Employees’ Participation in IT-Projects in the Public Sector: Mapping Participation to the Project Lifecycle

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ABSTRACT

Employee participation in IT projects in the public sector is argued in the literature as a critical factor for the success and acceptance of IT. However, studies on employee participation reported on the lack of end-users participation in the public sector and on the need of improvement of participation concepts. This article investigates different participation practices and used methods for participation within different approaches such as Human Centered Design, Ethnography, Contextual Design and Human Resource Management, and explores opportunities for participation across the system development life cycle in the public sector. The findings reveal a variety of participation opportunities across the whole process. Finally, implications of these findings are discussed with suggestions for future research.

KEYWORDS


INTRODUCTION

The benefits of user participation in information technology (IT) projects have been reported in several studies within various research areas. Effective user participation within the System Development Life Cycle (SDLC) has been shown to have a positive effect on the success of the system in terms of user satisfaction, system use, system quality, ease of use, as well as keeping the project in time, within budget (Abelein & Paech, 2015), and within the level of system acceptance (Damodaran, 1996). User satisfaction and attitude toward an information system are positively influenced by their participation and involvement within the development process (Lin & Shao, 2000). Other than typical elicitation techniques, user participation in the SDLC is an effective way to understand the users’ application domain, their daily work practices, the environment of the system use, their requirements and especially their behavior and preferences (Muneera & Didar, 2015). Employees in the public sector seem to have stronger resistance to change, hindering their IT adoption than those in the private sector (Parente & Prescott, 2016). End-user participation in the public sector has been identified as a strategy for overcoming organizational and managerial challenges of IT projects (Ramó N Gil-García & Pardo, 2005). Change management approaches based upon participation benefit

DOI: 10.4018/IJPADA.2019040102

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public-sector organizations working to achieve enduring organizational change (O’Brien, 2002). This perspective stimulates employees to actively contribute to IT projects (Van Der Voet, 2013). Despite the importance of participation, many studies report on lack of end-user participation in IT projects in the public-sector and underline the need for improvement of such concepts (Ben Rehouma, 2018; Følstad, Jørgensen, & Krogstie, 2004; Horton, 2003; Rao Baliwada & Jayaram, 2014). A primary reason for the lack of participation is the missing of management of and knowledge concerning the opportunities and methods used for participation in IT project (Ben Rehouma, 2018). Despite the awareness of user participation within the public sector, there remains a need for external experts to explicate the importance of utilizing participation methods suited to the IT development process (Følstad, Krogstie, Oppermann, & Svanaes, 2005). Employee participation in the public sector remains a topic that hitherto has been less investigated in e-Government and Information Systems (IS) research. Participation researchers have so far prioritized the study of employee participation in IT-projects as motivational practices and have focused on outcomes of participation in the form of benefits of system success. Another research stream has focused upon citizen participation to improve government services (Abu-Shanab, 2015; Fung, 2015; Jho & Song, 2015). To fill this gap, this study aims to advance the research in this filed by investigating opportunities for employee participation across the SDLC in the public sector, by addressing the following research question: How could government employees participate in IT projects?

In order to achieve this purpose, this paper uses a hermeneutic framework to identify participation approaches and explores opportunities for employee participation and methods that can be used across the SDLC within the public sector. This paper carries out a qualitative analysis and evaluation of findings with a focus on the content of the reviewed articles; by exploring practices of participation and used methods from the identified approaches and mapping them into the activities of the SDLC.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework, including the definition of participation and its specifications in the context of information systems. Section 3 describes the applied research methodology, followed by the results within section 4. The established framework is presented in section 5. Lastly, section 6 summarizes the findings, discusses implications for research, policy and practice.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Participation

Literature on participation embraces different sciences, with topics treating organizational, social, and political issues (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978). Participation refers to “taking part” and means “to contribute to something” (Barki, Hartwick, & Hartwick, 1994). According to Heller, Pusic, Strauss, and Wilpert (1998), participation in decision making is:

the totality of forms, i.e., direct (personal) or indirect (through representatives or institutions) and of intensities; i.e., ranging from minimal to comprehensive, by which individuals, groups, collectives secure their interests or contribute to the choice process through self-determined choices among possible actions during the decision process. (p. 42)

Following a multidimensional analysis, along which participatory systems may vary, Dachler and Wilpert (1978) emphasize the different properties of participation explained in this definition and provide four defining dimensions of participation in organizations. While indirect participation implies some form of representation, direct participation is considered the ideal form of participation, referring to immediate personal involvement in decision making. Formal and informal participation refer to the form of legitimization and vary from formal agreements to informal non-statutory consensus between interacting members. The degree of formality or informality of participation is related to the goal of participation and to the context to which the participatory system exists (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978).
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