Chapter IX

Challenges of Managing the Global IS/IT Workforce

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ABSTRACT

The trend toward globalization of business has increased the need for global information systems that enable and support global operations. In order to develop and support global information systems, organizations must employ a global IS/IT workforce. This chapter details the unique nature of this global IS/IT workforce, identifies and discusses specific challenges to the management of these employees, and describes strategies for addressing these challenges. Relevant prior research on this topic in the management and MIS disciplines, labor statistics, as well as prior and ongoing research by the authors, are used to support this discussion.
INTRODUCTION

Global systems are driven by the general trend toward global economic activity, and in particular the need to support global business processes, staffs, markets, and customers. Such global systems are typically developed, implemented, and maintained by Information Systems/Information Technology (IS/IT) professionals located around the world. Even when a company operates in only one country, it may have an IS/IT workforce that is quite diverse in terms of national background, especially in countries with shortages of qualified information technology professionals. In either case, managers are confronted with a new kind of workforce and work settings that require different strategies to maintain successful IS/IT operations and retain a skilled IS workforce.

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the unique nature of the global IS/IT workforce, discuss specific challenges to the management of these employees, and describe strategies for addressing these challenges. The chapter reports on prior research on this topic in the management and MIS disciplines, labor statistics, as well as prior and ongoing research by the authors.

While in specific countries the job market for IS/IT workers fluctuates between high demand and oversupply, globally “the demand for ICT (information and communications technology) skills continues to grow, creating concerns about possible labour shortages and gaps in worker skills” (OECD, 2002, p. 8). By the end of the 20th century, computer workers alone accounted for over 2% of the workforce in countries such as the United States, Finland, Sweden, and The Netherlands; and between 1% and 2% in seven other European countries (OECD, 2002). Government initiatives in countries as diverse as Ireland, Singapore, and Romania have focused on educational programs that develop general computer literacy, as well as creating specialized IS/IT professionals. The accepted view is that without an adequate IS/IT workforce, the growth of new economy industries will be stifled by labor shortages and skill mismatches (OECD, 2002).

Individual firms must also be concerned about recruiting, developing, and retaining an IS/IT global workforce that facilitates their IT-enabled global operations. The human resources strategy for achieving these goals is not simple (Agarwal & Ferratt, 2001), and requires consideration of factors controllable within the organization as well as environmental issues outside an individual firm’s control. In the rest of the chapter, we address five key challenges to managing a global IS/IT workforce:
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