, struggles over purchases of hardware and soft-
ware, interdepartmental sharing of information, and the flow of communications such as
e-mail among employees. The chapter analyzes examples of each of these internal aspects
of politics. The chapter also discusses evidence concerning whether political appointees or
career administrators are more effective as information managers. Externally, the chapter
discusses how information management has been used to attempt to achieve greater political
accountability through e-reporting and examples of cases where purchasing problems spill
over into the realm of external politics such as through attempts to privatize governmental
information management function. Certain topics such as municipal broadband systems
and information management disasters are highly likely to involve information managers
in politics. The attempts to use governmental Web sites as mechanisms to achieve e-gover-
nance and greater citizen participation in the political process also make it impossible for
information managers to insulate themselves against politics.

Introduction

The message of this chapter is that information management has always been political and will become increasingly political due to several important trends that are occurring. First of all, information technology has become a central aspect of organizations, so more people care about it. This high interest can lead to struggles over strategic and operational issues. Second, there are emerging issues that push technology into areas that are potentially fraught with politics. For example, many local governments are interested in establishing governmentally supported broadband and wireless areas and these efforts have already resulted in major political battles with more likely to come. Also, information management is viewed as a method of obtaining increased citizen participation in the political process through various electronic mechanisms such as governmentally supported online e-governance mechanisms such as online rule-making dockets, public Listservs, public blogs, and other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Each of these mechanisms has the potential to achieve positive goals, but they are also fraught with potential for generating political conflict. The underlying premise of this chapter is that information is power and consequently information management is inherently political. Information asymmetries give an advantage of one actor over others (Bellamy, 2000). Maintaining control over information can allow individuals, departments, and organizations to control how successful they appear to others and thus may protect autonomy, job security, and funding. Therefore, in order to provide effective leadership for IT, the generalist and head IT manager will need to actively engage themselves in both internal and external politics. An excellent case illustrating the importance of political issues in managing IT occurred in California. The California Department of Information Technology (DOIT) was eliminated in June of 2002 (Peterson, 2002). The department had been created in 1995 in order to solve the problem of several disastrous contracts in the IT area including a Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) project that cost over $50 million but never functioned as planned (Peterson). Peterson cites accounts from observers to support the argument that a major reason for the failure was due to the other major agencies that viewed the new department as a threat to their power and lobbied to reduce the authority of the agency in the legislation creating it. In particular, the opponents lobbied to deny the new DOIT control over operations in the legislation creating DOIT. Those with interests opposed to the new DOIT included existing departments that had major authority in the IT field and/or those with large data centers. The opposition was successful so that the legislation limited DOIT's role mainly to authority over the budget. Consequently, the DOIT did not have control over data centers and was not able to achieve one of its major goals to centralize and consolidate these data centers (Peterson). This lack of operational authority limited its ability to influence other departments as Peterson summarizes:

Without controlling data centers or California's telecommunications network, DOIT simply had no juice, some sources argued. Because DOIT didn't add value to other state agencies, it couldn't exert any leverage on those agencies. DOIT could present ideas, but it couldn't make any real contribution to making those ideas happen. In other words, with the Department of Finance controlling IT budget processes, the Department of General Services controlling IT procurement and the state data centers handling computing needs, what was the DOIT's responsibility?

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