Usage of and Support for Information Centers: An Exploratory Survey

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Much has been written in both academic and practitioner literature concerning the role, structure, operation and direction of the Information Center (IC). The purpose of our study was to conduct an exploratory survey of ICs. On-site interviews, in 20 organizations, were conducted to determine the current status of the IC as well as its future direction. A semi-structured questionnaire containing one hundred fourteen questions was used. Four areas were researched: the nature of the user community, the initial and current attitudes regarding the formation of ICs, the organizational impacts of the ICs, and issues of major concern for ICs. The most important finding of this survey is that the use of the IC increases as the ICs become older and this usage is not declining as user sophistication increases. The paper ends with a brief comparison of our findings with other empirical studies and an outline for future research.

End-user computing (EUC) is the direct assumption of computerized system development and information processing tasks by the user, for his own benefit (Head, 1985). EUC developed as a result of several conditions: user impatience with waiting for information systems (IS) to fill requests (Morse & Chait, 1984); a better-educated and more computer literate user community; the advent of user-friendly software; and, ultimately, the development and proliferation of the microcomputer (Carr, 1987). The information center (IC) was designed to provide several important functions for end-user computing (Carr, 1987).

The concept of the IC was initiated by IBM in 1974 with the express intent of decreasing IS service backlogs. In its original conception, the IC was a portion of the Information System’s development resource organized and dedicated to support the users of IS services. Such major activities as that were supported are: report generation and modification, data manipulation and analysis, spontaneous inquiries, etc. The
The fundamental premise underlying the ICs is to provide the user with proper education, technical support, usable tools, data availability, and convenient access to the system. As a result, the users may “directly and rapidly... and willingly... satisfy a part of their business area requirements” (Carr, 1987). In other words, a major goal of the IC was to enable users to obtain appropriate individual support needed to allow them to contribute heavily to fulfilling their own IS needs (Rockert & Flannery, 1981).

In recent years much has been written about ICs. Much of this literature consists of subjective opinions. Only a handful of papers are based upon empirical observations (AMA, 1986; Carr, 1987; Computer Decisions Information Center Survey, 1988; Magal & Carr, 1988; Sumner, 1985; Wetherbe & Leitheiser, 1985; White & Christy, 1987). Some of these studies were limited in scope and they barely touched on such important issues as the fate of the ICs, to whom they should report and how their services are justified.

The purpose of this study was to answer such questions. Rather than concentrating on one area or testing one hypothesis, we conducted a comprehensive exploratory study.

As a result, we spent between five and nine months in each of the twenty organizations researched. This paper reports findings in four areas: the nature of the user communities, the initial and current attitudes regarding the formation of the ICs, the organizational impacts of the ICs, and the issues of major concern to the ICs. The presentation is followed by a brief comparison with previously reported empirical studies and it ends with a proposal for future research.

**Research Methodology**

This study began as an extension of a term project in which students investigated the status of an IC in one company. The findings of their project contradicted some widely-accepted notions about ICs. For example, while many people believe that the IC should report to a user organization, we found it reported to the director of IS. Similarly, most textbooks prescribe that the IC is basically composed of MBAs, we found none. Therefore, we decided to visit more corporations. Based on the material collected in the term project and on a literature review (Dotson, 1982; Hammond, 1982; Head, 1985; Jacobsohn & Cardullo, 1983; Johnson, 1984; Johnson, 1984; Mills, 1984 Morse & Chait, 1984; Petruzelli, 1984; Roberts, 1985; Schultz, 1985; Sumner, 1985; Wheelock, 1982; Wetherbe & Leitheiser, 1985), we designed a questionnaire that included, in its final version (after pilot testing), 114 questions. Some questions were open-ended while others were of a multiple choice format. The questionnaire was administered by graduate students to twenty corporations in California, Colorado and Arizona. Since the major purpose of this study was to explore the current state of the IC on many dimensions, we felt that all sites had to be visited by the interviewers. Due to the large number of questions, we mailed the questionnaires two weeks prior to the site visit and requested that the companies prepare answers prior to the interview.

Strict guidelines were given to the students with respect to the interview process. Nonetheless, we have no assurance regarding the quality or consistency of the interviews. However, in order to improve the accuracy of the information, we instructed the students to interview three individuals in each organization: an IC manager, an IC user and the IS manager. We requested that the information provided be the consensus of the three individuals (except where questions were directed to only one individual). If the three interviewees provided inconsistent responses they were queried by the students. Responses from sites where no consensus was obtained even after discussion, are not recorded here as valid. (We analyzed these inconsistent cases, but due to the small number involved we are unable to report any meaningful
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