Earning a Seat at the Table: How IT Departments Can Partner in Organizational Change and Innovation

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ABSTRACT

Few would argue that the information technology department (ITD) is not an essential part of an organization. It is hard to envision a project that does not need the support of the ITD. Despite this importance, the ITD is not always involved in the management of projects. Often, the ITD is brought into the project late in the planning and development process. In many cases, the inclusion of the ITD in an advanced project stage can result in project failure where early involvement could have prevented it. Why is it that ITDs, while clearly a vital part of project implementation, are not always incorporated in the early stages of organizational projects? Is the ITD’s role not understood, or are there misconceptions regarding the ITD’s value? This paper seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the role of ITDs in organizations through a conceptual model of ITD organizational integration. The model provides actionable recommendations, demonstrates the organizational value of ITDs, and highlights the importance of including ITDs early in organizational project lifecycles.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration, Inclusionary Project Planning, Information Technology, Infrastructure, Organizational Value, Project Management

INTRODUCTION

Information technology departments (ITDs) have an identity crisis in the typical organizational workspace. In most instances, the role and impact of the ITD are either not clearly understood or not fully appreciated (Gibson, 2014). This identity crisis can stem from any number of reasons – from a personal disagreement to a failed information technology (IT) implementation of a service or product. It can also stem from a lack of understanding between IT personnel and top management (Manfreda & Stemberger, 2014; Sáenz and Aramburu, 2011). Regardless of the reason, organizations will be better served by improving their understanding of ITDs. In real-world scenarios, ITDs impact nearly every part of an organization, with the potential to help identify new services, improve existing services, and improve efficiency and effectiveness throughout the organization. For an organization to realize these benefits, ITDs must first be seen as a valuable asset.

One of the ways to tackle an emerging issue – in this case, the integration of ITDs within an organization – is through the development of a conceptual model (Webster & Watson, 2002). The following paper seeks to develop such a conceptual model, one whose themes are informed by a literature review (Wolfsinkel, Furtmueller, & Wilderom, 2013) guided by the following research
question: what themes exist in literature vis-à-vis: the role of ITDs within organizations? In addition, the paper analyzes the gap found within the literature regarding why organizations continue to struggle with integrating ITDs in their planning and operational processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was undertaken utilizing a grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Following a grounded theory approach is an appropriate technique when the researcher seeks to develop a new perception of a relatively well-known phenomenon (Stern, 1995). The actual literature review was conducted using Google Scholar and ProQuest with broad search terms such as “‘role of information technology’” and “‘IT’ AND ‘organizations’”. Initial searches were not limited by dates so a sense of what literature existed in this space could be obtained.

As articles were reviewed, patterns, additional search terms, and seminal research articles were discovered. In addition, the “Cited by” feature within Google Scholar was leveraged to find new articles. As search terms were refined, results were then limited to the last ten years and the content was organized into the following initial categories or codes: role of emotions, process alignment, organizational performance, performance, IT project management, IT positioning within organization, objective alignment, and risk management. A further round of review within these initial categories produced a finalized group of categories: ITD position within the organization, calculating the value of IT, risk management and the ITD, and improving communication within the ITD. A summary of the salient literature within these final categories appears below.

ITD Positioning Within the Organization

The discussion of emergent themes in the literature begins with the organizational positioning of ITDs. The ITD accomplishes the desirable outcome of organizational positioning through deliberate integration into core business functions. Instead of appearing as an external part of the organization or a hindrance to growth and innovation, ITDs must create connections between core business values and organizational goals. In their classic paper, Bynolfsson and Hitt (1995) state, “the contribution of IT is large and statistically significant” (p. 197). Without ITDs, IT cannot be integrated into the organization. Rivard, Raymond, and Verreault (2006) suggest that in order for the ITD to successfully integrate itself within an organization, it must be resource-driven and should strategically position itself in alignment with core business functions. Significantly, they state, “IT support for firm assets was found to influence IT support for strategy” (p. 45).

In many organizations, business processes run through a variety of IT tools, therefore making it difficult to determine how much choice is available to the end user in how they go about completing their work tasks. If an organization requires a particular system for certain tasks, then that is the system selected for use. While this is not an issue when the system works well or is compatible with the type of work that employees are completing, the problem arises when the required system does not align well with the employees’ work. The misalignment between tasks and tools required to complete the tasks contributes to the creation of an adversarial relationship between users and technology implementers; instead of working as partners towards meeting organizational objectives, the two groups clash with one another. Organizations can mitigate this issue by implementing a more collaborative approach (Boudreau & Robey, 2005). Once a collaborative approach is developed, the ITD can begin the process of improving its position within the organization. This transition allows opportunities for innovation within the organization.

There are several ways ITDs can transition their relationship within an organization, one of which is business process reengineering, or BPR (Attaran, 2004). BPR is “a strategic action [that] requires a clear understanding of customers, market, industry, and competitive directions” (Attaran, 2004, p. 587). By aligning with core business functions, ITDs help create a shared vision for the organization and demonstrate the overall value of IT in supporting and executing that vision. One way to maximize
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