The Application of the Theory of Reasoned Action to Senior Management and Strategic Information Systems

PETER P. MYKYTYN, JR.
University of Texas at Arlington

DAVID A. HARRISON
University of Texas at Arlington

In recent years MIS research has been concerned with the development and use of information systems to achieve a competitive advantage. One of the many encompassing issues related to this topic is the need to gain the support and commitment for such systems from senior management. Although previous research has discussed some of the difficulties with and reasons for senior management’s reluctance to adopt strategic information systems, there does not appear to be the application of any integrated theory or framework to this problem. In this paper, we discuss an established and well-researched theory, the Theory of Reasoned Action, and we provide a basis for how it can be applied to the acceptance of strategic information systems by senior management. Initially, a general discussion of competitive advantage and strategic information systems is provided as foundation. Next, the Theory of Reasoned Action is discussed in detail. Finally, the theory is applied to senior organizational executives, with an emphasis on a methodology, to uncover some of the underlying reasons for resistance to adopting strategic information systems.

During the past several years, a considerable amount of empirical and conceptual research has been devoted to the study of competitive advantage. Much of this research emanated from the work conducted by Porter (1980). His research concerned competitive forces with which an organization must contend, along with various strategies an organization might adopt to deal effectively with those forces.

Building on Porter’s general characteristics, many MIS researchers have recently investigated the application of information technology (IT) to achieve a competitive advantage in organizations. Such use of IT is often referred to as strategic information systems (IS). Prominent MIS researchers who have examined strategic IS include McFarlan (1984), Bakos and Treacy (1986), Rackoff, Wiseman, and Ulrich (1985), Parsons (1983), and Benjamin, Rockart and Scott Morton (1984). McFarlan, for example, suggested that companies use IS to: build barriers to new entrants, change the basis of competition, generate new products, build in switching costs, and change the balance of power in supplier relationships. Parsons expanded McFarlan’s work by suggesting that IS can have a strategic impact if used to: change an industry’s products and services, change an industry’s markets, change an industry’s production economics, affect a firm’s buyers and suppliers, prevent customers from using competitors’ products and services, preclude new competitors, alter the degree of rivalry, and support one of Porter’s three generic strategies. Bakos and Treacy (1986) and Benjamin et al.

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What appears to be missing in much of the research on this topic is an examination of the possible underlying reasons for management’s reluctant behavior regarding strategic IS. Specifically, what is essential is the application of an established theory or framework to address such behavior and examine its determinants. Such a research perspective can assist MIS researchers and corporate managers in identifying the bases for resistance to adopting strategic IS, and then, to design more effective ways to overcome that resistance.

One approach might be to merely study top managers’ attitudes toward strategic IS in hopes of understanding their future behavior toward them. Many researchers in MIS, psychology, and other disciplines have studied attitude, attitude change, and satisfaction. Noteworthy among these are Lucas (1973, 1974a, 1974b, 1975a, 1975b) and Ives, Olson, and Baroudi (1983) in MIS, and Triandis (1971) in psychology. A richer study of behavior, intention, and other behavioral determinants, however, would provide a more complete assessment of senior management’s position regarding strategic IS. In particular, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) have developed a theory, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), that examines attitudinal and normative influences on behavior which might explain the reasons for senior management’s resistance to the concept of using IS technology to achieve competitive advantage.

In sum, the organizational and managerial issues surrounding strategic IS are diverse. Many issues could possibly affect senior management’s behavior regarding adopting such systems. It is therefore imperative that researchers approach this problem systematically and base their efforts on a solid theoretical foundation. Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) Theory of Reasoned Action may provide this foundation. The theory is discussed in general terms below. Following that, techniques and procedures are presented to apply it to an example of senior executives’ behavior regarding strategic IS. A discussion regarding possible changes to management’s behavior is then presented. Finally, concluding remarks relevant to IS researchers and practitioners are presented.

**Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)**

Over many decades, researchers have studied the relationship between attitude and behavior. Often attitude has been used quite generically to refer not only to a person’s feelings toward something but also to his/her
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