Trends in Information Centers

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This study examines the key issues facing information centers (ICs) by identifying and comparing the issues that IC managers rated as most important in two surveys, one in 1986 and the second in 1989. Both surveys elicited 21 issues, with the 1989 survey adding four new issues while deleting four issues from the 1986 survey. The study compares and contrasts the two sets of issues to discover those that increased in importance, decreased in importance, or remained the same. The findings provide insights into the changing nature of the IC’s function in organizations.

The growing demand for new computer applications and for enhancements to existing applications have resulted in lengthy backlogs of service requests in MIS departments. Alloway and Quillard (1983) found that MIS departments were not able to meet these demands, even with significant improvements in software development efficiency.

These unfulfilled demands, declining hardware prices, and more comprehensive, easy-to-use software packages have helped fuel the remarkable growth in end-user computing (EUC). Benjamin (1982) estimated that EUC utilized negligible amounts of computing capacity in 1970, but utilized 40% of computing capacity by 1980. He further predicted that EUC would consume 75% of computer processing capacity by 1990.

The EUC phenomenon is clearly important to the information systems field. Among the key issues facing the MIS profession, EUC ranked sixth in the Ball and Harris study (1982), second in the Dickson et al. study (1984), fifth in the Hartog and Herbert study (1986), and sixth in the Brancheau and Wetherbe study (1987). These findings support the fact that EUC has become a vital element in the overall information resource of the organization.

Many firms, recognizing the importance of EUC, have created information centers (ICs) as a vehicle for formal support of EUC (Carr, 1987). IBM® Canada first formalized the IC concept in 1974 (Hammond, 1982). The IC’s mission was
conceived largely in response to the long and growing applications backlog in the MIS department (Sumner, 1985; Wetherbe and Leitheiser, 1985).

Since 1974, IC’s have gained wide acceptance in the business community as evidenced by their rapid growth. Indications of this growth were noted in the American Management Association Report (1986) on Information Centers, which stated that: (1) one third of all IC’s were less than 18 months old; (2) the number of end users was growing at an annual rate of 20%; (3) the level of user requests for IC services was expanding at an annual rate of 20%; and (4) IC staff sizes were increasing at an annual rate of 10%.

The preceding discussion shows that the IC is an important corporate entity for supporting EUC in the firm. This study examines the role of the IC as part of the information resource of the firm by investigating issues of importance to the IC. Consequently, this research was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What were the most important issues facing ICs in 1986 and 1989?
2. What was the order of importance of those issues?
3. How has the importance of those issues changed between 1986 and 1989?

With EUC growing so rapidly and pervading the entire organization, the problems of managing the phenomenon continue to increase. These problems include education, training, standards, control, security, hardware support, software support, communications support, as well as others. Studying the key issues facing ICs and how these issues have changed will provide insights into the manner in which the IC performs its main function, supporting organizational EUC.

Background

End-User Computing and the Information Center

End-user computing is the direct hands-on use of computers by people with problems for which computer-based solutions are appropriate (Hammond, 1982; Carr, 1987) End users perform their own computing for several potential benefits (Benson, 1983; Cheney et al., 1986) Among these benefits are:

- users may have more control over system development and use;
- MIS department procedures may not be appropriate for small applications;
- the information systems developed may better meet user needs.

Accompanying the potential benefits to the user community are several potential risks that may result from end-user development (Davis, 1984):

- Elimination of the separate analyst functions of technical expert, independent reviewer of information requirements, and enforcer of standards and policies;
- Lack of end user commitment to quality assurance in system development;
- Development of continuously changing systems, when stable systems are needed;
- Encouragement of private information systems at the expense of shared corporate computing resources;
- Expensive accumulation of unneeded information.

Organizations are generally aware that end-user development entails risks as well as benefits. Therefore, firms have four general approaches they can take towards end-user computing (Leitheiser and Wetherbe, 1986):

1. Sink or swim: do nothing and let the end user beware.
2. Stick: control EUC so that corporate risks are minimized.
3. Carrot: encourage certain EUC practices which reduce corporate risks; this approach targets a specific benefit or risk, and does not provide a broad program of support.
4. Support: develop services to help end users in their computing activities.

Organizations, while wanting to encourage EUC (support category), realized at the same
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