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ENTREPRENEUR OR INTERMEDIARY: THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP MANAGER'S JOB

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Abstract

A new liaison role between Information Systems (IS) and users, the relationship manager (RM), has recently emerged. According to the prescriptive literature, RMs add value by deep understanding of the businesses they serve and technology leadership. Little is known, however, about their actual work practices. Is the RM an intermediary, filtering information and sometimes misinformation, from clients to IS, or do they play more pivotal roles as entrepreneurs and change agents? This article addresses these questions by studying four RMs in four different industries. The RMs were studied using the structured observation methodology employed by Mintzberg (CEOs), Ives and Olson (MIS managers), and Stephens et al. (CIOs). The findings suggest that while RMs spend less time communicating with users than one would expect, they are leaders, often mavericks, in the entrepreneurial work practices necessary to build partnerships with clients and to make the IS infrastructure more responsive to client needs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Of the many problems organizations face in the 1990s, the management of relationships between user groups and central Information Systems (IS) is widely recognized as a key issue (Henderson 1990). IS organizations have developed a variety of mechanisms to integrate the use and management of technology infrastructure into the mainstream of the firm. In particular, specialized middle-management roles for overseeing client relationships have evolved. These new roles are variously called relationship managers, account managers, client executives, or consultants.

Formal descriptions of the Relationship Manager (RM) role offer little insight into actual work practices, focusing instead on normative prescriptions such as "provide IT leadership," "build trust," and "deliver value." While the intent of the RM role is to build partnerships with user communities and provide strategic direction, little is known about how these activities are carried out and the degree to which RMs add value to the organizations that employ them. It is no surprise, then, that these roles are particularly vulnerable to "misrecognition" (Bourdieu 1977; Brown and Duguid 1991) and elimination during periods of organizational restructuring. While it is unknown how many people occupy the RM role, we do know that organizations create boundary spanning positions when interdependent work processes are deemed critical (Galbraith 1974), only to devalue and

eliminate them at some later point. In the 1970s, Nolan (cited in Ives and Olson 1981, p. 50) warned that the MIS manager was mistreated and used as "a scapegoat when things go awry." In the 1990s, the relationship manager may have a similar fate as middle management ranks become targets of organizational reform (Applegate 1994).

Our research is motivated by several underlying concerns. First, as the title suggests, we want to better understand the role of RMs in the changing business practices of IS departments. Are they intermediaries, filtering information and sometimes misinformation from clients to IS, or do they play more pivotal roles as entrepreneurs and change agents? Second, we want to understand the nature of day-to-day realities for RMs and the tradeoffs they must make to achieve their goals. Like others who have attempted to articulate the nature of specific managerial jobs, such as the CEO (Mintzberg 1973), the IS Manager (Ives and Olson 1981) and the CIO (Stephens et al. 1992), we employed a structured methodology while observing daily work practices. Our strategy was to collect and analyze rich data from four pioneers who are evolving the role of the RM.

2. RMS AND THE MANAGEMENT OF IS

Today, user communities are assuming more responsibility for the entire development and management life cycle of their own specialized systems resulting in a decrease in the size of the

central IS function and a shift in focus in IS from systems design and development to systems integration and consulting (Clark 1992). It is within the context of this movement toward more decentralized IS infrastructures that the role of the RM has emerged.

While the major expectation of this role is to increase interactions with users, its enactment can be quite ambiguous. First, unlike other IS managerial roles, RMs do not have subordinates or budgets and must operate within a networked team-based structure influencing peers through negotiation and making do with whatever resources they can muster. Second, since most RMs report to IS, rather than to a user group, an essential part of their job is to do whatever it takes to ensure that their clients positively value IS performance. Third, while it is a boundary-spanning role (Lyonski 1985; Michaels and Dixon 1994) created specifically to enable closer collaboration between client groups and the IS organization, how this collaboration can be effectively achieved is unknown.

Two models of relationship management can be derived from the literature (Table 1). As intermediaries, RMs act as go-betweens or information conduits between IS and users (Keil and Carmel 1995). Relationships with other organizational actors are less salient. Their work worlds are highly structured, requiring operational efficiency and information accuracy. The bulk of their time is spent interacting with customers to understand their IT needs and to respond to their day-to-day crises. The focus is primarily on systems development and maintenance processes and representing user needs to central IS on a system by system basis. RM success is reflected in successful projects and new systems that are well received. Keil and Carmel argue, however, that frequent problems arise with this role. Information can become distorted as it passes through intermediaries who are often inexperienced and who can easily misunderstand the complex business practices of their clients.

A second model views RMs as entrepreneurs or change agents. While they are expected to manage client problems as they arise, a preponderance of their work is more strategic and focused on integrating and reconfiguring interfunctional organizational processes. They are part of a complex web of relationships including their own teams, other RMs, data center personnel, external consultants, user IS organizations, and user line managers. Their work worlds are highly unstructured, requiring continual sensemaking and real-time interactive management (Applegate 1994). In the 1950s, Schumpeter (cited in Applegate 1994, p. 26) defined entrepreneurial work as consisting of "things that are not generally done in the ordinary course of business routine....The entrepreneur is the one who gets things done." Since they lack staff and budget, to obtain results they must work around traditional bureaucratic constraints. Routine work practices consist of experimentation, *bricolage* or tinkering (Levi-Strauss 1966; de Certeau 1984), and rule breaking (Brown

and Duguid 1991). Success is reflected in high customer satisfaction evaluations.

For individual RMs, it is likely that there will always be tension between the two models, as short-term tasks demand attention and preempt the time available for long-term reconfiguration and integration activities. However, we predict that RMs will be more successful as entrepreneurs.

3. METHODOLOGIES FOR STUDYING RMS

We employed a direct non-participant observation procedure similar to the one Mintzberg used to focus attention on the work practices of CEOs. Unlike surveys and diaries, observation leads to rich description of actual work practices. In this study, one author observed all RMs. Piloted, pre-printed forms enabled the quick capture of the start/end times of events, their type, purpose, location, number of participants, organizational roles, initiator, and other critical comments. If the RM left the office and attended meetings, the observer accompanied him. Each RM activity was classified into one of the following five categories that were established in Mintzberg's study as representative of managerial work:

1. **Scheduled Meetings:** These include meetings that have been prearranged, even if only a few minutes before the actual meeting.
2. **Unscheduled Meetings:** These include meetings that were not prearranged. They are informal and unplanned contacts in the RMs office, in the hall or in other people's offices.
3. **Telephone Calls:** All incoming and outgoing telephone calls were included whether they were completed or not.
4. **Desk Work:** This includes time alone in the office, sitting at the desk, most often working at the computer.
5. **Other:** This category includes travel time to the client site, breaks, and lunches.¹

In addition, copies of all incoming and outgoing paper and electronic mail were collected and analyzed.²

4. OBSERVATIONAL STUDY

In different organizations, RMs carry different titles and sets of responsibilities. To define the role for this study, to guarantee consistency across the sample, and to ascertain "best RM practice," we decided on five selection criteria. First, an RM had to be pioneering the role in the organization. Second, an RM had to be responsible for managing IS relations with specific clients,

Table 1. Two Models of Relationship Management

	Intermediary	Entrepreneur
Characterization of the role	go-between; conduit	change agent; engages in risky behavior
Focus of the role	short-term; operational level; systems development	long-term; pro-active; process and infrastructure integration and reconfiguration
RM/client role	RM represents the customer	RM serves the customer and builds partnerships
RM/IS role	Passes information to IS	Builds responsive IS infrastructure
Work environment	structured; RM between two entities: users and IS	unstructured; part of a complex web of relationships
Good job	successful projects; well-received systems	successful redesign of business capabilities; integrated interfunctional processes
Potential problems with role	distorted messages; lack of understanding	ineffective management of problems; lack of comprehensive service
Time spent	talking with clients understanding client needs	experimentation and learning; bricolage; making do; real-time interactive management
Performance evaluation	unknown	customer satisfaction evaluations

rather than having a vague mandate to serve customers in general. Third, managing IS relations with a set of clients had to be a full-time rather than part-time job. Fourth, an RM had to be classified as middle or upper-middle management with some authority or influence to get things accomplished. Fifth, an RM had to be in his/her current position for at least one year. We wanted to avoid observing those who were novices.

We selected four firms, representing four different industries, that employed RMs. IS management selected RMs that fit our criteria. Table 2 gives a profile of the RMs and the organizations included in the study.

5. THE FOUR RMs

After selection, the four RMs were mailed a short questionnaire focused on their backgrounds, job descriptions and work

organizations. Each RM was briefly interviewed and, then, observed for two days during the summer and fall 1994. Brief sketches of the four RMs follow.

5.1 The Telecommunications Company RM

TelCo is a regional telecommunications provider gearing up for the challenges of the "new communications" marketplace while in the midst of reengineering, downsizing, and attempting to become more customer-focused. IS is an internal division, viewed primarily as overhead, with significant pressure to reduce costs by consolidating data centers and moving to standard packages. Although several clients have their own IS departments, they continue to rely on central IS for network services, data centers, and large-scale application development and maintenance. TelCo has six RMs all reporting to a senior IS manager. Each RM heads a team which includes a service

Table 2. Relationship Manager Profiles

	TelCo	CompCo	ServCo	PowerCo
Company	Telecommunications provider	Computer manufacturer	Telemarketing service provider	Utility
RM/title	Consultant	Client executive	Account manager	Client support executive
Work hours/each week	55-70 hours	45-50 hours	45-55 hours	40-45 hours
Gender	male	male	male	male
Tenure in firm	27 years	12 years	10 years	15 years
Tenure in job	1 year	1 year	4 years	4 years
Background	Systems analyst	Technical support	Systems analyst	Data center operations
Billing value of client(s)	\$20-25M	\$83M	\$10M	\$30M
# Projects/clients	17 projects	2 clients	1 client	5 clients
Team structure	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

manager, an information advocate, an integration engineer, and a systems engineer.

Designated "Consultant," the TelCo RM informally held this position for three years before it was formally instituted in 1993. With a bachelor's degree in engineering, he started at TelCo twenty-seven years ago as a programmer/analyst. His proactive initiatives in representing client needs to IS and his networks of relationships made him an obvious candidate for the job. His primary responsibilities are to remain "in front of the client" and to do "whatever the clients want." He is co-located with his clients, a diverse set of administrative units including finance, legal services, human resources, real estate, security, and corporate communications. His performance is not measured formally, an element of his job that makes him nervous. However, there are several informal indications that he is doing an excellent job: the status of the seventeen projects he is currently executing for his clients are all on-time and the informal evaluations from his superior's conversations with his clients are all very high.

5.2 The Computer Company RM

CompCo is a large computer manufacturer currently focused on reengineering and downsizing. IS is a subsidiary of the organization and has several thousand employees serving divisions distributed around the globe. IS is viewed as a profit center and currently has a mandate to reduce its budget by 5% annually. While clients are free to choose their IS services, no internal client has yet switched to an outside IS provider. There

are ten RMs all reporting to an IS Director. The RM coordinates with Project Executives and the on-site Customer Support Representatives of data centers delivering products and services to his clients.

Designated "Client Executive," the CompCo RM has a bachelor's degree in Computer Science and an MBA that he completed by taking courses at night. His primary responsibility is to ensure IS performance on "cost, reliability and responsiveness." His clients are two large groups, corporate headquarters and the personnel group, both of which are located several miles away. He interacts primarily with the CIOs of his clients' IS departments who he reports are "really interested in numbers." His major challenge is to help users leverage their shrinking IS budgets. Central IS and RM performance are both measured through formal surveys and external consultant interviews. He received a rating of 93% last year, a score that is considered to be in the "stratosphere."

5.3 The Telemarketing Service Company RM

ServCo is a large telemarketing firm looking to diversify its customer base. IS is a subsidiary with about 1,000 employees and an annual budget of about \$155 million which is currently growing. It is viewed as a profit center and has a goal of 5% profit on all operations. IS has seven RMs, each working with an account team including an account executive, software developers and integration engineers. They work with software and hardware groups who provide a standard platform and common systems that are proven and trouble free. Clients are free

to procure services from any IS provider, internal or external. Many are beginning to develop their own internal IS units to provide specialized solutions.

Designated "Account Manager," this RM has been in his present position ever since the role was created in 1990. He has a degree in computer science and came to ServCo as a systems analyst in 1984. His biggest challenge is to sell standard business solutions when the customers prefer blends and non-standard solutions. He has one large client, located three hours away, who he visits every other week. IS performance is assessed through weekly polls and annual surveys. As the last annual survey produced low scores all around, IS personnel did not receive their bonuses. In response to concerns about the limited time RMs spend with their customers, monthly reports now include RM-client "face-to-face" time.

5.4 The Power Utility RM

PowerCo is a utility with multiple nuclear power stations. Stations are mandated to use IS, an internal centralized department, to keep them in compliance with a plethora of safety regulations. Safety is such a critical concern that end-user development is discouraged. To keep the IS budget below 3% of revenue, they have rationalized hardware and software investments and standardized user services.

Designated "Customer Support Executive," the PowerCo RM has a degree in computer science and started out as a mainframe programmer. Later, he became head of the Data Center and was appointed RM when the power utility became an autonomous entity in 1989. Currently, there are three RM positions and they plan to add another in the next year. The RM manages IS support to a mixed client base comprised of several power generating units, an external client and the international division, all of which are off-site. He meets with senior client executives at least once every quarter to discuss the IS plan. His current campaign is to help end-users focus on leveraging their current information systems rather than on acquiring the latest technologies. RM performance is evaluated yearly by clients in the form of customer satisfaction surveys. He has received high ratings each year.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The four RMs were each observed for two days, for a total of 60 hours, including:

- 14 hours during 15 scheduled meetings;
- 17 hours during 61 desk work sessions;
- 8 hours during 45 unscheduled meetings; and
- 8 hours during 86 telephone calls.

All RMs used Information Technology (IT) extensively to support their work, including telephone and video conferences. They had

PCS in their offices and they traveled with laptops and cellular phones.

6.1 How do RMs Spend Their Time?

Previous research has shown that low-level managers are involved in more activities per day and each is of shorter duration (cf., Ives and Olson 1981, p. 53). As predicted, RMs engage in more activities than do the highest level IS managers (CIOs) and each is of shorter duration (Table 3). The only category that significantly differs from this pattern is "other," representing significant travel time to client sites for three of the RMs. Below we examine the implications of scheduled meetings, oral contacts and interactions with clients for the RMs.

Scheduled Meetings. Because RMs have no subordinates, no time need be allocated to one-on-one supervisory meetings or large staff meetings, activities which constitute a large portion of the scheduled meetings of other IS managers (Figure 1). Significant amounts of time can then be opened up for more flexible, real-time interactive management activities (Applegate 1994). Most of their scheduled meetings have three people present (Table 4) and over half (57%) included the client (Table 6). According to Mintzberg, scheduled meetings with external participants provide opportunities to develop mutual strategies.

Oral Contacts. About half of RM time (49%) was spent in oral contact with others (Table 3). Despite the intention to create a new mechanism for communication, RMs are spending considerable time alone at their desks or traveling to client sites. Telephone calls and unscheduled meetings, activities in previous research that have been labeled interruptions, comprise 90% of their oral contacts and over half of their oral contact time (Table 5). These contacts are sources of new action and indicate a more unstructured work world where constant real-time management is needed. Much of this contact time was spent outside the office (48%) where RMs were more likely to initiate the contact than not (Table 5).

Interaction with the client. Since RMs spend most of their time in unscheduled meetings, phone calls and desk work, it is possible that much of that time is focused on the ad hoc needs of clients. However, the client is included in only 33% of unscheduled meetings (Table 6), most likely due to the lack of proximity. While RMs routinely use the telephone (Figure 1), only 29% of incoming and 29% of outgoing calls involve the client (Table 7). E-mail is part of RM deskwork, but only 18% of incoming and 13% of outgoing e-mail messages involve the client (Table 8). The greater time spent in flexible, real-time management did not produce significantly greater communication with clients. Approximately, 25% of RM time is spent with a client (Table 3), an improvement over the IS Managers of the early 1980s, but still significantly less than would be expected. Rather than acting as

Table 3. Activities per Day

Activity	CIOs Stephens	IS Managers Ives/Olson	RMs Iacono
Number per Day (range)			
Desk work	5 (2-7)	9 (6-17)	8 (0-12)
Phone calls	7 (4-10)	9 (6-14)	12 (0-24)
Scheduled meetings	4 (3-6)	5 (2-10)	2 (0-6)
Unscheduled meetings	7 (4-13)	16 (8-28)	6 (1-9)
Other	not given	not given	3 (1-7)
Tours	2 (0-5)	2 (0-3)	not taken
Total activities/day	25	41	31
Average Duration in Minutes (range)			
Desk work	29 (16-44)	9 (5-13)	17 (3-75)
Phone calls	6 (3-12)	4 (2-7)	5 (1-20)
Scheduled meetings	59 (44-73)	40 (22-103)	54 (26-121)
Unscheduled meetings	11 (8-17)	5 (4-10)	7 (1-34)
Other	6 (2-10)	6 (0-11)	33 (8-195)
Tours	6 (2-10)	6 (0-11)	not taken
Average duration	22	13	14
Percentage of Time (range)			
Desk work	28 (14-51)	19 (9-36)	28 (8-43)
Phone calls	9 (3-15)	9 (6-14)	13 (3-20)
Scheduled meetings	48 (33-56)	48 (30-67)	23 (10-32)
Unscheduled meetings	14 (9-28)	20 (11-29)	13 (6-21)
Other	2 (0-6)	2 (0-6)	23 (4-50)
Tours	2 (0-6)	2 (0-6)	not taken
Time Spent Outside of Office	66%	41%	46%
Time Spent with Users	58%*	8%	25%

*Indicates percentage of oral contract time spent outside IT, some of which may be with users.

Note: Adapted from Stephens (et al. 1992) Table 2. Ives and Olson is based on 3-4 days; Stephens et al. is based on 5 days; Iacono (Subramani and Henderson) is based on 5 days.

Table 4. Number of Participants in Oral Contacts

Size of Meeting	Scheduled Meetings			Unscheduled Meetings		
	CIOs Stephens	MIS Mgrs Ives/Olson	RMs Iacono	CIOs Stephens	MIS Mgrs Ives/Olson	RMs Iacono
Percent with 2 people	53	39	34	90	86	82
Percent with 3 people	15	9	52	8	9	18
Percent with 4 people	5	6	9	1	2	0
Percent with more than 4 people	27	45	14	1	3	0

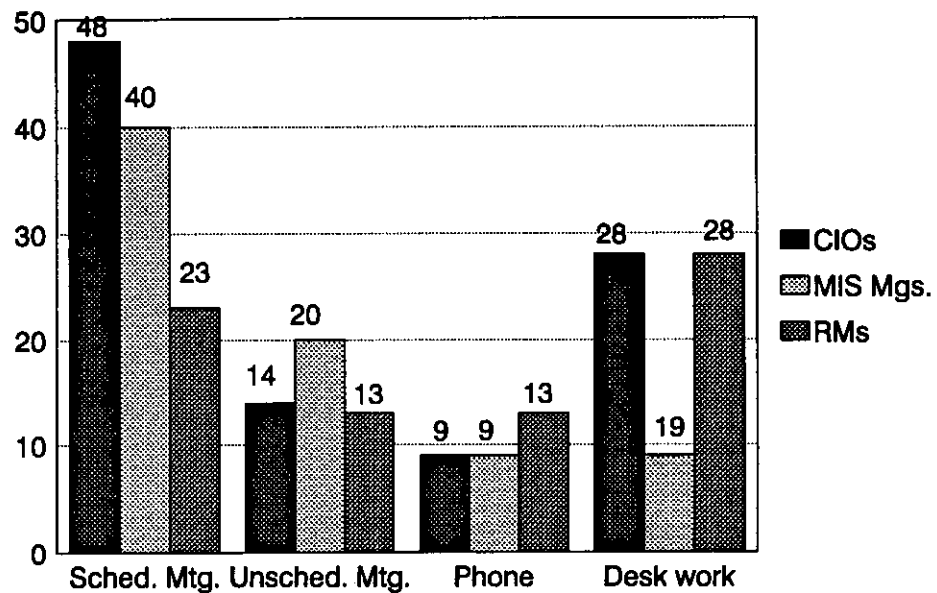


Figure 1. Percentage of Time in Work Activities

Table 5. The Nature of Oral Contacts

	CIOs Stephens		MIS Managers Ives/Olson		RMs Iacono	
Media: % of contacts/% of time						
Telephone calls	35	12	31	13	62	28
Scheduled meetings	22	66	17	57	10	47
Unscheduled meetings	35	20	54	30	28	26
Tours	8	2	not given		0	0
Location: % of contacts/% of time						
Manager's office	53	33	69	58	79	48
Other's office	9	6	13	7	15	42
Hall (or plant)	16	7	9	2	2	1
Conference/board room	10	26	8	26	3	9
Other (away from organization)	12	27	2	6	0	0
Initiated by: Percent of Total Contacts						
Manager	42		54		62	
Other party	40		38		33	
Chance (mutual)	9		4		1	
Clock	2		4		3	

Table 6. Participants in Scheduled and Unscheduled Meetings

	TelCo	CompCo	ServCo	PowerCo	All
Scheduled Meetings					
IS	54%	21%	0%	0%	19%
Client	0%	18%	87%	0%	26%
Both	46%	63%	13%	0%	31%
Other	0%	0%	0%	100%	25%
Unscheduled Meetings					
IS	25%	41%	100%	90%	64%
Client	72%	59%	0%	0%	33%
Other	3%	0%	0%	10%	3%
Total Time Spent Each Day*	120	23	33.5	48	224.5
% Total	21%	6%	6%	19%	13%
%Total - All Meetings	41%	30%	38%	29%	36%
% Total Meeting Time with Client	22%	23%	32%	0%	19%

*Note: Time is denoted in minutes.

Table 7. Nature of Telephone Use

	TelCo	CompCo	ServCo	PowerCo	All
Avg # calls per day	23	13	3	11	13
Incoming					
IS	51%	66%	0%	19%	34%
Client	21%	12%	0%	81%	29%
Other	28%	22%	0%	0%	13%
Outgoing					
IS	65%	88%	14%	67%	59%
Client	9%	13%	61%	33%	29%
Other	25%	0%	25%	0%	13%
%Total Time All Calls	20%	11%	3%	17%	13%

Table 8. Nature of Electronic Mail Use

	TelCo	CompCo	ServCo	PowerCo	All
Avg # msgs per day	74	9	10.5	N/A*	31
Incoming					
IS	70%	75%	95%	N/A*	80%
Client	30%	25%	5%	N/A*	18%
Outgoing					
IS	60%	100%	100%	N/A*	87%
Client	40%	0%	0%	N/A*	13%
% Total Time	7%	11%	N/A*	N/A*	4%**

*Data not available.

**Figure reflects a weight of 0 for PowerCo and ServCo.

intermediaries between clients and IS, RMs are communicating primarily with their large network of IS staff members.

6.2 What Is the Content of Their Communications?

Mintzberg grouped thirteen oral contact categories into decisional, interpersonal and informational purposes. We found that 10% of RM oral contact time was spent making decisions, 13% was interpersonal and 77% informational. This is an important aspect of their role, if as Applegate (1994, p. 27) has argued, "The key to success in entrepreneurial organizations is intensive, real-time, organization-wide information sharing." Further analysis of oral contacts found that 30% were focused on coordination issues, i.e., setting up meetings and other project management activities, 24% entailed the giving of information and 23% the receiving of information.³

To provide additional insight into the dynamics of RM work practices, we performed a qualitative analysis of the e-mail received and sent during the observation periods.⁴ While numerous routine reports and memos are distributed via e-mail, e.g., outages, customer satisfaction results, meeting minutes, newsletters, job openings, etc., we focus this analysis on the episodic e-mail communication among RMs, IS staff members, and clients. Two major themes emerged: building partnerships with clients and building responsive IS infrastructure.

Building partnerships with clients. RMs can not achieve their goals of client satisfaction on their own. One way to build client trust is to increase the visibility of IS backstage operations. For example, after a system crash at CompCo, the client was carbon

copied on internal IS reports of the ongoing mop up so he could see for himself the diligence of the project leader (who stayed at work each night until the system had stabilized) and the thoroughness of their procedures. Using electronic mail, RMs were able to involve clients in IS activities occurring at some distance.

Increasing the visibility of IS operations was not always well received by IS, however. RMs often had to oppose organizational norms to make this happen. At ServCo, a client wanted to have details of IT's procurement costs for items included in a bid. When the RM asked IS for the cost detail, the IS manager replied, "But surely what we pay for an item is commercially in confidence. The customer knowing the indiv [sic] prices might decide to do it for himself and we loose [sic] out." After the RM assured the manager that "he [the client] just wants to justify the spend on each of the items" to his management, IS relented and released the information.

Building partnerships with clients does not mean that IS interests are not important to an RM. An e-mail episode at TelCo illustrates how an RM forced his clients to act contrary to their own self interests but in behalf of the larger organizational good. The RM had discovered that his client's material management application was likely to exceed normal growth estimates over the next year. The RM notified his line managers by e-mail of the impending bottleneck for IS if increased processing and storage needs were not estimated accurately. The line managers initially were indignant because this meant an increase in next year's IS budget, but the RM persuaded them to estimate actual growth levels while he wrote up the Business Case and handled all the paperwork. As the cutoff date for budget submissions was past, the RM had to contact someone in the planning group to put in

an informal number, promising them a firm figure backed with a Business Case within two days. Later, in an e-mail message to a colleague, the RM reported that despite being "beaten up" by his client, he was successful in avoiding a bad situation for everyone.

Building a responsive IS infrastructure. Client satisfaction is a central feature in the worklives of RMs. As a consequence, clients are largely unaware of the extensive coordination efforts orchestrated for their benefit and the risks that RMs take to insure good service. Much of that work remains invisible, occurring backstage within the extensive network of RMs and IS staff. Goffman (1959) argues that when teammates are back-stage and out of the presence of their audience, much of their talk is focused on problems related to coordination or impression management, i.e., sustaining particular definitions of situations. Much of the e-mail sent and received by the RMs reflected similar concerns. At TelCo, the RM was interested in launching a new groupware technology, Lotus Notes, within his client groups. During a demo, the head of a high profile group stopped by and showed interest. The RM felt that the group would make a good demonstration site for the rest of the organization. Using e-mail, the RM made a number of inquiries to ascertain the feasibility of getting them set up with Notes. First, he contacted the group's IS support personnel to find out whether their Macs would need upgrading. Then, he contacted their data center and discovered there was enough disk capacity to accommodate their use of Notes. Conventionally, the group would have had to make a Business Case and include a budget, but because of longstanding relations with the data center, the RM was able to obtain some free short-term use while the group tried out Notes. Finally, the RM contacted the group head and let him know that setting up Notes for them would be quick and easy.

Sometimes the IS infrastructure was not smooth-functioning, however, and RMs had to confront the unresponsive behaviors of their team members. At TelCo, the RM was dumbfounded when he realized he had not been formally notified about data center personnel changes. Instead he heard about them through the e-mail grapevine. He sent an e-mail message to the data center manager explaining the negative fallout for client relations when the grapevine preempts official announcements and admonishing her to be more alert in the future. Such a confrontation constitutes risky behavior for RMs. In a follow-up message to a colleague, the RM wondered if his position was so secure that he could afford to chastise a manager two levels above him.

Many e-mail messages focused on impression management. Prior to a meeting with a client, the RM at CompCo and one of his team members discussed how they would handle an interaction: "I agree — there's no reason to volunteer this information without being prompted. However, like you, I will respond honestly if asked a direct question." In another situation, an IS staff member

e-mailed the RM and asked him to "grease the skids" with the client before another memo about cost changes went out. Senior RMs were routinely asked for advice by the more inexperienced RMs. In one such occurrence focused on the correct timing and format for presenting new ideas to a client, the senior RM responded, "how the info [sic] gets in front of the customer will be critical — I know that the... 'posters' on one system were a real annoyance to some customers, so I think we want to avoid that type of reaction...if the vehicle we use is right, I think this is worth doing." Given the importance of customer satisfaction in these organizations, the careful handling of client relations is not surprising. What is surprising is the extensive coordination and integration work required for IS to insure positive valuations of their work. Interactive, real-time management is not ad hoc. Instead it is quite well planned and choreographed.

7. CONCLUSIONS

We have investigated the actual work practices of four RMs in four different industries. While their behaviors varied, they all worked in unstructured, decentralized environments in which they were responsible for integrating and reconfiguring the overlapping processes between IS and client groups. As pioneers representing "best practices," they acted more as entrepreneurs than as intermediaries. They did not simply pass client information to IS. Instead they actively structured the IS organization and induced clients to see and understand backstage operations. This work favored neither IS nor client interests. Instead, it worked to the benefit of interfunctional efficiency and effectiveness. Contrary to expectation, most of their communication was with members of their own IS organizations, not with their clients. In part this is due to the fact that clients were not always co-located with their RMs, making unscheduled meetings less likely. However, the primary determinant is the amount of coordination and impression management work required to obtain high customer satisfaction evaluations.

As entrepreneurs, RMs initiated contact, took risks, confronted situations, experimented to compose temporary solutions, and sometimes blatantly disregarded organizational norms, both with IS and their clients. Similar to Drucker's (1974) argument about entrepreneurs, the RM "has to slough off yesterday and to render obsolete what already exists and is already known...has to create tomorrow." It is unfortunate that much of their work remains invisible to the rest of the organization. As part of the swollen middle and without increased recognition for their positive influences on organizational change, their jobs are easy targets for downsizing and restructuring.

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9. ENDNOTES

1. Mintzberg (1974) included the category "tours." They were not included here because every RM excursion from the office resulted in a meeting.
2. All observations were validated by the RMs through review of an early draft of this paper, formal presentations of the data, and, at one site, a feedback session with all RMs. While they were not surprised by the results, they provided critical understandings which are included in this paper.
3. Other categories included 17% technical consultations; 6% planning; and 1% day-to-day operations.
4. All e-mail sent and received by the RMs during the observation period were analyzed using an inductive technique known as open coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Episodes, i.e., a thread of e-mail messages focused on the same subject, were categorized by content.