Chapter VII

Concern Solving for
IS Development

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ABSTRACT

“Some make the deep seated error of considering the physical conditions of a country as the most important for its inhabitants; whereas it cannot, I think, be disputed that the nature of the other inhabitants with which each has to compare is generally a far more important element of success.”

(Charles Darwin, On the Origin of Species, 1859)

Mitroff and Linstone’s (1993) summit work, “The Unbounded Mind,” reiterates the multiple perspectives epistemology that was introduced to IS by Churchman (1971). They explain the advantages of dealing with IS development problems as involving three domains of knowledge—technical, meaning objective; personal, meaning lifestyle and ethics; and organisational, meaning social constructions and politics. They argue these align with Freud’s professional, personal and political layers of anxiety. This chapter focuses on the ‘organisational’ or ‘political’ domain, where the key is being able to deal with conflicting demands from stakeholders. The author recently returned from two years as adviser to the Deputy Premier of South Australia. This epitomises the typical working life of senior executives, who operate almost exclusively at this ‘organisational’ or political domain of analysis. His conclusion from that experience was that ‘problem solving’ in this domain should be relabelled ‘concern solving,’ as it was so much about dealing with stakeholders’ concerns rather than objective problems.

THE ARGUMENT

The case for not thinking of all problems, especially IS development problems, as if dealing with an ‘object’ has now been extensively made in the IS literature. Butler (2000) provides one of the brief explanations, Mitroff and Linstone (1993) a more complete one that includes implications and comparisons. They explain the advantages of dealing with IS development problems as involving three domains of knowledge—technical, meaning objective, personal, meaning lifestyle and ethics; and organisational, meaning social constructions, politics. These, they argue, align with Freud’s professional, personal; and political layers of anxiety. This chapter focuses on the second of these domains, the organisational domain. Knowledge, and therefore problem solving, in this domain is best treated as being socially constructed. In this context the chapter attacks the use of the words ‘problem solving,’ preferring instead ‘concern solving.’ This is not semantic but rather pragmatic; it changes the way problems are perceived and dealt with. It has been observed to cause a genuine realignment of thinking towards those that say they have a problem and away from the declared object of their concerns. In this problem domain it focuses thinking on the disease, not the symptoms. This includes concentrating more on listening and less on informing.

This chapter will first discuss the concept of ‘concerns.’ This is followed by a demonstration of the dominance of concerns-issues in the day-to-day activity of a senior manager by interpreting activities from that workplace. Last a simple application of the perspective will be presented. It is a concern-solving approach to IS project definition.

Wilson (1983) defines concern as “a readiness to exert influence: a readiness to act.” A failure to be able to act often heightens concern. Use of the word “concerns” does come up in the IS literature. Baskerville and Wood-Harper (1998) use it frequently in their explanation of research, in particular action research, as “Area of Concern.” This, they argue, needs to be determined up-front in any investigative process. This fits well with what is being argued here, in the sense that a problem is defined by first noting people’s (area of) concerns. Keen (2000) also talks about exploring communities’ concerns rather than “topics” when looking for research agenda. These he classifies as “classical (root metaphors), situational and immediate.” He seems to be suggesting that a researcher should choose one of these. However, it may be more useful to think that a concern has to be studied through each of these lenses. Keen’s work rather concentrates on “community concerns.” In this chapter a more individualistic approach of individuals’ concerns is taken to be a better level of analysis. Dewey (as cited in Argyris & Schon, 1996) uses the term “doubts” as the driver for human inquiry. This must be a similar concept to concerns.
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