Communication Processes of Information Technology Executives in Higher Education

Angela K. Hollman, University of Nebraska at Kearney, Kearney, NE, USA
Sonja H. Bickford, University of Nebraska at Kearney, Kearney, NE, USA
Janet L. Lear, University of Nebraska at Kearney, Kearney, NE, USA

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explain the key variables of internal communication processes of information technology executives, specifically chief information officers (CIOs), at higher education institutions. By understanding the key variables that influence the IT communication process, leaders and administrators, such as the CIO, can better communicate with their stakeholders leading to a successful, technology-integrated organization. While others have sought to model this business-IT relationship using communication as one part of a model, this study focuses upon only the CIO communication process adding value to current information technology management literature. This exploratory pilot article offers empirical insights about how CIOs communicate within their own team and up through the executive ranks of an organization. It suggests that CIOs can be divided into two categories; these two categories, keying off of communication variables, appear to directly affect the ultimate success or failure regarding the integration of technology into the mission and vision of the organization.

KEYWORDS

Chief Information Officer, Communication, Communication Management, Higher Education, Information Technology, IT, IT Management, Management, Technology

INTRODUCTION

Basically, as a CIO [Chief Information Officer], it’s important for me to partner with these folks and understand what their needs are and their strategies and make those things happen.
– CIO Adam

In today’s era, technology is intricately involved in all business processes as technology never diminishes, but continues to grow at an astronomical rate. Moore’s law predicts that computer processing speed will continue to double every 18 months while Metcalfe’s law predicts that computer networks will exponentially continue to grow as the value of the network increases alongside of the number of network users (Metcalfe, 2013; Moore, 1965). Furthermore, both predictions have been widely accepted as law. As a result, organizations are growing more dependent on digital innovation and require individuals who work within the organization to be prepared to meet this challenge (Fichman et al., 2014).

The IT department, in an organization such as higher education, healthcare, or private industry, typically encompasses all computing processes; including web applications, e-mail, file storage, and internet/network access. As the executive head of an organization’s information technology
(IT) department, the Chief Information Officer (CIO) is intertwined with the technology in the organization’s environment. As information technology increases, the challenges for the CIO and IT team involved with meeting the needs of stakeholders will only continue to grow. Aside from technology, CIOs also serve as executive business officers, and their IT teams are highly involved in business strategy and processes lending credence to the importance of the CIO in any organization (Eiras, 2010; Waller, et al., 2010). Due to the CIO’s responsibilities for managing technology as well as managing business interactions, CIOs must be able to combine both skills effectively. Communication plays a large role. CIOs must communicate at both a technical and user-friendly level while building and managing relationships (Eiras, 2010).

Communication is crucial in a CIO’s skill set, especially when focusing on a higher education environment like a university or a college. In this environment, a CIO must combine communication and people skills to communicate effectively not only within the IT department and other business departments, but also across borders with the larger stakeholders in the academic environment including professors, department chairs, and deans. The CIO must also maintain relationships and communication channels with the executive staff—chancellors and vice chancellors—and support staff. Communication channels must also remain open between the CIO and his IT department and the students—also known as the customer within the higher education environment. When looking at higher performing CIOs, these individuals tend to operate from a social and participative point of view, actively involving others and keeping the information pipeline open (Waller et al., 2010). Thus, the underlying issue of CIO communication emerges. The CIO, within any institution, must find ways to successfully manage IT communication across borders among the aforementioned, diverse group of stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication skills, especially for people in managerial and executive roles set the tone and atmosphere for their departments and even organizations, like the university. Many researchers support the theory that communication is at the core of an organization and has an impact on its success (Barnard, 1938; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Gortner, Mahler & Nicholson, 1997; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Sagini, 2001). However, the research in regards to executive CIOs and IT teams is still new, only dating back to the 1980s.

Many factors affect communication, especially in a department such as IT. Organizationally, an IT department can be centralized in one location or spread throughout several different departments, thus combining many different levels of management, staff, and academia. Different departments or teams within departments focus on different functions and have varying areas of expertise to improve efficiency of service and operations. To provide these central services, communication is at the core and will have an impact on productivity. Thus, boundaries created may cause problems that impact communication (Clampitt, 2005).

Daft (2015) defines communication as a process by which information and understanding are transferred between sender and a receiver, such as between a manager and an employee. Daft (2015) also states that the role of the manager is that of an information processor. Consequently, top level managers can spend up to 80% of their day just communicating. This managerial communication or strategic conversation is taking place across boundaries of the organization’s hierarchical structure in support of the organization’s mission and goals.

Looking more narrowly, executives such as the CIO must be able to communicate effectively across these organizational boundaries. Both top-down and bottom-up conversations, through the levels of an organization, are crucial to effectively achieve departmental and organizational goals. Kearns and Sabherwal (2007) suggested that CIOs need a voice at the executive management level to express strategies and ideas. Knowledge sharing is an important aspect when examining reporting
Information Technology Supported Communication - Group Cohesion, Agreeability, and Performance: The Role of Media Richness
Michael B. Knight and D. Scott Hunsinger (2010). *Computational Advancements in End-User Technologies: Emerging Models and Frameworks* (pp. 242-259).
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/information-technology-supported-communication-group/38096?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/information-technology-supported-communication-group/38096?camid=4v1a)

Utilization and Perceived Benefit for Diverse Users of Communities of Practice in a Healthcare Organization
[www.igi-global.com/article/utilization-perceived-benefit-diverse-users/46968?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/utilization-perceived-benefit-diverse-users/46968?camid=4v1a)