The Expert's Opinion

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Interview conducted by Karen Mowery

IRMJ: In your opinion, what is the role of information resources in the overall growth and success of an organization in the public sector?

Zogby: I believe that it is probably more important in the public sector than in the private sector for reasons both different and similar to private sector concerns. One different reason is that one of the major functions of government or the public sector is to disseminate information. This is the public’s right to know, which is not only in both federal and state statutes, but seems to be in general an accepted objective of government. So, processing information is relevant to that mission.

A similar reason is that government organizations have to make choices in how they deliver their products, perhaps not the types of products because that’s usually in statute, but how they deliver those products and in what form. So they need information to be sure they are meeting the public’s demand on those products and you might call that a form of strategic planning. Strategic planning may be even more important for public sector because of limited resources.

IRMJ: How do you make top administrators aware of the importance of Information Resources in the public sector?

Zogby: It is occurring as a matter of evolution. The information age is upon us. Whether you read some trendy books like Megatrends or Third Wave, or go into textbooks, you see that people are becoming more aware of the uses of information, its value and what it means in positioning your organization, public or private, in meeting its missions. The difference is timely and accurate information relating to your products, not necessarily automated. I think you’ll find that in most top administrative groups there is often a need for certain types of information that does not lend itself to automation. It could be research related, or it could be evolving trends like types of technology coming out in your field and what the effects will be. In our industry, we may be interested in the future designs and trends in automobiles and heavy trucks. Now, what are the future designs and trends in highway systems? In fact, are we going to build new highways that are wider, etc.? You look at all the trends, which may be on a database, but the design elements probably will not be. Managers may get information like this by networking with colleagues and through other sources. Top administrators are becoming aware that they cannot manage in the traditional ways, they have to understand intermodal interactions, not only what is happening with vehicle and highway design and related human factors, but also what is happening with transit, air travel, waterways, etc. to effectively manage the transportation system. And here’s the other glitch—that al-
most then pushes you into the public policy or political arena—understanding the public’s re-
action to all that and how what they are doing fits into the greater socio-economic picture. They
are becoming aware that the manager who suc-
cceeds is the one who has the right information at the right time.

**IRMJ:** What do you consider to be some of the major problems in the management of information resources in the public sector?

**Zogby:** One of the major problems is that we still have the fragmentation of information re-
sources in most organizations. We have the
traditional data processing shop with its empha-
sis on applications and systems development, we usually have a separate office automation
staff, and then in some cases we might even have word processing sections that are separate from office automation. In my experience, this is one of the major problems in the public sector.

The other is that in controlling or manag-
ing information resources, the major emphasis
is on managing the hardware acquisition and contracting software applications, rather than managing the information as a valuable asset. This emphasis was an effective management style in the old days when productivity gains were the sole aim of information management, but information resources now encompasses not just the value of the “things,” but the intrinsic value of the information to management. We are not managing the intangible side of informa-
tion resources because information is simply not recognized as valuable in this light—as an actual asset of the organization.

**IRMJ:** What are the challenges of integrating traditional information systems processing, office automation, and telecommunication when traditionally they were separate from one another?

**Zogby:** The first challenge is that of traditional turf issues which arise out of the division of information systems management. The second challenge is getting a manager who can integrate these areas, one who has management skills rather than technical skills, or in the best of both possible worlds, has technical skills but is really more proficient in management. Simply lump-
ing these units into one bureau does not mean they are integrated, in fact, you can still have the same turfs. What is important is the information that I may need as an administrator. Whether it comes to me through a paper medium, screen, mainframe, office automation interface, etc. doesn’t make any difference as long as it is available to me when I need it. That takes a higher level person who understands and is dedicated to the mission of the organization and

is that, practically, we have to move that way. We consider ourselves a participative manage-
ment organization, so we should allow our man-
gers to manage and that means that they should determine what information they need in order to manage. We have designed our accident records system to function this way. Our field personnel can interface with that system and get the information they must have to understand the safety climate. We do this as well with other systems like the roadway management system. The managers can both input and extract informa-
tion from that system. We feel that information should not be managed so much by control as by results. If the objectives of the organization are such that we expect decentralization in our management structure, we should expect it also in end-user computing, and let that manager be held accountable for the way he utilizes his time and expenditures to meet those objectives.
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