Chapter III

The Social Responsibility of Information Systems Developers

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ABSTRACT

Information systems professionals have often been accused of ignoring issues such as ethics, human factors, social consequences, etc., during the development of an information system. This chapter aims to put into perspective that this attitude or ‘fact’ could be a result of a somewhat outdated mechanistic view of information systems and their role in organizations. Organizations adopt and use information systems for a variety of reasons, of which some of the most influential on the outcome or success of the systems often are neither planned nor anticipated. It is these reasons and their consequences that are the main point of discussion in this chapter. The importance of viewing information systems as social systems is stressed and it is pointed out that the ‘social side’ of information systems is the ‘other side of the coin’ of technical development methodologies. In the modern organization all work is so intertwined with the use of information technology that the one side cannot be considered, planned or developed, without considering the other. It is furthermore argued that it is the social responsibility of information systems professional to ensure that the human environment within which systems are being developed is cultivated and nurtured.

INTRODUCTION

Information systems are increasingly one of the most essential components of modern business organizations. Their use has become so integrated with the fabric of organizations that most organizations cannot function without one. They can be regarded as the ‘core’ of the organization. But what is an information system?

In the literature the term ‘information system’ is not used consistently. It is not a precise concept and is known by a variety of names, including management information systems, computer-based information systems, information systems and, increasingly, information technology (Markus, 1999). As will be seen later when the author offers a definition of information systems, in this chapter the term is used more or less in the sense proposed by Lee (1999), namely that information systems is an ‘instantiation’ of information technology. We take ‘information system’ as a concept that includes, inter alia, management policies and procedures, system developers, users, and communication and information systems (CIS).

The role that information systems play in organizations has changed over the years. Initially it was viewed as a somewhat passive one, namely ‘supporting the functions’ of the organization. Currently, this view has expanded to a much more active one often called ‘determining the future’ of the organization and, indeed, of society.

However, information systems adoption and use in organizations have many consequences and raise interesting questions. The quest of many information systems researchers is to try and make sense of this interplay between technology and people, in order to develop more successful approaches to information systems development.

The main thrust of this chapter is that this ‘determining’ role of information systems is not a deterministic one in the sense that it mechanistically determines the ‘future’ of organizations. Instead, this role is a softer, socially constituted one that embraces the many social forces that also play a part in determining that ‘future,’ so that the ‘futures’ of different organizations may be completely different even if similar technology is being used.

One result of this view is that the developer of information systems has, apart from a technical role, also the role of introducing information systems in a manner that takes cognisance of the notion of the social context of information systems. We wish to investigate how an appreciation and understanding of the social context of information systems changes the traditional role of systems developers. Especially, we wish to concentrate on the social responsibility that these new roles expect from systems developers.

Information systems cannot change the future of an organization without being used. However, the process of adoption and integrating this technology in organizations has not been of primary interest in the history of the information
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