Chapter 11

The Impact of Organisational Politics on the Implementation of IT Strategy:
South African Case in Context

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ABSTRACT

Through IT strategy, many organisations intend to set out key directions and objectives for the use and management of information, communication and technologies. A shared view among these organisations is that IT strategy allows all parts of the organisation to gain a shared understanding of priorities, goals and objectives for both current and future states as defined in the strategy. It would therefore seem that IT strategy, for the foreseeable future will remain a key aspect of development within organisations. As a result, there has been more focus on how IT strategy is articulated and formulated. What is missing is that there has been less attention on the implementation of the strategy. Also, in most organisations, technical issues are minor compared to the relationship issues. There are many factors which influence the implementation of the IT strategy. This paper focuses on how organisational politics as examined by two underpinning theories, Structuration Theory and Actor-Network Theory, impact the implementation of IT strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

IT strategy is a term that refers to a complex mixture of thoughts, ideas, insights, experiences, goals, expertise, memories, perceptions, and expectations that provide general guidance for specific actions in pursuit of particular ends within the computing environment (Ward & Peppard, 2002). IT organisations have many and diverse stakeholders and this makes politics inevitable. IT strategy helps to set direction (Straub & Wetherbe, 1989), comprehension and focus on the future in the wake of change in the organisation that it supports. Walsham and Waema (1994) argue that IT needs strategy to achieve its aims and objectives. No doubt, "IT Strategy" is a significant factor in driving towards a specific direction. What is even more important is the outcome of the IT strategy. The question is what influences or causes the IT strategy outcome (implementation)? Orlikowski (1993) argued that organisational politics has an important influence on the degree to which IT, through its strategy, can be used. It is argued that the danger of politics is that it can be carried to extremes, and can then seriously harm the effectiveness of an organisation (Armstrong, 1994). In a study by Robbins et al. (2001), many employees and employers confirmed the existence of legitimate and illegitimate politics in the organisations.

The way in which the IT strategy is developed and implemented have a significant impact on its success, and can have a direct impact on the organisational culture. According to Gottschalk (1999), implementation is key to the success or failure of IT strategy. Those who develop the IT strategy will probably be different people from those who carry out the implementation. If the IT strategy is understood or interpreted differently, the implementation is likely to encounter problems (Walsham & Waema, 1994). Implementing IT strategy depends on key people within the organisation (Daniels, 1994). In essence, unless all major stakeholders are involved, successful implementation is unlikely. However, analysing the peoples' perspectives opens the door for political intent within the organisation. Where there are different people and technologies, there are conflicts and difficulties (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). It is inevitable that people are influenced and driven by different forces, such as 'politics', in the organisations. Where people are involved, politics exists. Scarborough (1998) argues that IT strategy needs other elements with a strong influence such as politics to achieve the set goals and objectives.

It is a serious oversight to pretend that politics does not exist. Since the beginning of time, politics has been a part of every human equation (Butcher & Clarke, 1999). Politics is the means; power is the end. Organisations are the most fertile breeding ground for politics. This is due to the fact that the actors seek different personal interests such as success, professional growth and financial security (Kling & Iacono, 1984). According to Hanbury (2001, p1), "If a project is not facing a lot of organisational politics, it is a sure sign that it is not doing anything significant". The study explored the impact of organisational politics on the implementation of IT strategy.

Regardless of the degree to which an employee may commit him or herself to the objectives of the organisation, personal interests are likely to be different from those of the employer. Employees seek to satisfy not only the organisational interests, but also their own wants and needs which are driven by self-interest. According to Morgan (1986, p. 148), "organisational politics arise when people think differently and want to act differently."

It has been demonstrated, analytically as well as empirically, that technical issues get caught up in a host of organisational issues such as politics. Orlikowski and Barley (200, p. 154) state "… to include insight from institutional theory, IT researchers might develop a more structural and systematic understanding for how technologies are embedded in complex interdependent social, economic and political networks, and consequently how they are shaped by such broader institutional influences".

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