A Tale of Two Cultures: The Political Behavior of CIO’s in the US and India

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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature on the role of the Chief Information Officer (CIO) reveals the importance of the political aspect of this role. Building on the Political Strategies Framework (Romm & Rippa, 2010), this study investigates the utilization of political strategies across two cultures, the US and India. The findings show crucial differences between CIO’s political behavior in the two cultures that are in line with the Hofstede (1980) culture model. The paper concludes with a discussion of the differences between CIO political behavior in the two cultures and how the Hofstede cultural dimensions can explain these differences.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural, Decision-Making, Enterprise Resource Planning, Italy, Politics, Power, Qualitative Research, System Implementation, USA

INTRODUCTION

In attempting to identify the key drivers of CIO’s success, three types of CIO’s skills have been identified as key drivers of organizational performance: (1) technical skills, (2) managerial skills, and (3) leadership skills (Bharadwaj, 2000). Research has demonstrated (Pagels et al., 2000) that the most effective CIO’s use judicious discretion in choosing the most effective strategy to fit a specific managerial situation. Thus, Simonsson et al. (2010) found that superior performance is a result of discretionary managerial choice based on the unique characteristics of situations.

How do CIO’s change their behavior to fit different situations? According to Virnay and Tushman (1986), the ability of CIO’s in top performing organizations to adjust their behavior to varying circumstances determines the overall performance of their organizations. Hambrick and Mason (1984) synthesized this finding into an “upper echelon theory”, arguing that the best predictor of upper echelon managers’ success is their demographic characteristics, including their experience, education, and technical skills. These characteristics, together with the characteristics of the organization (size, prior performance), determine the overall success of the CIO. In other words, according to Hambrick and Mason (1984), it is the CIO’s experience, education, and technical skills that enables
them to respond differently to the situations that they face in the process of playing the role, with CIO’s who possess superior qualifications being able to respond more flexibly than those without such characteristics.

Continuing the above line of research, Spencer and Spencer (1993) demonstrated that CIO’s competencies can be conceptualized along three major dimensions: (1) “know-what”, (2) “know-how”, and (3) “know how to be”.

The “know what” dimension relates to the CIO’s previous work experience (e.g., having worked in the same industry for many years). The “know-how-to-be” dimension relates to the CIO’s education (e.g., being a graduate of a top university in an area related to the business of the organization), while the “know-what” dimension is related to the number of years that the CIO’s spent in their role. Note that these two dimensions imply that the longer CIO’s play this role, the more skilled they are, and, therefore, the more able to respond flexibility to changing circumstances and differing situations.

Further research on the above conceptualization demonstrated that “know-how”, “know-what” and “know-how-to-be” characteristics of CIO’s are key contributors to an organization’s superior performance (Ravarini et al., 2003). Therefore, one would expect that more effective CIO’s would possess these characteristics at a higher level than less effective ones.

Are the CIO demographic characteristics the only predictor of their effective performance?

It is our belief that a key element missing from the literature on CIO characteristics is the political dimension of the CIO role. The political dimension cannot be seen as part of any of the above dimensions because it is a behavioral characteristic. It is not an automatic by-product of working in a similar industry (“know what”), it is not necessarily a result of the CIO’s level and quality of education (“know-how”), and it is not always related to the number of years that the CIO spent in his/has role (“know-how-to-be”). It is a separate set of behavioral characteristics that cannot be categorized under any of the above dimensions. It is our goal in this investigation to offer insights on how this dimension can be incorporated in the body of research on the CIO role.

POLITICAL BEHAVIOR

Before we consider the theoretical aspects of the CIO role, a review of the literature on organizational politics is warranted. The literature on organizational politics shows that defining this term is not simple. The literature is replete with definitions that often contradict each other. For the purpose of this paper, we follow a definition proposed by Drory and Romm (1991). To account for the wide number of attributes that researchers do not agree are part of the concept of organizational politics, Drory and Romm (1991) created a conceptual framework or a “map” of the range of behaviors that should be considered “political”. Their framework considered organizational politics as a combination of three types of elements:

1. **Necessary elements**: In this category the authors included “influence attempts” and “informal means”, indicating that by definition, in order to be considered political, an actor has to attempt to influence another actor, using informal means of persuasion;
2. **Defining elements**: In this category the authors included whether the actor is an individual or a group and whether the behavior is directed upward, downward or laterally;
3. **Optional or circumstantial elements**: In this category the authors listed a number of elements mentioned in the literature, including: “the existence of a state of conflict”, “working against one’s organization”, “power attainment”, and “concealment of motive”. These were all considered important but not essential for a behavior to be defined as political.

Following Drory and Romm (1991), our definition of political behavior is “influence attempts”. This definition encompasses
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