Chapter VI

Conflict and Politics and Information Systems Failure: A Challenge for Information Systems Professionals and Researchers

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ABSTRACT

Managing the power, politics and organizational conflict inherent in information systems is increasingly recognized as being of critical importance to successful information systems development. The focus of this chapter is the extent to which conflict among participants in an information systems development may be said to contribute to project failure. The chapter describes a research study that explores the nature of conflict in an information systems development and the extent to which conflict may be perceived to impact on the successful progress of a project. In particular, the study was designed to determine which type of conflict (i.e., conflict between which type of stakeholders) may pose the most risk to an information systems development and to determine to what extent conflict can be said to be a contributing factor to information systems failure.

The study was structured into three distinct stages. The first stage was a major case study conducted to explore the nature of conflict in a prematurely terminated information systems development and to probe the extent to which conflict was perceived to pose a risk to information systems projects.
The second stage involved surveying IT Managers to test the wider applicability of the case study findings. The third and final stage involved developing a predictive model of conflict showing the relative weighting of each of the variables investigated, using logistic regression. The most significant outcome of the study was that information systems developments can be detrimentally affected by the impact of conflict among users who have commissioned or will use the system. Managing and resolving conflict in an information systems environment is clearly a difficult, challenging and time-consuming exercise, but the findings of this research study suggest that the rewards, in terms of higher success rates, should be worth the commitment.

INTRODUCTION

As the new millennium unfolds, it brings with it certain axioms about organizations and the information systems that support them. These axioms, although spawned in the last millennium, are likely to be founding tenets of the next. This chapter discusses the nexus of two such truisms: organizations are political systems, and information systems are a vital and integral part of them.

Information systems researchers and practitioners have long been concerned about the high failure rates of information systems projects. There are no studies that have yet provided the information systems community with the ‘silver bullet’ by isolating a single factor that will guarantee project success, but there are many studies that have identified parts of the problem. In fact, there has been a growing realisation that no single factor, methodology or tool can ensure success in every situation.

Managing the power, politics and organizational conflict inherent in information systems is increasingly recognized as being of critical importance to successful information systems development. Furthermore, the need for improvements in the success rate for information systems development demands that researchers and practitioners give greater attention to the cultural and human factors involved in business process redesign and information management. Yet, there still does not appear to be a clear understanding of how these issues may impact on a project.

The extent to which conflict among participants in an information systems development may be said to contribute to project failure was the focus of the study described in this chapter. In the absence of any definitive models on the degree of risk posed by conflict on information systems development in the existing literature, this study was an attempt to build a theory of the impact conflict may have on the successful progress, completion and implementation of an information systems development project, and to discover more about the types of conflict that may pose a risk. The objective of this chapter, then, is to outline the study, its background and its findings, and to demonstrate the need for further research in this
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