Chapter VI

Organizational Compatibility as a Predictor of Telecommuting

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ABSTRACT

Innovation literature long has advocated that an innovation may be compatible or incompatible with an organization’s existing systems or resources. Compatibility of an innovation traditionally has meant that the innovation is compatible with the existing values, skills, and work practices of potential adopters. However, Tornatzky and Klein (1982) criticized this definition as too broad, noting that compatibility may refer to compatibility with the adopters’ values (value compatibility) or that it may represent congruence with the adopters’ existing practices (practical compatibility). Anecdotal evidence suggests both types influence telecommuting. Therefore, this study investigates compatibility and its relationship to IS personnel’s telecommuting. The organization’s ability to secure telecommuting (a dimension of practical compatibility) was found to be a major facilitator of the adoption and diffusion of telecommuting. Group values were found to be a major facilitator of diffusion and success, and practical compatibility was found to be a facilitator of success. Implications are discussed.

Predictions concerning the growth of telecommuting have not materialized, despite potential benefits to both employers and employees (Guthrie, 1997). Though reasons for this lack of growth are not clear, lack of control of telecommuting employees has been cited as one reason in that, while out of sight, employees will engage in opportunistic behavior (Bresnahan, 1998; Christensen, 1992; Handy, 1995). In a 1995 study, Hewitt Associates found that 63% of companies felt that a major drawback of telecommuting arrangements was reduced control and supervision by managers (Jones, 1996). Such arrangements characteristically lack the same type of controls present in traditional on-site work arrangements.

Success in telecommuting arrangements could be improved by using outcomes-based measures of employee performance, rather than management by observation or by whether or not the employee looks busy (DiMartino & Wirth, 1990). Thus, it appears that organizations that manage by setting objectives and by enhancing management and employee work skills would be those most compatible with telecommuting arrangements. Recently, some researchers (i.e., Belanger & Collins, 1998; Kavan & Saunders, 1998) have proposed that the compatibility of telecommuting, or other similar alternative work arrangements with the organization, individual, work, and technology, is important to the work arrangement’s success.

The innovation literature long has advocated that an innovation may be compatible or incompatible with an organization’s existing systems or resources (Rogers, 1983). Innovations compatible with existing resources imply that the risk of failure in implementing the innovation is reduced. The level of compatibility likely will be seen by the organization as a need for either a major reorientation or merely an adaptation (Downs & Mohr, 1976).

Compatibility of an innovation has traditionally meant that the innovation is compatible with the existing values, skills, and work practices of potential adopters. However, Tornatzky and Klein (1982), in a meta-analysis of innovation adoption and implementation, criticized the dual definition of compatibility as too broad, noting that compatibility may refer to compatibility with the values or norms of potential adopters (value compatibility), or that it may represent congruence with existing practices of the adopters (practical compatibility). Similarly, Klein and Sorra (1996) propose a model of innovation implementation success explained by both the formal mechanisms creating a climate for the innovation’s implementation (practical compatibility) and the fit of an innovation to the targeted users’ values at the organizational and group level (value compatibility). Few, if any, researchers have investigated the dual nature of compatibility, despite its promising potential.
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