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THE IMPACT OF CIO INFLUENCE ATTEMPTS ON THE RELATIONAL SIDE OF ICT-BUSINESS ALIGNMENT (RESEARCH-IN-PROGRESS)

Abstract

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) researchers have been examining the social or relational aspects of ICT-business alignment for over twenty years. This research has examined not only the barriers to alignment, but also has suggested tangible ways to achieve relational ICT-business alignment. The research outlined in the paper briefly examines this research and outlines a study that will delve into the impact of Chief Information Officer (CIO) influence attempts on relational ICT-business alignment. A convenience sample of Irish CIOs will be interviewed on this subject and the data gathered will be subsequently analyzed. The preliminary results suggest that successful influence attempts build ICT-business alignment while unsuccessful influence attempts create misalignment.

Keywords: Alignment, IT Leadership, Influence, ICT-Business Alignment.

1   INTRODUCTION

The issue of executive influence is significant because managers in organisations spend considerable time and energy influencing their colleagues. The literature suggests that exerting influence is one of the most important management skills (Cohen & Bradford 1989, Gotlieb 1990, Keys & Case 1990 Kotter 1985). Reliance on formal authority to accomplish organisational objectives is no longer sufficient, especially in cases where the organisation is highly decentralized. The exercise of influence is especially significant for executives dealing with strategic decisions. For example, heterogeneous top management teams often engender conflict (O'Reilly & Snyder, & Booth 1993). Therefore, it is important to gain their acceptance and commitment (Nutt 1987); and involvement, endorsement, cooperation or consent (Korsgaard & Schweiger, & Sapienza 1995) when formulating and implementing strategies.

In this executive environment, CIOs are even harder-pressed to successfully exercise influence with their colleagues than other functional heads due to a variety of reasons. For instance, CIOs are still considered to be the "new kids on the block" in a lot of circles and therefore do not have as much influence as others such as the Chief Financial Officer. Others have suggested that part of the reason that CIOs are not influential with other executives is the lack of alignment between ICT and the business, much of which has to do with the relational side of alignment (Earl & Fenney 1994, Holmes 2006). As far as we are aware, no studies have explicitly examined the link between CIO influence attempts and the establishment of relational ICT-business alignment, which would presumably lead to enhanced CIO influence within organisations. Therefore, the basic research question addressed in this paper is: What is the impact of the exercise of influence by the CIO on relational ICT-business alignment?

The paper is organised as follows. Drawing on extant research, section two explores the concept of CIO influence and the related theme of ICT-business alignment noting the need for further inquiry that explores how CIOs influence indiviudals in groups within and across organsiations. Section three outlines the rationale for a qualitative approach to this inquiry and notes the role of interviewing therein. Section four addresses methodological considerations while the final section draws out a number of preliminary findings based on field-work that has been completed thus far.

2   RESEARCH CONTEXT

It has been argued that one CIO role is to persuade top management of the need to invest in information systems to support business objectives (Enns & McFarlin & Huff 2007, Lederer & Mendelow 1988). A critical requirement for this to take place is the CIOs ability to sell ICT systems services and products on a one-to-one, relationship-based foundation (Holmes 2006). However, a number of common barriers exist that make it difficult for the CIO to successfully sell these initiatives (Earl & Fenney 1994, Lederer & Mendelow 1988, Reich & Benbasat 2000). Some of these barriers include: top management's lack of awareness of the potential of ICT to support the business strategy; the IS function is often seen as an operational liability, not an asset; and the ICT function lacks credibility since many ICT projects continue to be over budget and late.

Fortunately, past research has also indicated a number of relationship-based practices that CIOs can use to overcome these barriers (Earl & Feeney 1994, Enns et al. 2007, Gartner 2006, Lederer & Mendelow 1988, Reich & Benbasat 2000). A summary of this work is reproduced in Table 1. For instance, CIOs have been encouraged to advertise successful projects (i.e., that were completed within time/budget and delivered business value), thereby establishing a trustworthy relationship with other

executives. Also, CIOs should communicate with and educate other executives and work on developing a shared vision for ICT by, among other things, using selective external success stories that indicate to top managers that the CIO understands the strategic direction the organisation is taking and how ICT can be used to leverage that strategic direction. Furthermore, CIOs should partner with TMT members to carry forward ICT initiatives in the best interest of the organisation and that are not seen as forwarding the CIO's career. Finally, CIOs must maintain good relationships with other executives by doing things like taking the time to explain new technologies and helping them understand how these technologies can assist them in their functional areas.

Authors → Practice	Lederer & Mendelow (1988)	Earl & Feeney (1994)	Reich & Benbasat (2000)	Enns et al. (2007)
Market ICT projects that are completed on time, within budget	√	√, market accomplishments selectively, establish and monitor a system that delivers	√, establish a trustworthy track record	√, establish a trustworthy track record
Communicate with & Educate other top managers	√	√, develop a shared vision for ICT	√, leverage shared domain knowledge	√
Interpret external ICT developments & success stories appropriately that demonstrate a business focus	√	√, application of technology in projects integral to business strategy	√, application of technology to business challenges	√, ICT initiatives aligned with business needs
Partner with users to sell new ICT initiatives	√	√, allow others to get the credit		√
Maintain good relationships with other executives	√	√, alliance building on a one-to-one basis	√	√, one-to-one basis

Note: A √ indicates that this is mentioned by the authors.

Table 1.   Practices That Facilitate Relational ICT-Business Alignment: A Partial Framework

If CIOs work on establishing relationships with other executives using, among other things, the practices outlined in Table 1, a stronger degree of relational ICT-business alignment can be achieved. One way a CIO can work on developing relational ICT-business alignment is through ICT initiatives that the CIO brings forward to the organisation for approval. The way in which this is conducted can lead to stronger relational ICT-business alignment. For example, if CIOs use external ICT developments and success stories that demonstrate a business focus, and this is embedded in preparation and execution of an influence attempt, this may not only lead to the greater likelihood of support for the initiative, but also enhance relational ICT-business alignment. Similarly, if CIOs partner with other executives on business-oriented ICT initiatives and there is a sense of ownership on the part of these other executives, ICT-business alignment of the relational kind can be enhanced.

Figure 1 below summarizes the CIO influence attempt process and the establishment of relational ICT-business alignment. The first step in the process suggests that the target of an executive's influence attempt must be assessed. For example, the CIO may choose a target executive to influence based on leveraging a good relationship with that executive or because the executive has resources required to

facilitate the CIO's initiative. The second step involves preparation for the actual influence attempt, including the content of the proposal and selection of appropriate influence behaviors. The final step involves the actual use of the influence behaviors chosen (see Enns et al. 2007 for a complete description of these behaviors). The outcome of the process may be favorable for the executive exerting influence (i.e., enhanced ICT-business alignment) or not (i.e., ICT-business misalignment).
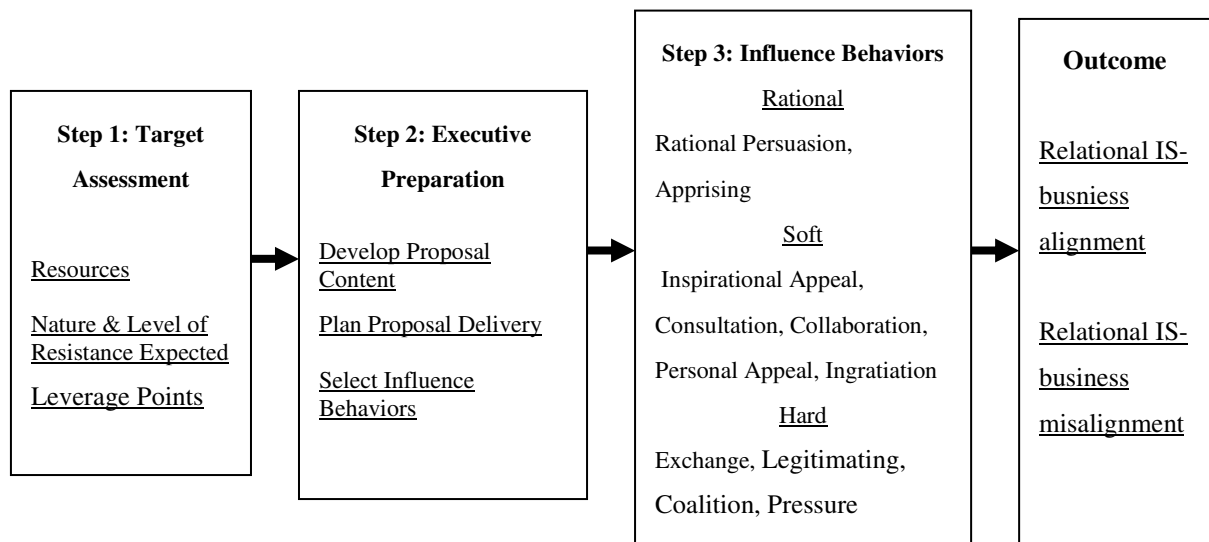
Step 1: Target Assessment	Step 2: Executive Preparation	Step 3: Influence Behaviors	Outcome
Resources Nature & Level of Resistance Expected Leverage Points	Develop Proposal Content Plan Proposal Delivery Select Influence Behaviors	Rational Rational Persuasion, Apprising Soft Inspirational Appeal, Consultation, Collaboration, Personal Appeal, Ingratiation Hard Exchange, Legitimating, Coalition, Pressure	Relational IS-busniess alignment Relational IS-business misalignment

Figure 1:   CIO Influence Process & Possible Outcomes (Adapted from Enns et al., 2007)

The research on which Figure 1 is based is incomplete in some ways. For example, the bulk of the CIO influence research conducted to date has been focused on lateral influence (i.e., CIO to business management peers). However, CIOs operate in very complex environments and they need to simultaneously influence a range of powerful individuals in disparate groups. For example, when the initiation and deployment of ICT proves problematic, it is almost certain that the factors which sustain and energize such difficultes are firmly rooted in dysfunctional dynamics between different managerial groups (McDonagh & Coghlan 2006, Schein 1996). Groups of particular importance in that regard include senior management, business management, project management, etc. (McDonagh & Coghlan 2006).

CIOs who seek to be highly effective in fulfilling their respective roles within organisations must therfore focus on influencing a range of individuals from various groups in relation to any major ICT-enabled modernisation and change programme (McDonagh 2006). Influencing individuals in one group at the expense of other groups will undoubtedly contribute to much disappointment with the deployment of ICT. For example, being effective in terms of influencing senior managers is no guarantee of eventual success with delivering effective change in the absence of influencing business managers and project managers to good effect also. In essence then, CIOs are required to be highly effective when influencing a range of individulas in groups both within and across organisations.

If functional, as distinct from dysfunctional, behaviour on the part of the groups noted above is central to the effective initiation and deployment of modern ICT systems in large complex

organisations, then it only seems prudent that any exploration of a CIO's effectiveness in terms of influencing others should focus on individuals in the context of disparate groups (McDonagh 2006). Understanding the behaviour of senior management is pivotal since it inspires change in relation to the deployment of modern ICT systems. Understanding the behaviour of business management is essential since it must engage with and deliver the agenda for change associated with ICT. Exploring the behaviour of ICT management is equally critical since it often exhibits behaviors that impede the effective deployment of modern ICT systems.

The persistence of ICT-business alignment as a critical issue in the management of ICT over the last three decades is evidence of both a recurring problem and a failure to produce robust theories that can have a fundamental impact on the world of practice (Caffrey & McDonagh forthcomimg, Watson 2007). In order to increase the possibility of generating robust theory that offers the potential to simultaneously transform practice, there is a pressing need to foster a more holistic approach to inquiry where the effectiveness of CIOs in terms of influencing others is attended to in the context of multiple groups both within and across organisations (McDonagh 2006). The main focus of studies on CIO influence thus far has been on business managers who are peers of the CIO (e.g., Enns et al. 2003). The next section partially addresses this gap by examining CIO influence from a multiple-constituency perspective (i.e., senior managers, business manager peers, and business managers who are not peers of the CIO).

3   SAMPLE & DATA GATHERING TECHNIQUES

In order to take a fresh look at relational ICT-business alignment, the study will examine these issues from a convenience sample of CIOs in Irish organisations. The convenience sample is a limitation of the research, however access to busy CIOs is difficult under the best of conditions. Entrée to CIOs in Irish organisations will be gained via personal networks in Dublin, Ireland. A number of CIOs have already taken part in interviews and more are scheduled. An interview methodology is being used since, at present, there are methodological gaps in the literature devoted to Chief Information Officer (CIO) influence. For instance, the main methodology that has been used in the small body of published CIO influence research has been surveys (e.g., Enns & Huff & Higgins 2003). The reliance on surveys has exposed gaps in our understanding of the processes and activities that CIOs engage in to influence other executives. For example, a number of CIOs did not complete surveys devoted to CIO influence in previous research since they stated that the survey questions did not reflect how they influenced other executives in top management contexts (Enns et al. 2003). Furthermore, in follow-up telephone conversations these CIOs were not able to readily articulate exactly what made their influence interactions effective. It could be that some influence behaviors currently found in surveys that deal with influence may not accurately capture top executive influence due to the often subtle, indirect style used in the top executive environment (Cohen & Bradford 1990). Therefore, the primary methodology of this research project is to engage in interviews which appear to be more suited to examine the nuances and subtleties of CIO influence in interactions with other executives.

The CIOs will be interviewed about their influence preparation efforts used to ensure alignment between their proposals and their organisation's strategic direction. In addition, the

interviews will also delve into the CIOs actual influence attempts; explore how these CIOs effectively influence other executives (e.g., senior managers, business managers who are there peers, business managers who are not there peers) about ICT initiatives; and if this enhances relational ICT-business alignment. Given the sometimes sensitive nature of the subject matter and Irish norms, the interviews will not be taped. However, notes will be taken during the interviews and transcriptions of these notes will be made immediately following the interviews, a technique successfully utilized in past research (see Eisenhardt & Bourgeois 1988, Silva & Hirschheim 2007, Walsham & Sahay 1999). The transcripts have been or will be reviewed and follow-up discussions will be held with the CIOs to fill in any transcript gaps. In addition, efforts will be made to gather archival data (e.g., internal documents used by CIOs in their influence attempts) to glean further insights into what actually transpired during specific influence attempts. For example, do the interviews and archival data provide the same perspective on how the ICT initiative is aligned with current business strategy? The methodology should be able to capture data that richly describe the connections between influence attempt preparation (such as the materials and evidence CIOs may find effective in support of the influence attempt), influence behaviors, and their effects on relational ICT-business alignment.

4   DATA COLLECTION PROTOCOL, ANALYSIS, & REPORTING

The interviews will be guided by a semi-structured interview protocol. At the outset of the interviews, the CIOs will be asked some basic questions about their managerial background, the internal organisational environment, as well as the competitive environment their organisations face. Other, specific questions include:

1. Describe a recent example of a new ICT initiative/system you wanted to move forward in your organisation.
2. How large was the investment (in 's)
3. Which executive(s) did you consider approaching re: this initiative?
4. How did you prepare for the influence attempt?
5. How did the executive react to the initiative?
6. Has this influence process led to better alignment between IT and the business, at least in the case of the executive involved in this initiative? How?

In addition, data will be gathered (either from public sources or during the course of the interviews) about the industry that the organisation is in, the number of employees it has, etc. This data will be used for comparison purposes to determine if CIOs operating in different contexts act differently.

The interviews and archival data will be analyzed using techniques similar to those described in Silva and Hirschheim (2007). When all the interviews are complete, the interview transcripts and other archival data will be organized and classified. NVIVO[1] will be used for this step as well as the next step. The second step will involve coding the document files. Finally, the last step will consist of writing narratives of the case studies and developing a framework. The framework will summarize the practices that CIOs of Irish organisations utilize to obtain relational ICT-business alignment within the context of influence attempts.

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[1] NVIVO is software specifically designed for the analysis of qualitative data.

5 PRELIMINARY RESULTS & CONTRIBUTIONS

The preliminary results appear to indicate that relational ICT-business alignment between the CIO and the other executives can either be strengthened or attenuated depending on the process and outcome of the influence attempt. For instance, if the CIO is able to successfully influence the other executive, better relational ICT-business alignment is achieved. This was evident in a number of cases. For example, in five of the interviews conducted thus far, the CIOs were successfully able to influence either a peer or their boss. This led to enhanced relational ICT-business alignment. The following quote from a CIO-peer interaction is typical:

"Sheila[2] had a say in selecting the components/features of the system. Initially, the idea had broad brush stroke elements to it in the sense that the idea was not fully shaped. There was plenty of opportunity for her to add input and ideas. The goal was to collectively arrive at a solution. She had ownership of the system, which naturally led to increased alignment."

This example is consistent with past research suggestions about how to develop relational ICT-business alignment (e.g., Earl & Feeney 1994, Enns et al. 2007, Lederer & Mendelow 1988). However, the results thus far suggest that unsuccessful influence attempts lead to damaging relationships between the CIO and the other executives. This in turn leads to ICT-business relational *misalignment*. In three of the interviews conducted thus far, the CIO was not able to successfully influence either a lower level manager, senior level manager, or peer. In all of these cases, the CIOs indicated that this fostered ill-will. The following quote explains one of these CIOs' perspective:

"The new system proposal damaged IT's relationship with the CFO. It did not establish credibility and left the CFO with the impression that these guys (i.e., IT) are gold digging."

During the conference, we intend to discuss the complete set of results after all the interviews have been conducted and the data has been analyzed with NVIVO. The limitations of the research will also be explored.

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[2] All names have been disguised to protect anonymity.

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