A Framework for Improving Effectiveness of MIS Steering Committees

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MIS steering committees have been a mainstay of many organizations for several years now. Steering committees have been found to be invaluable in long-range planning for information systems (IS), getting user involvement in IS development efforts, and in allocation of scarce computing resources to different projects. However, because of a number of pitfalls associated with steering committees some organizations have found them to be more of a problem than a solution to both the IS staffs and organizations they serve. This paper integrates research on group decision making, reported in the organizational behavior literature, with empirical research on MIS steering committees, reported in the MIS literature, and presents a framework for improving effectiveness of MIS steering committees. The proposed framework consists of guidelines for managing three stages of an MIS steering committee function: its inception, design, and day-to-day operational aspects. It is argued that attention to these guidelines at the three stages will help organizations steer clear of common pitfalls associated with these committees.

In view of the propensity of organizations to appoint committees at every opportunity, it has been said that if several average Americans found themselves on an airplane about to crash, at least one of them would take time to appoint a landing committee (Fisher, 1980)! If you have served on committees, someone must have quipped that a committee is a group of people that keeps minutes and wastes hours, or that camel is a horse designed by a committee! Committees and group decision making bear the brunt of several such jokes; and, therefore, it should not be a surprise that MIS steering committees have received mixed reception in practice and in the MIS literature.

On one hand, MIS steering committees have been found invaluable in getting top management’s attention to MIS planning and development (McFarlan, 1981; Miller, 1979; Nolan, 1982), in ensuring the fit of information systems with corporate strategy (Buss, 1983; Head, 1979; King, 1978; McKeen & Guimaraes, 1985), and in changing the users’ attitudes toward the MIS function leading to increased user involvement with, and acceptance of, MIS efforts (Izzo, 1979;
Whieldon, 1983). On the other hand, several organizations have experimented and reported unsatisfactory results with MIS steering committees (Reck & Reck, 1989). User-executives complain about computer gibberish used by MIS staff, and busy executives question the end results of MIS steering committees after sinking so much time and effort into them (Cash, McFarlan, & McKenney, 1988). Some MIS steering committees are also blamed for taking uninformed actions or taking over operational decisions of the MIS function (Hannan, 1982).

The main focus of this article is to show that the success of an MIS steering committee depends upon several critical decisions made at its inception, formulation, and conduct during its meetings. We scanned the group decision making literature in organizational behavior as well as the empirical research on steering committees in the MIS area (Bahl & Dadashzadeh, 1990). Based upon this analysis, guidelines to ensure effectiveness of MIS steering committees were developed. These guidelines were then classified and formulated into a framework for improving effectiveness of MIS steering committees.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section defines the composition, characteristics, and objectives of a typical MIS steering committee. The main research findings from the empirical research in the MIS literature are then reviewed. Following that, a conceptual model for group decision making by a steering committee is formulated and discussed. The conceptual model has been adopted mainly from the organizational behavior literature. Based upon our model of group decision making and the empirical research findings on MIS steering committees, we develop a framework for improving effectiveness of steering committees. The framework, which is presented in section five, consists of guidelines for managing three stages of the MIS steering committee function: a) inception; b) design; and c) day-to-day operational aspects. The proposed framework suggests the following guidelines:

(a) Environmental guidelines describe the need and appropriateness of an MIS steering committee in an organization. They outline the organizational factors which determine the success of a steering committee.
(b) Structural guidelines suggest how to effectively design and structure an MIS steering committee.
(c) Group dynamics guidelines describe the fundamental issues important in day-to-day functioning of an MIS steering committee.

It is argued that an organization which follows these guidelines during inception, design, and functioning of the MIS steering committee, is more likely to get the desired results. The paper concludes with a summary and directions for future research.

**MIS Steering Committee as a Management Strategy**

Management information systems have evolved from transaction-oriented data processing systems to sophisticated systems of strategic importance to organizations. Products, product quality, market share, and corporate strategy increasingly depend upon information technology for companies in industries such as airlines, banks, insurance, finance, manufacturing and distribution (Cash, et al., 1988; Wiseman, 1989). It is for these reasons that business managers are becoming more concerned about making the right decisions regarding long-range planning of the MIS function. It is widely recognized that management lacks the technical training and knowledge to deal with the intricacies of the computer world. At the same time, there are few MIS staffers with sufficient management expertise. Thus, to manage the MIS function effectively, management has few options. The formation of an MIS steering committee, a group which collectively possesses the technical knowledge, and knowledge about company activities, problems and opportunities, is one option for establishing effective management and direction for the MIS function.

It is hoped that by forming steering com-
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