

Chapter II

Politics, Accountability, and Governmental Information Systems

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ABSTRACT

Information systems are becoming more involved in politics due to the growth of the World Wide Web, electronic government, and the increasing digitization of information of all kinds. Many information management specialists lack knowledge and experience about how to deal with political aspects of information management, and consequently they are ineffective. This chapter shows how important political issues are to information managers and illustrates strategies that can be useful in dealing with political issues. I provide several examples of how inattention to the political aspects of managing information systems can result in problems and disasters. The chapter covers both internal and external politics. Information managers have to deal with many internal politically-charged tasks such as the structuring of information management, purchasing information systems, managing personnel in this era of digital communication, and struggles over the sharing of information within organizations. External information management issues are also becoming important such as demands for online accountability information, the development of websites, issues over access to information, and interorganizational issues including disputes over turf.

INTRODUCTION

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, or organizations to control how successful they appear to others and thus may protect autonomy, job security, and funding. Although information management involves many technical issues, it is important to understand that it involves major political challenges. A large portion of governmental information managers come from technical backgrounds such as computer science and business. They usually have excellent technical skills and they can quickly rise to leadership positions such as Chief Information Office (CIO). However, decision-making concerning the management of information technology (IT) requires more than technical knowledge. The most important critical success factors involve organizational and political skills that the technologically skilled often lack, but these skills can be learned. This chapter identifies some of the key political problems that are likely to be faced. Some technical staff dislike and try to avoid dealing with political dilemmas. Molta (1999, p. 23) says “engineers and programmers frequently appear oblivious to the strategic issues that keep management awake at night.” He goes on to state that managing information technology is “the most politicized issue of the modern organization” and that technical staff “need to get in the game.” Refraining from politics will lead to more serious problems and result in ineffective management of information technology.

Before the days of the World Wide Web and electronic government, managers and user departments often deferred computing decisions to technical staff because information management was not central to organization (Lucas, 1984) and generalist managers had little knowledge to contest decisions made by technicians. As information has become a central concern, user departments themselves often have their own technical staff, and generalist managers often become “technical junkies” (Molta, 1999, p. 24) and keep abreast of technological trends. Consequently, technical skills themselves are not sufficient to be effective for information managers to achieve their goals. A study (Overton, Frolick, & Wilkes, 1996) of the implementation of executive information systems (EISs) found that political concerns were perceived as the biggest obstacles to success. Many people felt threatened by the installation of such systems for a variety of reasons, including fears of loss of job and increased “executive scrutiny” (Overton, Frolick, & Wilkes, p. 50). Feldman (2002) also sees politics as one of the biggest challenges for technical

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