Management of the Information Center: The Relationship of Power to End-user Performance and Satisfaction*

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Information centers are appearing in many large organizations. Some Chief Information Officers (CIOs) have proclaimed them to be immediate successes, while other CIOs have not been convinced. When questioned further, they often mention the issue of control of the information center as a central concern. This study examines how the coercive and noncoercive use of power affects user performance and user satisfaction within the information center. The causal model is then analyzed by path analysis techniques using data collected from 180 end users in two states. The results indicate that the model is normologically valid and that information centers should rely on noncoercive sources of power in the control of their information centers.

Introduction

An interesting phenomenon in the management of information systems (MIS) in the 1980s is the dispersion of information processing technology within an organization. The distributed information system has been widely implemented in organizations and end-user computing has increased proportionately. The dispersion of information usage throughout the organization has, in turn, generated some management problems. The information center approach has emerged as a method to assist end-user computing and solve some of these problems (Dickson, Leitheiser, Nechis, & Wetherbe, 1985).

The concept of the information center was introduced in Toronto in 1976 by IBM Canada. Originally, the information center was not a place, but a concept which combined the expertise of the MIS department with the business skills of those in other functional departments in order to improve leverage, the power of the information processing technology, and to expand the availability and use of the organization’s information processing resources to areas outside the MIS department.

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The original concept of the information center as a community of users and MIS department personnel has evolved into a separate organizational group with a manager and its own staff.

Today, the information center is often a formal organizational unit featuring walk-in facilities to train end users to employ user-friendly tools to meet some of their own reporting and analysis needs for decision making. Individuals staffing the information center must be “genuinely adept at interacting with users, often on a one-to-one basis, in a support role. Technical expertise; the willingness to learn new equipment, packages and tools; and the capacity to communicate one’s expertise to users are also important attributes” (Kendall & Kendall, 1988, p. 693). Information centers are also called information resource centers, information technology centers, and client support centers.

An information center in itself cannot solve all of the organization’s information problems. Information centers have to be set up and managed. The style of management becomes an important issue, as Chief Information Officers (CIOs) may not want to give up too much power to the information center.

The main question to be considered here is what type of power, coercive or noncoercive, is more suitable for managing the firm’s information center. End-user performance and satisfaction are measured in order to determine which management strategy is appropriate.

A causal model showing relationships among coercive and noncoercive sources of power exercised by the information center, end-user performance, and satisfaction is developed. Then, the causal model is analyzed by path analysis (Asher, 1983; Teas, Wacker, & Hughes, 1979).

Research Design

Coercive and Noncoercive Power

Ranson, Hinings, and Greenwood (1980) note that an organization is an instrument in which inequality and dependence are intrinsically embedded. Because of this inequality and dependence, one party exercises influence on another party in organizations. Power is one of the terms that is used in conjunction with influence. French and Raven (1959) enumerate five types of power: coercive power, reward power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power.

Reitz (1981) defines power as “the capacity to influence others or to affect other’s behavior, [which] accrues to an agent because of his resources, like strength, wealth or knowledge.” This definition is based on a resource dependence theory which suggests that power between interacting parties is determined by the control and manipulation of scarce resources (Pfeffer, 1978; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Further, significant changes in resource availability can provoke the collapse of the current dominant coalitions and create new power dependencies (Ranson, et al., 1980).

In MIS, most of the resources related to computers are also scarce resources. The emergence of the information center in organizations has brought significant changes in resource availability of the information system and has created new power dependencies.

Basically, dependence arises out of the exchange process. Aiken and Hage (1968) interpret dependence caused by needs for resources, where these needs are derived out of an organization’s drive for organizational diversity and innovation. The implementation of the information center, therefore, is a kind of organizational innovation, which generates the new dependent relationship.

In managing end-user computing, the information center exercises various sources of power over end users. Although social scientists have enumerated five types of power (reward, legitimate, expert, referent and coercive), power is meaningfully dichotomized into coercive and noncoercive sources of power in this study.
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