A Matter of Perspective: The Role of Casual Attribution in the Assessment of User-System Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

The working relationship of information systems (IS) professionals and end users is an ongoing source of both research and practical concern. This study employs Attribution Theory to examine the causal attributions IS professionals and end users make for successful and unsuccessful user-system outcomes—end user attempts to use an information system to get the information needed to complete system-dependent, work-related tasks. Eighty-six IS professionals and 122 end users participated. The results show no differences in the nature of IS professional-end user attributions for successful outcomes, but very significant differences between them following unsuccessful outcomes. Post hoc analysis indicates that for unsuccessful user-system outcomes, the causal attributions of IS professionals and end users who are cross-functional team members are significantly less divergent than the causal attributions of those who are not. The implications of Attribution Theory for IS professional-end user interaction are discussed.
INTRODUCTION

Effective interaction among information systems (IS) professionals and end users is an essential ingredient in IS success (Joshi, 1992). As the impact of information technology on personal and organizational success becomes even more apparent to workers, the need for and extent of IS professional-end user interactions are expected to intensify (Joshi, 1992; Tapscott & Caston, 1993). Unfortunately, IS professional-end user interaction in many IS settings too often results in mutual frustration and blame laying rather than effective problem solving behaviors (Concord, 1999; MORI, 1999).

This study seeks to shed additional light on the IS professional-end user relationship through the application of Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973). Attribution Theory (AT) is a cognitive-perceptual theory of human information processing that has provided research insights in a variety of pertinent organizational settings (Brown & Jones, 1998). AT directly addresses how individuals explain (i.e., how they attribute) the causes of their own and others’ performance in mutually dependent, interactive contexts (Brown, 1984; Green & Mitchell, 1979). Prior research in relevant organizational settings suggests that causal attributions have consequences of relevance to IS professional-end user interaction (Brown & Jones, 1998). For example, causal attributions can influence information-seeking strategies (Harrison, West, & Reneau, 1988), problem-solving responses to poor performance (Kaplan & Reckers, 1985), and information system use (Kelley, Compeau, & Higgins, 1999; Magal & Snead, 1993).

This study differs from prior research in its application of AT to IS professional-end user interaction in a post-implementation IS context. It is specifically concerned with IS professional and end user attributions following end user attempts to use an information system to complete system-dependent, work-related tasks. Growing dependence on IS support for work-related tasks has in turn led to an escalating demand on IS professionals to respond quickly and appropriately to end user needs (Tapscott & Caston, 1993). Unfortunately, recent surveys indicate IS professional-end user interaction in this important context is frequently unproductive and of practical as well as research concern (Concord, 1999; MORI, 1999).

To respond appropriately in such situations, IS professionals must be able to determine why a user-system outcome is perceived as a success or failure by end users. Misunderstandings by IS professionals as to why end users perceive IS support to be successful or unsuccessful can be a source of mutual confusion and frustration (Goodhue, 1988). AT research has demonstrated that why a person believes an event occurs—the causal attribution for the event—provides the impetus for decisions and actions that follow. AT research has also identified biases that can
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