

## **SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY PROJECTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Power and politics are indispensable to any social institution. By the same logic, formal organizations are not the exceptions rather battlegrounds for playing political games to hold and maintain power in the group, organization and community. Given this, if a project is perceived disturbing for the existing power structures, it is resisted by those who find their power threatened. Information in itself is a powerful resource thereby vital to political capacity of those who hold it against those who don't. This paper carves out the political strings in the development, use and maintenance of computer-based information systems (CBIS) in public and private organizations of any size, structure and power with a view to coming up with a logically interwoven layout of the problem and solution models.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Digital divide is no more a novel phenomenon, which classifies the world according to haves and have-nots or “information rich and information poor (Walsham, 1993:3).” A nation’s global political positioning stands on her capability to harness information technology (IT) for production, use and progress levels. The same political partition is visible down in the organizations both in public and private with varying degrees of issues and impacts depending on differing contexts of the work environment. Given this, the possession and holding of information is a power to uphold the political position of haves and have-nots in every organization because “Power and politics are inevitable in information systems (McGrath, 1997).”

Data are a central “political resource,” which “symbolize status, enhance authority and shape relationships (Keen, 1981).” Lyytinen and Hirschheim (1994) comment that the use of information systems can be seen from many perspectives such as symbolic, political and persuasive in addition to decision making dimension. Political issue is not specific to the development phase only it continues throughout the life cycle of an IS, piercing through development to use and maintenance. For example, “Research shows that initial successful implementation is not final, political campaigns continue throughout the life of CBIS and these are responsible for maintaining and shifting balance of power (Kling and Iacano, 1984).”

### **2. ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS**

Organization is the structure of human and material resources that is used by the managers. Thus, managers are possessors of these sources thereby powerful to use them in the organizational matters. Any threat to this will naturally be taken seriously otherwise power-sharers will emerge who may take it in Toto. A manager’s power speaks through the control over resources (Cavaye and Christiansan, 1996), which is less physical and more virtual in the sense that managers command resources through information and its communication. Thus, shifting control of organizational data is virtually the transfer of power. Any such situation triggers, what Mintzberg (1991) calls

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“Politics,” which “are mechanisms that are created in pursuit of power.” because “The political metaphor views an organization as a loose network of people with divergent interests and who gather together for the sake of expediency (Walsham, 1993:39).”

## **2.1 POWER STRUCTURES**

Organization is a mega structure of several sub-structures. Power structure emerges from the distribution of authority over resources. Chain of command shows the degrees of power held by officers in every layer of the hierarchy. This structure creates the bosses, colleagues and subordinates. Positive change in power is acceptable but its reduction can not be compromised rather resisted. Dhillon and Backhouse (1995) document, “Over reliance on the functionality of new systems results into massive reorganization with new management structures and new styles of team work. A new system can impose unrealistic formal groups onto the members of the organization.”

Furthermore, “IS increasingly alters relationships, patterns of communication and perceived influence of authority and control (Keen, 1981) while adding fuel to the fire, “management approaches to structuring IS function are uncertain, diverse, and sometimes downright contradictory (Edwards et al., 1991).” In this environment, “key actors develop a variety of structural and ideological strategies to mobilize support for the arrangements they preferred and quiet opposition (Kling and Iacono, 1984).” This is possible because, “power is the relationships between people and not simply an individual’s attribute (Warne, 1997).” Management must take things seriously as “research shows that organizational restructuring is often implemented through ad hoc managerial strategies triggered by financial imperatives (Currie, 1996).”

## **2.2 POLITICAL POWER OF IT**

Cavaye and Christiansan (1996) note, “an IS can threaten a groups autonomy, undermine present distribution of authority, challenge existing ownership of information and can be considered as a threat by some while an opportunity for others.” Keen (1981) remarked, “Information is an element of power. CBIS often redistributes information, breaking up monopolies.”

A researcher notes “ultimate function of information is to control organizational life (Scarrott, 1989)” thus, every employee must be looking for the control of organizational data to control work environment. Likewise, “information brings change in a person’s knowledge, beliefs, values and behavior (Markus, M. Lynne (1983).” These changes are must to occur however, if untapped by the management, these can turn into negative changes, which are against the demands of new IT project. It is noted somewhere that “if change is not welcome, resistance may take various forms, from industrial action to misuse of the system, or the adoption of informal practices to bypass it (Keen, 1981).” Another researcher (Warne, 1997) found that ‘each user is likely to seek and protect power to affect outcomes.’ Users are not homogeneous groups rather they come from various managerial levels who hold different opinions about an information system and its results.”

## **3. CONSEQUENCES OF POWER POLITICS**

When IT projects are victimized to political games, it hard-hits several aspects of the project. Unsettled political disputes dilute into the ISD process resulting into resistance to change through impression management tactics, which in turn, create uncertainty in

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the work environment. In such an uncertainty, alignment between IT and organization becomes an uphill task. Mis-alignment is an indicator of different degrees of IS failure.

1. Resistance to Change: There is resistance to change when users feel threatened. "It is precisely during organizational change processes that the political dimensions of organizational behavior are most potent (McGrath, 1997)."
2. Impression Management: "Failure to align information system strategies requires IS managers to constantly justify their cost/service compromises to various stakeholders: senior managers, business unit managers and users (Hirschheim, R. and Newman, M., 1988)."
3. Uncertainty: "Uncertainty is an individual's perceived inability to predict something accurately (Millikan, 1987)." "Conflicts between different groups add to uncertainty in the ISD environment (Kling and Iacano, 1984). The degree of uncertainty is a major determinant of decision rationality and uncertainty leads to political activity (McGrath, 1997). When there is high level of uncertainty as in innovative systems, then substantial influence will be brought to bear by the organization's power-brokers (Warne, 1997)."
4. IS Failure: "Despite some notable successes, IT-projects can and still do fail dramatically to achieve the objectives (Poulmenakou and Holmes, 1996)." And "Politically motivated resistance is identified as a major reason" to this.

#### **4. DE-POLITICIZING THE IT PROJECTS**

Wong, Eva J. W. and Tate, Graham (1994) notes that 'it is possible to solve or at least substantially ameliorate the problems, if political will is there.' The reason to this is "IS development is not mechanical, it is rather accompanied by disagreements and delays and sometimes fails completely (Kling and Iacono, 1984). Research shows that "an IS development is fraught with recurrent problems caused by poor, indisciplined and incomplete development practices (Ewusi-Mensah and Przasnyski, 1994).

Furthermore, "it is not sophisticated and leading-edge technologies rather a thoughtful integration of the dispersed information systems, which take the organizations to success however, integration is never possible unless the political obstacles are addressed first (McGrath, 1997)." Cavaye and Christiansan (1996) suggest, "viewing ISD as a social and political process, adds a human dimension and enables a more realistic analysis of IS implementation." This is inevitable because "management of power, politics and context are recognized as critical success factors for information system development (Warne, 1997)."

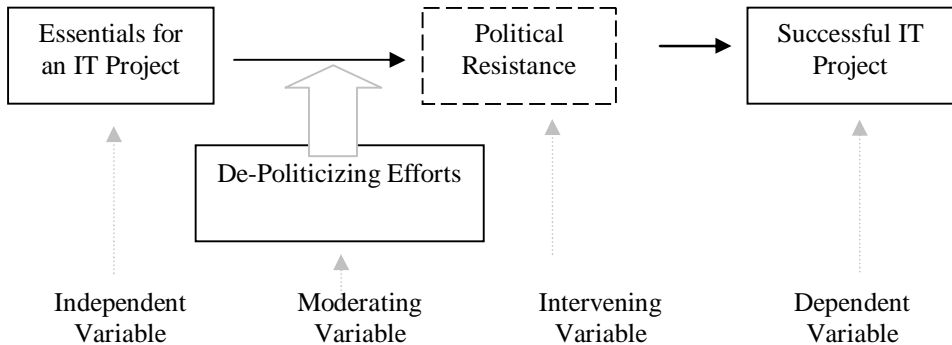
To achieve de-politicizing through bringing political and human dimensions on the top, "management needs a comprehensive analysis of the organizational power distribution and the potential threats to it by the new change imitative (McGrath, 1997)." The emphasis has to be laid on the reality that "information is an extremely important aspect of the 'dominance metaphor' (Walsham, 1993:39)."

Above discussion suggests that three major variables operate in the successful development of an IT project: 1. Essentials for an IT project (independent variable) 2. A successful IT project (dependent variable) and 3. Political resistance (an intervening variable, which emerges as a function of the independent variable. As said earlier, when a project begins, those who feel politically threatened start protecting their interests by disturbing the normal routines of the project either through nonparticipation or direct resistance to the project. Third variable intervenes the relationship between variable one

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and two. Since this intervention is negative therefore the real relationship is politicized. To de-politicize the project a moderating variable is applied to dilute the negative impact. A graphical presentation of the above discussion is given in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Politicization/De-Politicization Model.



## 5. CONCLUSIONS

“High costs and increasing investments in computers show the increasing dependence on the information and communication technologies (Poulymenako and Holms, 1996).” But one should not forget that “politically motivated resistance to new systems is the major contributor to IS failure (McGrath, 1998) and “major risks to IS are organizational, social and political and not technical (Willcocks and Margetts, 1994).” Therefore, “understanding distribution of intra-organizational power can provide useful information about IS implementation processes and also explanations (and predictions) of events and outcomes (Cavaye and Christiansen, 1996).”

“Information systems are social systems, therefore share all the difficulties associated with social sciences. (Hirschheim, 1994:31).” For example, Malone (1994) proposes that IT projects should be implemented with two mottos: “a. automate as many manual tasks as possible and b. use technology to eliminate manual work and not the workers.” Because “the trend today is towards an increased use of general purpose enabling infrastructure. The provision of a PC on the desk of a manager as a part of information infrastructure rather than a tool for a specific job (Land, 1994:7).”

Another factor to remember is that “information system development is surrounded by uncertainty; the project management is required to tolerate and work around this situation (Poulymenako and Holmes, 1996).” The “emergent belief of most studies is to view organizations as evolving social forms of sense-making where different groups interact with each other and the environment (Dhillon and Backhouse, 1995).” Thus, “managers need organizational mechanisms and necessary resources for negotiations between different parties or groups of coalitions (Kling and Iacono, 1984).”

However, “management game is difficult to play without a FIXER, a person or group with prestige, visibility and legitimacy to facilitate, bargain and negotiate effectively (Keen, 1981).” Avison and Fitzgerald (1995) call it “a champion, a hybrid manager.” A man with multidimensional knowledge and applications particularly about the human nature as exposed during the development and use of an IT project.

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