Information Resources Management: An Examination of Individual and Organizational Attributes in State Government Agencies

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Public organizations continue to acquire information at exponential rates, and the need to manage this deluge of information and information resources has become even more acute. This study examines the role of state public administrators in their efforts to balance the need for information with the responsibilities of organizational control. A survey of 66 administrators from 11 state government agencies in the nine San Francisco Bay Area counties found that administrators (1) perceive their programs and service delivery functions to be externally-oriented; (2) acquire most of their information from external sources (external to their departments); (3) perceive lack of expertise in critical areas as impediments to using information effectively; (4) cope with the non-availability of information management experts by circulating information to key people; (5) recommend increasing staff as well as expanding analytical functions as solutions to improving the acquisition and management of information; and (6) believe that both fiscal and political factors are critical in controlling and managing information resources.

In this era of increased information, an organization’s ability to apply existing technology to collect and use information is critical to its ability to make effective decisions. Even more critical is an organization’s ability to manage its information resources. Previous studies have alluded to the significance and timeliness of understanding organizational behavior during periods of change—focusing on such areas as organizational responses to constrained resources, shifts in the composition of the public work force, and broad changes in political environment (Aldrich, 1979; Bozeman & Slusher, 1979; Leifer & McDonough, 1979). A common theme that emerges from all these areas appears to be the means by which public organizations exercise control over information.

The Commission on Federal Paperwork (1977) set the stage for the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 which mandated information resources management at the federal level. At the state level, Florida and South Carolina took the initiative in adopting information resources management (IRM) strategies in the early 1980s and have served as models for other states’ experiments with IRM approaches. Most states have passed legislation and/or issued executive orders requiring strong IRM attention by top officials and career managers (Caudle & Marchand, 1989).

Since IRM is a relatively new management discipline, very little systematic research has been done on...
federal and state governments’ IRM efforts other than required audits or oversight reports (Caudle, 1990). The present study examines the role of state agency administrators in their efforts to balance the need for information with the responsibilities of organizational control. Public administrators who understand and express their organization’s primary activities will be better able to direct their internal and external information resources more judiciously. This study expands on the possibilities of IRM in public organizations by presenting some strategy directions.

The Administrator as an Information Manager

In order to examine the extent to which administrators engage in the management and strategic use of information resources, it is useful to build some understanding of this activity. Previous studies in this area have been successful in identifying agency-specific variables and policy issues involved in the transfer of information among levels of government (see studies by Bozeman & Blankenship, 1979; Caplan, Morrison, & Stambaugh, 1975; Perry & Kraemer, 1979). However, it is not clear what elements must be incorporated into the decision making-process if successful strategies and techniques in IRM are to be adopted.

In determining the effects of the quality and accessibility of information on decision making in a county welfare agency, O’Reilly (1980) found accessibility to be an important determinant of use, even if the quality of sources used was lower than what the decision maker knew might be available. This implies that administrators will tend to rely, over time, on immediate sources of information—exhibiting a reluctance to venture outside the immediate organizational unit to incorporate additional material.

In a broad overview of information utilization by public agencies, Sabatier (1978) discusses those variables considered in linking the “acquiring” of information with the “providing” of information. For Sabatier, agency officials attempt to increase their technical competence as well as legitimize their activities. These objectives are then weighted by the resources which the administrator may devote to the acquisition and utilization of information. For example, an environmental protection agency may need to increase its monitoring of industrial effluent. In order to do so, it relies, to a limited degree, upon internal staff assessment as to the validity of information provided by the industry. Yet, demands by the public-at-large, oversight agencies, or interest groups to evaluate the situation critically and to forecast future conditions may necessitate additional information acquisition activities. Field studies, use of outside consultants, and access to data from other bodies or research institutes are examples of those actions legitimated by the political environment.

Therefore, public administrators often adopt a reactive strategy regarding information management. That is, they engage in a rationalizing process by gathering information as a response to particular statutes or requests from external organizations. However, the procedures by which such information is required, processed, and utilized are not often prescribed. This creates a “knowledge gap” whereby the decision making process is controlled by administrators who possess greater knowledge of the situation, and not by those who must oversee and regulate its activities. As Sabatier noted:

... when constraints on resources are controlled for, agency staff will generally provide technical information sufficient to meet the minimum requirements imposed by legal rules (including court review) and professional norms. Above this general threshold, information will be provided on specific decisions only if there is some reasonable probability that it will alter those decisions (p. 403).

Furthermore, the tenets of IRM rest on organizational and environmental interconnectiveness and interdependence to achieve organizational goals. IRM approaches seek to bring together information users, information needs to support organizational goals, and information technology solutions (Marchand & Horton, 1986). Public administrators are guided by three sets of values in decision making. As Harmon and Mayer (1986) note, these include concern:

• with efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity that look to the workings of government itself and the ways its goods and services are distributed and delivered;
• with the rights and the adequacy of governmental processes—in sum, how government relates to its citizens; and
• with representation and the exercise of discretion where attention is placed on citizens’ control over the workings of government.

Assuming that both controlled information and the
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