Information Management As Perceived by CIOs in Three Pacific Rim Countries

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Data was gathered from managers who are responsible for part or all of the information resources of selected large organizations in Korea, Mexico, and the US. The purpose of the research was to learn about the managers’ perceptions of their roles and the factors influencing their own performance and that of their units, and to explore the influence of country social culture on those perceptions. Information is provided about the organizations, the information resources executives, and such topics as strategic business planning, strategic planning for information resources, competitive advantage, outsourcing, and reengineering. The topics are integrated by means of a graphical model. The executives also offer suggestions for achieving successful management of information resources.

Recent years have seen an increasing awareness that information is a resource that can be used for strategic purposes (Porter and Millar, 1985). The person in the organization who has primary responsibility for managing this information resource has been labeled the chief information officer, or CIO (Benjamin, Dickinson, and Rockart, 1985). The CIO is typically seen as residing on the executive level, as a vice president or director, and often being included among the select group of executives who set the firm’s policies and map its strategies (Carlyle, 1988). However, all of the pictures that have been painted of the CIO position have not been rosy. Such influences as end-user computing, outsourcing, and downsizing are seen as eroding the scope of responsibility and the relative status of the position within the firm. Certain observers see the future role of the CIO as a dead-end career path and have concluded that the term really means “career is over” (Rothfeder and Driscoll, 1990). However, not everyone shares such a dismal view (Earls, 1996).

In spite of the attention, both pro and con, that has been focused on the CIO, there has been little study of how the CIOs themselves perceive their role and their future. Do the CIOs view their problems and challenges in the same light as the observers? Also, do the descriptions, largely written by US authors and published in US journals, apply equally well to CIOs in other countries?

In an effort to shed light on these questions, data was gathered from CIOs in Korea, Mexico, and the US. The findings provide an inside look at the CIO position and reveal how the role can vary from one country to the next. The findings provide a starting point for formulating prescriptive information management strategies that take into account not only particular organizational settings, but also particular national and cultural environments.

Information Resources Management

In the inaugural issue of the Information Resources Management Journal, Guimaraes recognized that information resources management (IRM) can be viewed narrowly to
include management of information or broadly to include all resources used to produce information (Guimaraes, 1988). McLeod (1995) supported the broad view with an IRM model showing the top-down management process, beginning with the firm’s executive committee, and consisting of strategic business planning and strategic planning for information resources. The information resources, consisting of hardware, software, data, information, human resources, and facilities, can be located in the central computing facility, in user areas, and in information centers.

Influence of Country Social Culture

The diagram in Figure 1 is an adaptation of the McLeod model showing the top-down management process. The process is performed within an organizational context, which is influenced by country social culture. Findings of studies aimed at the cultural influence have been mixed. Burn (1995), Palvia & Hunter (1996), and Ein-Dor, Segev, & Orgad (1993) found that a country’s culture has a strong affect on the diffusion, acceptance, and use of information technology (IT) by firms operating in the country. However, Niederman (1997) studied the influence of culture on reactions to new technology in Mexico and the US and found the differences to be neither deterministic nor exceedingly strong.

The line of research that has provided the foundation for many of the studies of culture in business is that of Hofstede who believes that organizations display value systems that include a component based on the organization’s dominant nationality (Hofstede, 1985). Four dimensions (Hofstede, 1980, 1985) of work-related values include (a) power distance or the level of acceptance of unequal distribution of power, (b) uncertainty avoidance or the level of comfort with uncertainty and ambiguity, (c) individualism/collectivism or the degree of preference for loosely knit or tight social frameworks, and (d) masculinity/femininity or the preference for achievement and assertiveness versus relationships and caring.

Although women have made significant contributions to the field of computing (Gürer, 1995) and have overcome many obstacles (Klawe and Leveson, 1995), they tend to be employed at lower levels (Baroudi and Igbaria, 1994-95). Therefore, the masculinity/femininity influence on IRM policy making and strategy setting at the executive level might not be discernible. The first three of Hofstede’s dimensions appear to offer the best opportunities for the study of the influence of country social culture on IRM and are therefore addressed in this study.

Power Distance. Hofstede defines power distance as a measure of the interpersonal power or influence between two parties as perceived by the least powerful of the two (Hofstede, 1980). Such a measure would apply to the relationship of the CIO to other executives in the firm. In a study of 39 countries, Mexico ranked high (position 2) on power distance and the US relatively low (position 25). For example, subordinates in Mexico would see their managers as making decisions autocratically and paternalistically, whereas in the US, managers would be viewed as making decisions after consulting with subordinates.

Uncertainty Avoidance. Firms attempt to cope with uncertainty by means of technology, rules, and rituals. Although Hofstede defines technology broadly, to include all human artifacts, he gives the example of automation of a process as a way of creating short-term predictability of outcomes. Planning and control systems are other examples. The study involving the same 39 countries positioned Mexico rather high (position 11) and the US relatively low (position 31) in terms of uncertainty avoidance. A Mexican manager would be characterized as one worrying about the future, fearing failure, and taking fewer risks. A US manager, on the other hand, would live day-by-day, have hope of success, and be more willing to take risks.

Individualism/Collectivism. More collectivist societies expect members to have an emotional dependence on their organizations. The US is regarded as regarding individualism as good and collectivism as bad, and this view is reflected by having the highest individualism ranking of the 39 countries. Mexico is in position 29. US managers, therefore, would tend to endorse “modern” points of view on stimulating employees; whereas, Mexican managers would favor “traditional” meth-
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