Chapter 17
Applying Grounded Theory to a Qualitative Study of CIO Interactions with External Peer Networks

Brian Davis
Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Joe McDonagh
Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

Interactions with external peers have been identified in the Information Systems (IS) management literature as being one of the most influential sources of contact for the Chief Information Officer (CIO), supporting them in their role as the most senior IS executive in the organisation. Today, due to the strategic importance of IS to the operations and competitive position of many organisations, the CIO often operates as a key member of the top management team. At the centre of this role, the literature suggests, is the ability of the CIO to identify relevant strategic IS knowledge in the external technological marketplace, via their external boundary spanning activities, that can impact the organisation’s strategic positioning and overall success. However, whilst the IS management literature identifies interactions with external peers as being one of the most influential sources of contact available to CIOs, it fails to identify why they are such an important support to the CIO, or for that matter, how CIOs actually interact with such external peers. Similarly, a review of the wider management literature, whilst confirming the reasons why top management executives, such as the CIO, favour interactions with external peers, it again fails to clarify how such executives, in fact, actually interact with external peers, via contacts in external networks. Consequently, this has led to a clear gap in our knowledge and understanding relating to one of the key activities of the modern day CIO. For that reason, this research study set out to explore how CIOs, in fact, interact with external peers via network connections. As no previous theory existed, the Grounded Theory (GT) methodology was adopted, within an interpretivist perspective, to develop new theory. The research setting chosen was the Irish Private Sector, with a specific focus on organisations in the finance, hi-tech, telecoms, and airline industries. The purpose of this chapter is to draw into sharp focus the nature of GT as applied in this study, rather than the findings from the study itself, and to consider the use of appropriate technology tools to support this application.

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BACKGROUND TO STUDY

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the use of grounded theory (GT) in developing theory around how CIOs interact with external peers, via contact in external networks, in the development and understanding of the ever changing IS marketplace. Specifically, the chapter will be of benefit to both researchers in the field of IS (IS) and managers and practitioners in IS today. To date, there has been a lack of empirical literature focused on addressing this key IS management issue. The chapter is made up of two main sections. The first section will address the background to why GT was deemed suitable for this inquiry. The second part will then provide some detail on the actual application of GT and supporting technology tools in practice.

FOCUS OF THE INVESTIGATION

The role of the CIO has emerged, over the last thirty years or so, to become the highest-ranking IS executive in many organisations (Smaltz, Sambamurthy, & Agarwal, 2006, Preston, Chen, & Leider, 2008). This new role was created, in the early 1980’s, at a time when organisations had just begun to recognise the critical importance of IS for both their operational effectiveness and competitive positioning (Ferreira & Collins 1979, Ives & Learmonth 1984, McFarlan 1984, Porter & Millar 1985). Prior to that, the most senior role in IS had been that of the IS Manager, a functional or line departmental manager role with only limited involvement with top management (Ives & Olson 1981, Stephens 1991).

A review of the IS management literature, since the role was first envisaged, suggests that whilst still the most senior IS executive in many organisations, the focus of the role of the CIO has now widened to cover the requirement to be able to also “bridge the gap” between the organisation itself and its external technological environment (Earl 2000, Smaltz, Sambamurthy, & Agarwal, 2006, Galliers 2007, Preston, Chen, & Leider, 2008). This widening of the role of the CIO has been due to the increasing role IS now plays in many organisations today and the growing expectation of top management regarding the strategic impact of IS on their marketplace and their own competitive position (Venkatraman 2000, Sambamurthy, Bharadwaj, & Grover, 2003). To do this, the CIO must now act as an external boundary spanner (Katz & Kahn 1966, Aiken & Hage 1972, Tushman & Scanlan 1981) and interact with the external IS marketplace in order to remain up-to-date with strategic IS developments that may be relevant to their organisations (Gottschalk 2002, Smaltz, Sambamurthy, & Agarwal, 2006). Research, to date, has identified the importance of external peer networks in this regard (Watson 1990, Maier, Rainer, & Snyder, 1997, Pawlowski & Robey 2004).

However, the IS management literature fails to elaborate on how CIOs actually interact with external peers. A review of the wider literature relating to executive boundary spanning and interactions with peers in external networks, suggests that, for top management executives, such as the CIO, external interactions with peers are indeed by far the most important due to a number of key factors such as: the often equivocal or ambiguous nature of many of the strategic issues facing top management (Hambrick & Mason 1984, Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987, Geletkanycz & Hambrick 1997) and therefore the need to create a shared understanding with other peers regarding the problems and issues facing them (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987, Krauss & Fussell 1990, Wenger 1998, Carlile 2004, Malhotra & Majchrzak 2004); the dangers of delegating such sensitive inquiries to subordinates (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987); and the perceived value of face-to-face and ongoing interactions with peers in external network situations (Mintzberg 1973).

In addition, this literature also suggests that such external peer networks can often act as a...