The Binding and Blinding Influence of Project Commitment

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ABSTRACT

Proper management of information technology (IT) projects remains important within organizations; they require tremendous investment and consume valuable resources. To enhance one’s understanding of IT projects and the continued issue of project failure, this study develops a model of the psychological influences of IT project commitment for individuals working on IT projects and its influence on intentions to continue an IT project (ICITP). Survey responses from 232 individuals across several organizations were obtained, and structural equation modeling was used to analyze the data. Three forms of project commitment (affective, continuance, and normative), subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control – internal were significant predictors of ICITP, explaining 64% of the variance. Additionally, continuance commitment and perceived behavioral control – internal were found to explain 46% of the variance in affective commitment. Implications and directions for future research are provided.

Keywords: Behavioral Intentions, Intention to Continue, Project Commitment, Project Management, Theory of Planned Behavior, Theory of Reasoned Action

1. INTRODUCTION

Troubled information technology (IT) projects and IT project failure continue to be costly problems for organizations (Calisir & Gumussoy, 2005; Kearn, 2007; Dominiguez, 2009). Due to the struggle with suboptimal projects, practitioners and researchers need to gain a deeper understanding of the factors involved that influence the continuation of troubled IT projects. To accomplish this we examine IT projects through a new lens, focusing on an often-unexplored psychological factor - project commitment (Kappleman, McKeeman, & Zhang, 2006). Project commitment has received conceptual and theoretical attention in the IT literature (Newman & Sabherwal, 1996; Abrahamsson, 2002) but has yet to be measured and empirically tested in a theoretical model. By applying the theoretical strength inherent in the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), we examine the role of project commitment in determining the behavioral intention to continue IT projects.

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Prior studies have introduced the concept of commitment to a project (Kappelman et al., 2006; Newman & Sabherwal, 1996; Abrahamsson, 2002), but the literature reveals a need for additional research to understand the role of commitment in IT projects. The following section provides a review of research on project commitment as background for the theoretical model presented.

2. PROJECT COMMITMENT REVIEW

The theoretical concept of commitment has been researched across several domains including management, psychology, and information systems and in various contexts including commitment to an opinion, goal, project, and organization (Kiesler, 1971; Wofford, Goodwin, & Premack, 1992; Abrahamsson, 2002; Akgun, Lynn, Keskin, & Dogan, 2014). Commitment is generally described as individuals being bound to behavioral acts (Kiesler, 1971). In the context of IT projects, a lack of commitment has been proposed to be an early warning sign of failure (Kappelman et al., 2006).

Commitment exerts “freezing” properties such that it “binds” an existing behavior, attitude, or course of action (Kiesler, 1971). In terms of goal theory, commitment is “one’s attachment or determination to reach a goal, regardless of where the goal came from” (Locke, et al., 1988, p. 125). In the organizational literature, commitment has been viewed as an attitudinal construct reflecting a psychological state of attachment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Based upon these descriptions, IT project commitment is viewed as an attitudinal, psychological state that reflects the degree of attachment or “binding” an individual experiences toward a project and is theoretically similar to organizational commitment (Abrahamsson, 2002).

Without commitment, appropriate actions would not be taken to invest resources (e.g. effort, time, and money) to complete a project (Newman & Sabherwal, 1996; Keil & Robey, 1999; Galliers, 1987). It is imperative for project success and has even been found to impact team learning in a project environment (Akgun et al., 2014). Additionally, project commitment has the potential to lead to unproductive behavior. Committed individuals may ignore the warning signs of project failure and continue blindly along a planned course of action. This counterproductive commitment manifests when individuals become committed to a troubled project rather than to a project progressing according to plan. At the point when a project becomes troubled, commitment becomes problematic. It may lead to a rigid adherence to a project’s course of action even when that course of action should be changed or abandoned (Abrahamsson, 2002). “IS projects are often continued because of strong commitment to them, even though technical, economic, or operational considerations would suggest cancellation” (Newman & Sabherwal, 1996, p. 48). Additionally, the unique nature of IT projects makes them more susceptible to such counterproductive commitment leading to the escalating commitment to a failing course of action (Keil, Tan, Wei, Saarinen, Tuunanen, & Wassenaar, 2000). Unique characteristics of IT projects include the intangible nature of software, the “90% complete syndrome”, where there exists an overly optimistic bias with a false perception that a project is close to being completed when in reality it is not and the inclination to have volatile requirements. These characteristics make IT projects more difficult to manage (Keil et al, 2000; Abdel-Hamid & Madnick, 1990; DeMarco, 1982).

To be consistent with previous research and provide a rigorous examination of commitment to IT projects, affective, continuance, and normative commitment are specifically examined (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Tsai & Huang, 2008). Drawing from organizational commitment literature is beneficial, because it is an established stream of research, theoretical evidence exists for various forms of commitment, and empirical evidence is available for measuring commitment and testing relationships between independent and dependent variables associa-
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