Chapter 3

Politicking the Information Technology Strategy in Organisations

Tiko Iyamu
Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Through IT strategy, many organisations intend to set out key directions and objectives for the use and management of information, communication and technologies. It would therefore seem that IT strategy, for the foreseeable future will remain a key aspect of development within organisations. As a result, there has been more focus on how IT strategy is articulated and formulated. What is missing is that there has been less attention on the implementation of the strategy. Also, in most organisations, technical issues are minor compared to the relationship issues. There are many factors which influence the implementation of the IT strategy. These influencing factors which include organisational politics, determine the success or failure of the IT strategy. This paper focuses on how organisational politics as examined by two underpinning theories, Structuration Theory and Actor-Network Theory, impact the implementation of IT strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

IT strategy is a term that refers to a complex mixture of thoughts, ideas, insights, experiences, goals, expertise, memories, perceptions, and expectations that provide general guidance for specific actions in pursuit of particular ends within the computing environment (Ward & Peppard, 2002). IT organisations have many and diverse stakeholders and this makes politics inevitable. IT strategy helps to set direction (Straub & Wetherbe, 1989), comprehension and focus on the future in the wake of change in the organisation that it supports. Walsham & Waema (1994) argue that IT needs strategy to achieve its aims and objectives. No doubt, “IT Strategy” is a significant factor in driving towards a specific direction. What is even more important is the outcome of the IT strategy. The question is, what influences or causes the IT strategy outcome (implementation)? Orlikowski (1993) argued that organisational politics has

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an important influence on the degree to which IT, through its strategy, can be used. It is argued that the
danger of politics is that it can be carried to extremes, and can then seriously harm the effectiveness of
an organisation (Armstrong, 1994). In a study by Robbins et al. (2001), many employees and employers
confirmed the recognition of legitimate and illegitimate politics in the organisations.

The way in which the IT strategy is developed and implemented have a significant impact on its suc-
cess, and can have a direct impact on the organisational culture. According to Gottschalk (1999), imple-
mentation is key to the success or failure of IT strategy. Those who develop the IT strategy will probably
be different people from those who carry out the implementation. If the IT strategy is understood or
interpreted differently, the implementation is likely to encounter problems (Walsham & Waema, 1994).
Implementing IT strategy depends on key people within the organisation (Daniels, 1994). In essence,
unless all major stakeholders are involved, successful implementation is unlikely. However, analysing
the peoples’ perspectives opens the door for political intent within the organisation. Where there are
different people and technologies, there are conflicts and difficulties (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). It is
inevitable that people are influenced and driven by different forces, such as ‘politics’, in the organisa-
tions. Orlikowski (1993) argued that organisational politics has an important influence on the degree
to which IT, through its strategy, can be used. Where people are involved, politics exists. Scarborough
(1998) argues that IT strategy needs other elements with a strong influence such as politics to achieve
the set goals and objectives.

It is a serious oversight to pretend that politics does not exist. Since the beginning of time, politics
has been a part of every human equation (Butcher & Clarke, 1999). Politics is the means; power is the
end. Organisations are the most fertile breeding ground for politics. This is due to the fact that the actors
seek different personal interests such as success, professional growth and financial security (Kling &
Iacono, 1984). According to Hanbury (2001), “If a project is not facing a lot of organisational politics, it
is a sure sign that it is not doing anything significant”. The study explored the impact of organisational
politics on the implementation of IT strategy.

Regardless of the degree to which an employee may commit him or herself to the objectives of the
organisation, personal interests are likely to be different from those of the employer. Employees seek
to satisfy not only the organisational interests, but also their own wants and needs which are driven by
and want to act differently.”

It has been demonstrated, analytically as well as empirically, that technical issues get caught up in
a host of organisational issues such as politics. Orlikowski & Barley (2001) state “… to include insight
from institutional theory, IT researchers might develop a more structural and systematic understanding
for how technologies are embedded in complex interdependent social, economic and political networks,
and consequently how they are shaped by such broader institutional influences”.

Organisational politics involves those activities undertaken within organisations to acquire, develop,
and use power and other resources to obtain one’s preferred outcomes in a situation in which there is
uncertainty, lack of clarity or a lack of consensus about choices. Organisational structure is a key com-
ponent of organisational politics, and power is the focal point of organisational structure. According to
Holbeche (2004), politics is a fact and part of life in organisations.

Much work has been done on organisational politics, such as Markus (1983), Pfeffer (1992), Hardy
(1994), Butcher & Clarke (1999), Mintzberg (2000) and Lewis (2002) and on IT strategy, such as Ciborra
Sydor (1999) and Mack (2002). These works are often separately articulated. What is missing is the