Information Resources Management: Improving the Focus

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The term IRM has been used for many years in different contexts and with different meanings. This article classifies the IRM literature into three different groups. Each group has a different view of IRM: the management of information resources, the management of systems development, and the management of the resources used to produce information. The author argues in favor of the last view of IRM.

Introduction

In the 1960s the Management Information System (MIS) concept was in its infancy. Considerable controversy existed about its identity and whether it was an important new development or a mirage (Ackoff, 1967; Dearden, 1972; Emery & Sprague, 1972; Fredericks, 1971; Rappaport, 1968; Tolliver, 1971). In time, the MIS concept has become a practical reality as computer technology increasingly has been transformed into decision support tools which complement the data processing services of earlier years.

Perhaps following a similar pattern, a controversy today surrounds the concept of Information Resources Management (IRM). Leading academics and practitioners are arguing over its identity and importance. Several different descriptions of IRM have been proposed.

The term IRM was discussed in general terms, likely for the first time, by F.W. Holmes (1977) and by Horton (1977a). Poppel (1978, p.2) presented the concept in the context of a process model where IRM is viewed as a mechanism to translate “business goals into a group of strategic systems objectives for the next five
years: improve the level of management information systems, reduce operating expenses, increase productivity and increase the flexibility of existing systems.”

IRM also was proposed by Venkatakrishnan, (1983, p.175) as “the discipline of comprehensively managing an enterprise’s information requirements.” He presented IRM in the form of an Information Cycle which provided the basis for a strategy for bringing together the several components of information resource management.

As a rebuttal to a stinging criticism of IRM by Connell (1981b), Stonecash (1981, p.46) has defended IRM as “a response to the increased complexity of today’s organizations and to the increased complexity of the environment in which today’s organizations operate.”

While there are many proponents of IRM under its different forms, some sobering criticisms have also been made. For example, Connell (1981b, p.78) has argued:

In point of fact, the Information Resource Management theory is full of holes. Its strident advocacy by the sages of information processing lend credence to the belief that IRM is an ill-disguised attempt to provide a sinner for aging data processing managers.

In a major review of the IRM literature, King and Kraemer (1987, p.1) questioned the validity of the IRM concept and summarized their position as follows:

Information is not a resource in the conventional sense of the term, and economic techniques for dealing with information as a resource are lacking. The implementation of IRM will suffer from ambiguities about what it is intended to accomplish, from the breadth of its intentions given practical constraints in complex organizations, and could lead to consequences not intended by IRM’s advocates. Existing experience with IRM does not provide support for the IRM position. More attention should be paid to the rationales behind the need for IRM, the workability of its ambitious objectives, and the likely consequences of IRM implementation given the problems with the concept.

In an attempt to resolve the controversy over the identity and the validity of the IRM concept, the objective of this paper is to classify the major views on IRM, to recognize their practical implications, and to support the IRM concept as a collection of subfunctions necessary to indirectly manage information as an organization resource. The latter objective is to be accomplished through the direct management of information technology used to provide data processing and information to the organization, and by allowing end-users to define their information requirements and determine the value of the information they receive.

Classifying the Different Views of IRM

The present controversy over the IRM concept is to a great extent, due to the fact that authors are addressing two distinct entities: information as a resource versus resources used to produce information, or information technology. The distinction between managing information resources and managing resources used to produce information has been previously noted by other authors (Horton, 1981; Horton and Marchand, 1982; King & Kraemer, 1987; Yurow, 1981).

In addition to these two perspectives on IRM, some authors (Bryce & Associates, 1988; King & Kraemer, 1987) have also implicitly or explicitly reduced IRM to the system develop-
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