Small Business Attitudes
Toward Computers

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This study examines the attitudes of small business owners and their support employees toward computers. The results deal with attitudes regarding computer impact upon the firm, computer contributions to office efficiency, and the extent to which computers contribute to stress and discomfort. Owner and support employee attitudes are analyzed individually and comparisons are made. The study shows that both owners and support employees have positive attitudes about computers; both groups believe that computer technology has had a positive influence on their firms. In addition, owners see the computer as a contributor to efficiency and profitability. Although both groups also hold negative attitudes about computers, the level of their negative attitudes is far less than the level of their positive attitudes. Both groups, for different reasons, believe that computer technology creates stress and contributes to discomfort for users.

Researchers and information systems professionals suggest that small businesses are not using computers at a level that even approaches their potential. To explore possible explanations for low computer use, this research examines attitudes of small business owners and their support employees. Analysis of user perceptions about the computer should provide information that is valuable to small business owners as they plan administrative procedures and practices and select training experiences for themselves and their support employees. Such information should also assist those who deliver education and training for small business owners.

Review of Related Literature

A search of the literature sought confirmation that computers are being used in small businesses, the results of research about user attitudes, and the opinions of experts about user attitudes. Although no research that parallels the project being reported here was found, several studies that deal with attitudes among other groups were identified. Most of the research involving attitudes deals with the attitudes of managers and employees in large organizations. Research about how managers and employees use computers is more prevalent than research about attitudes. The following paragraphs review the literature, and the references list at the end of this report identifies the sources.

The implementation of computer systems by small business has been extensive. Studies by Dye (1991) and Rumberger (1986) document extensive use of computers by small business. Others (deJager, 1991; Barnett, 1990) have documented the need for computer
training and software/hardware improvement.

In an extensive review of research involving microcomputers and end user computing, Clark (1992) reported positive attitudes toward computers but underdeveloped uses of systems by end users who are non-technical managers. Clark’s research examined managers’ attitudes about their own computer use or their attitudes about the value of computers for their employees.

A Computergram International (1992) survey of United Kingdom senior managers sought to identify benefits, manager understanding of computers, and their attitudes about the value of computers. The study concluded that 56 percent of United Kingdom managers fully understand the benefits of computers, but only 38 percent believe that the computer has improved productivity. In a similar study, Maglitta (1991) surveyed non-technical top executives and concluded that the number of top executives using computers regularly in their work is increasing—56 percent in the 1991 survey, compared to 44 percent in 1989. Chief financial officers are the heaviest users (59 percent). A considerable portion of Maglitta’s research involved top management’s attitudes about the value of the central information systems (IS) units in their organizations. On this matter, they believe that the role of the IS group is increasing; but they do not perceive IS as the key to competitive advantage for their organizations.

Among research involving computers and learners, several studies have dealt with the attitudes of adult students and trainees. Gattiker (1992) studied the relationship between attitudes and (1) gender, (2) computer ownership, and (3) learning performance and concluded that an overly positive attitude about computers is an obstacle to learning performance. Koohang (1989) measured undergraduate student attitudes toward computers and concluded that positive attitudes toward computers are associated with computer experience, keyboarding skill, programming knowledge, word processing knowledge, and spreadsheet knowledge. Lewis (1988) administered the Adults’ Attitudes Toward Computers Inventory to 666 adult basic education students prior to introduction of computers into the learning environment and concluded that this population feels little threat from computer technology.

Numerous opinion writings (Patrick, 1990; Currid, 1992; Perin, 1992; Rifkin, 1991) have offered interpretations of end-user attitudes toward computers. Generally, they report increasingly positive attitudes about the value of computers. Various groups within organizations, such as computer “zealots,” computer phobics, and end-user support groups from central IS units, are identified as inhibitors to more positive attitudes toward computer use.

Information gathered from the review of literature was helpful in developing the instrument used in this study.

Research Design

Unlike previous research involving computers and user attitudes, this study focuses on small business owners and support employees. It examines their respective attitudes toward computers and office automation.

Problem

The problem of this research is an analysis of attitudes about computers and a comparison of the attitudes of small business owners with their support employees. Specifically, it seeks to compare perceptions related to three categories of attitudes: (1) value of computers in general, (2) effect of automation upon efficiency in office and administrative activity, and (3) concerns about office automation—both personal and for the firm.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to draw implications for the implementation of computers in small businesses and the education and training of small business owners and their support employees.

Methodology

Data were sought from small business owners and their support employees in three categories of Indiana businesses: law firms, real estate agencies, and casualty insurance agencies. Lists of prospective participants were compiled from three sources: (1) broker lists for Realtor Multiple Listing Services in selected Indiana cities, (2) attorney lists in the Indiana Legal Directory, and (3) insurance agencies listed in the National Underwriters Handbook-Indiana. Only insurance agencies that write property and casualty insurance were included. Random number tables were used to select participants from the lists. This process yielded 617 firms (189 law firms, 214 real estate agencies, and 214 casualty insurance agencies).

The review of the literature identified areas of