Chapter VIII

The Changing Roles of IT Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Information technology (IT) leadership has undergone fundamental changes over the past decade. Despite increased interest in recent years, little empirical research on IS/IT leadership has been done. To better understand the changes, this study compares leadership roles, individual characteristics and position characteristics of newly appointed IS/IT executives (who have been in their position for two years or less) with established IS/IT executives based on a survey in Norway. Survey results indicate that new leaders spent more time in the informational role and in the change leader role than established leaders. New leaders had worked shorter in the organization and shorter in IS/IT than established leaders. New leaders had less responsibility for computer operations, communication networks and technical infrastructure than established leaders. New leaders had more responsibility for strategic alignment between IT and business.

INTRODUCTION

Information systems (IS)/information technology (IT) leadership has undergone fundamental changes over the past decade (Cross et al., 1997; CSC, 1996; Stephens et al., 1995). Despite increased interest in recent years (e.g., Armstrong and Sambamurthy, 1995; Brown et al., 1996; Earl and Feeny, 1994; Rockart et al., 1996), little empirical research on IS leadership has been done.

This research was motivated by Applegate and Elam (1992), who conducted a study of newly appointed IS executives. In their study, a new senior IS executive was defined as one who had been in the position for two years or less, while an old/established IS executive was defined as one who had been in the position for five years or more. This research applied the same definitions.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addressed the following questions:
1. What are the main leadership roles of new IS executives? Do they differ from those of established IS executives?
2. What are the individual characteristics of new IS executives? Do they differ from those of established IS executives?
3. What are the characteristics of new IS executives’ positions? Do they differ from those of established IS executives?
4. How does the importance of strategic alignment influence IS/IT leadership roles?

LEADERSHIP ROLES

Managers undertake activities to achieve the objectives of the organization. Mintzberg (1994) notes a number of different and sometimes conflicting views of the manager’s role. He finds that it is a curiosity of the management literature that its best-known writers all seem to emphasize one particular part of the manager’s job to the exclusion of the others. Together, perhaps, they cover all the parts, but even that does not describe the whole job of managing. Mintzberg’s role typology is frequently used in studies of managerial work (e.g., Pinsonneault and Rivard, 1998).

Describing the manager’s work has been an ongoing pursuit of researchers and practitioners. The manager’s work is characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation of tasks, a preference for action (as opposed to reflection), and a preference for verbal communication over formal reports (Mintzberg, 1994). Managers in organizations are continuously confronted by an array of ambiguous data and vaguely felt stimuli which they must somehow order, explicate and imbue with meaning before they decide on how to respond (Kuvaas, 1998). A number of models describing the manager’s work have been proposed including functional descriptions such as planning, organizing, directing, controlling, coordinating, and innovating. Similarly, frameworks based on the methods used to accomplish these functions, for example, Mintzberg’s role typology, have been proposed. According to Mintzberg (1990), the manager’s job can be described in terms of various roles:

1. **Informational Roles.** By virtue of interpersonal contacts, both with subordinates and with a network of contacts, the manager emerges as the nerve center of the organizational unit. The manager may not know everything but typically knows more than subordinates do. Processing information is a key part of the manager’s job. As monitor, the manager is perpetually scanning the environment for information, interrogating liaison contacts and subordinates, and receiving unsolicited information, much of it as a result of the network of personal contacts. As a disseminator, the manager passes some privileged information directly to subordinates, who would otherwise have no access to it. As spokesperson, the manager sends some information to people outside the unit.