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GSS Facilitation:
Avoiding Intrusion in the Public Sector Task Domain

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Abstract

GSS is widely used and researched in the private sector; however, public sector GSS is lagging in both use and research. Public policy groups, legislative bodies, commissions and councils, etc., could all potentially benefit from GSS, yet their use of GSS is somewhere between infrequent and rare. Many of these groups might lack knowledge of GSS or access to the technology, but many of these groups might also be uncomfortable with the control that a facilitator has over the decision process. Before these groups can be comfortable with the prospect of improved decision-making through GSS, they need assurance that the facilitator will aid the decision process without biasing the outcomes of their deliberations.

In this paper, we introduce three dimensions of facilitator intrusion and present a position that these intrusion effects warrant further research within the context of the public sector. Specifically, we posit that in public sector contexts, where fair and impartial processes are critical to the acceptance of decision outcomes, the potential for facilitator bias might be inhibiting the use of the technology.

Introduction

With increasing use of group support systems (GSS), it is important to examine the impact of GSS on group member roles to better understand how GSS affects decision-making processes and outcomes. Of special importance in the public sector is the role of the GSS facilitator. In most GSS contexts the facilitator is essential for use of a GSS, but intrusion effects in the decision outcome may be undesirable or unacceptable (Griffith et al., 1998).

There has been evidence of widespread use of GSS in the private sector but relatively little research into the use of GSS in the public sector, e.g., policy groups, legislative bodies, state and city commissions and councils, etc. Before those groups can be comfortable with the prospect of improved decision-making through GSS, they need assurance that the facilitator will aid the decision *process* and not contribute decision content.

In this paper, we introduce three dimensions of facilitator intrusion, and present a position that these intrusion effects warrant further research within the context of the public sector. Specifically, we posit that in public sector contexts, where fair and impartial processes are critical to the acceptance of decision outcomes, the potential for facilitator bias can be an especially important concern.

Task-Oriented Groups In The Public Sector

Individual behavior in the group setting and the roles that group members play in meetings have been subjects of study for about 50 years. Benne and Sheats (1948) identified a number of roles that individuals perform during the group decision process. They combined these roles into task-facilitating, group-maintenance, and individual-dominant categories.

Task-oriented groups in public sector organizations are different from their private sector counterparts. Public sector organizations appear to be especially sensitive to the decision-making methods employed during meeting interactions. For example, Mahler (1987) suggests that the politics endemic to public administration contexts may have an impact on the effectiveness of decision-making techniques and provides evidence of this with the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). Limited examples of GSS use in the public sector exist. The County of Fairfax, Virginia, has used GSS for meetings where the eventual goal was to redesign financial processes. These meetings were used for activities such as brainstorming and ranking preferences (Higgins, et al., 1998). Also, the Institute for Community and Area Development at the University of Georgia has used this technology to help community groups find consensus on public policy issues (Knack, 1994). It is reasonable to question if the potential for facilitator bias might inhibit the use of GSS by decision-making bodies in the public sector.

Functions Of The Facilitator

Facilitation in GSS environments has been described as managing relationships among people, tasks, and technology as well as "running" the technology (Clawson and Bostrom, 1996). The overall purpose of a facilitator is to keep a meeting organized, controlled, and moving toward an effectual conclusion (Gallupe and Fox, 1992; Hamilton, 1992; Kay, 1994; Kiechel, 1988; Nunamaker,

et al., 1991). Furthermore, several specific facilitator characteristics have been identified in the literature (Clawson, Bostrom, and Anson, 1993), including promoting ownership and responsibility; demonstrating self-awareness and self-expression; appropriately selecting and preparing technology; listening to, clarifying, integrating, and presenting information; developing and asking questions; keeping the group focused on outcome; promoting understanding of the technology and technology outputs; creating and reinforcing a positive, and participative environment; managing conflict and negative emotions constructively; encouraging/supporting multiple perspectives.

Goals Of The Facilitator

The overall goal of the facilitator should be to guide the group through the decision-making processes as necessary to make a quality decision acceptable to the group. A primary motivation for a GSS session is to arrive at a group consensus. Therefore, reaching a decision is one of the goals of the facilitator (Gallupe and Fox, 1992; Seymour, 1993; Thornton, 1993). The facilitator must be sure that the decision reached is not in haste and that it pertains to the goals or objectives. Optimally the facilitator moves the group so that all members agree to the proposed action plan or decision made during the meeting (Donelan, 1993; Gallupe and Fox, 1992). The facilitator may use a voting tool to determine if there are any doubts or questions that might still exist at the session's close.

Intrusion Of The Facilitator

Ideally, the facilitator should not intrude or alter the results of a GSS session other than through an enhanced process (not through content). Results of a GSS session are often based on opinions or value systems of the group members. The facilitator, as a fellow human being, is not without opinion, especially with regard to decisions of public policy. Three specific concerns related to facilitator intrusion are discussed below: outcome-related, tool-related, and planning related.

The facilitator could compromise the integrity of the group's decision outcome in several ways. Nunamaker, et al., (1991) suggest that if the facilitator is not part of the decision-making group, he/she will not have the task or group knowledge available to other members, thus possibly inhibiting the facilitator's understanding of the meeting's topic. Alternatively, as the meeting leader, the facilitator is in a unique position to consciously or unconsciously introduce biases in the decision outcome.

The functions of the facilitator of a GSS session can affect the outcome of the meeting. For example, if the facilitator proceeds to the next phase of the decision-making process or GSS tool prematurely, the outcome of the session could be affected (Connolly, et al., 1990; Laplante, 1993). Watson, et al., (1994) suggest that the facilitator might get "tunnel vision" from using only certain parts of the system (GSS) in a particular way, thus keeping groups from utilizing the full potential of the system. Tool selection is a very important responsibility of the facilitator; inappropriate tools or timing can also consciously or unconsciously introduce biases in the decision outcome.

Another potential for intrusion is that the facilitator could become stuck in a routine way of performing GSS sessions (Watson, et al., 1994). The team might not reach its most effective potential if it does not have the opportunity to use certain tools or structures that would be relevant to its situation. The facilitator must be careful to use proper GSS processes by understanding and "reading" the group's needs (Laplante, 1993) and becoming flexible to the structure in which a session is facilitated. But flexibility can be misused, again, to consciously or unconsciously introduce biases in the decision outcome.

Conclusions

Facilitators of GSS sessions are used for the purpose of bringing a group to a high quality, consensus decision. The quality of the decision might be affected by the roles that a facilitator plays and how expertly he/she performs those roles. Because the team members may view the system negatively according to the skill level or intrusiveness of the facilitator, it is important for the facilitator to effectively fulfill the various roles while remaining objective.

Much more evidence of extensive use of GSS has been found in the private sector than in the public sector, suggesting that this technology might be underutilized in the public sector. One issue to confront is the potential intrusion of the facilitator in public sector decision-making, especially since group participants are often elected officials representing certain constituents. The facilitator's role is to simplify use of the GSS system and not to bias those decisions. Because the facilitator runs the meeting and selects when and how to use the technology, he/she is in a unique position to influence the outcome. Since the facilitator is not the decision-maker, it is critical that this influence not be biased. Additional research is recommended related to effective use of GSS in the public sector.

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