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Descriptions of responsibility for implementation: A content analysis of strategic information systems/ technology planning documents

Petter Gottschalk*

Department of Technology Management, Norwegian School of Management, Box 580, 1302 Sandvika, Norway

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Abstract

The need for improved implementation of IS/IT strategy has been emphasized in both empirical and prescriptive research studies, and responsibility has been identified as an important predictor of implementation. This research collected strategic IS/IT plan documents in Norway. Based on content analysis of the documents, descriptions of responsibility for implementation were found in 50% of the plans. In plans with such descriptions, responsibility was primarily concerned with systems ownership as a result of large projects. Out of 55 descriptions of responsibility, 32 were concerned with users, 13 with managers, and 10 with developers. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Strategy implementation; Implementation responsibility; Responsible persons; Content analysis

1. Introduction

The lack of implementation of formal information systems/information technology (IS/IT) strategy has become a major challenge to IS/IT executives [1]. In the research literature, implementation barriers were identified by scholars such as Earl [2], Galliers [3], Lederer and Sethi [4], and Premkumar and King [5]. In an empirical study of content characteristics of formal IS/IT strategy to predict the extent of plan implementation, descriptions of responsibility for the implementation was found to be the most important predictor [6].

* Tel.: +47 67 55 73 38; fax: +47 67 55 76 78.

E-mail address: petter.gottschalk@bi.no (P. Gottschalk).

Based on previous findings [6], this research is concerned with the following research question: “How is responsibility for implementation described in strategic IS/IT plans?” The research attempts to contribute to theory on implementation responsibility. This article presents results from a content analysis of strategic IS/IT plan documents in Norway.

The present article adds to the knowledge established in earlier research by investigating general findings from survey research [6] through specific content analysis of documents. Although earlier research indicates that the main factor to facilitate implementation of planned strategic change is identification and description of responsibility, this research identifies how responsibility is described in such plans. The ambition of this article is to discuss how implementation responsibility can be described in strategic IS/IT plans to improve the extent of implementation.

2. Responsibility for implementation

In this research, responsibility for the implementation is defined as the personal accountability for the implementation. Responsibility is a moral or legal obligation for which accountability and liability can emerge. A person can be held responsible for actions and results. Responsibility, as such, may take on two forms—negative duty, and positive duty [7]. Negative responsibility implies that action be taken due to threats, and is often motivated by loyalty, while positive responsibility implies that action be taken due to commitment.

In IS/IT strategy work, the planning staff (planners) is often composed of different individuals than the implementing staff (implementers). In the transition between these two groups responsibility is often lost. During implementation, the frames of implementers (those responsible for the introduction of the technology to prospective users) will influence the extent of implementation [8]. Most IS units do not have responsibility for key organizational results [9]. “Line managers are increasingly assuming responsibility for planning, building, and running information systems that affect their operation” ([10], p. 32). The plan should identify the MIS department’s actions necessary to expedite adoption of the plan [4]. A monitoring system to review implementation and provide feedback is an effective implementation mechanism [5]. For each benefit desired from the implementation, specific responsibility for realizing the benefit should be allocated within the business. Only when specific people are responsible for implementation parts, is implementation likely to occur. Responsibility has to be defined in such detail that responsible people take expected initiatives when problems occur during implementation. Hussey ([11], p. 19) recommends that “it may also be valuable to consider whether the chief executive responsible for the strategy is willing to accept the personal risk involved. If not, the strategy may be good but is unlikely to be implemented.” Implementation participants must accept responsibility for their own behavior, including the success of the actions they take to create change [9]. In the empirical research conducted previously by the author [6], responsibility was measured by a multiple item scale, as listed in Table 1.

Items in the survey instrument had the following sources: 1) responsibility for implementation on time [12]; 2) responsibility for implementation within budget [10];

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