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Chief Information Officer Influence: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract - Effective initiation and execution of IS/T projects and systems has become a critical core competence for many organizations. One key to this is the influence of the senior executive responsible for IS/T, often called the Chief Information Officer (CIO). This paper explores the notions of influence and influence behaviors, top executive influence behaviors, how CIOs influence peers in the top management team, and reports the findings from an exploratory study. Contrary to some of the extant literature, the findings suggest that CIO influence can vary both in terms of how it is utilized and its effectiveness. Furthermore, CIO influence is exercised for the initiation of information systems projects, the implementation of these projects, and on overall business strategy. The paper concludes with a series of observations that summarize the findings.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we examine the ways in which Chief Information Officers (CIOs) exercise influence within their organizations in order to further their objectives. While considerable research has been conducted on the question of individual influence behaviors in other domains, to our knowledge this is the first systematic examination conducted at the CIO level within the ranks of information systems professionals.

In order to set the context of the study, we begin with a brief discussion of the nature of influence, in particular the difference between influence and authority. We also discuss some of the key literature in the influence behavior field upon which our study drew. We then present our field study, which relied upon in-depth interviews with 14 CIOs and peers.

II. THE NATURE OF INFLUENCE

Broadly speaking, influence is the capacity of an individual to produce effects on others. The act of exerting influence is termed "influence behavior."

A useful approach to conceptualizing influence is to contrast influence with authority. Authority is the legitimate exercise of decision-making that affects the behavior of individuals in the firm [36]. Thus, subordinates agree without question to the decisions of a superior and are willing to set

aside any judgments about the suitability of a superior's request or behave as if they agreed with the superior. On the other hand, influence implies that subordinates do not set aside their critical faculties or disposition to behave based on their desire [4].

A similar view suggests that authority implies indiscriminate acceptance of superior directives [38, 39]. Furthermore, authority is embedded in or designated across hierarchical management positions. However, Tannenbaum [38] also recognizes that a superior relies on advice or information from subordinates. Thus, a person exerts influence by offering information, providing advice, persuading, making suggestions, and the like. Nonetheless, that person may not exercise authority when the final decision does not rest with him/her. Finally, authority flows downwards, whereas influence can be multidirectional. Thus, individuals have the capacity to influence superiors, subordinates, or peers.

"The dispersion of influence permits actors from all levels in the organization to make their expertise felt in specific decision areas, while final approval of their recommendations rests with the higher echelons." [3, p. 31]

This distinction between authority and influence is important in situations where CIOs do not hold formal authority over the person being influenced. Therefore, they must rely on influence to impact persons in these situations.

III. PREVIOUS INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR RESEARCH

Influence is exercised via numerous influence behaviors [18, 20, and 44]. One of the first studies of influence behaviors was conducted by Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson [18]. The authors examined what they called influence tactics, by which the 'agent' (i.e., initiator) of an influence attempt tried to gain something from the 'target' (i.e., recipient). Two studies were reported; in both cases the subjects were part-time graduate students who were lower level managers. In the first study, the participants were asked to describe, in an essay, how they used influence to get their way with a superior, subordinate, or co-worker. Content analysis was used to identify 370

influence tactics, which the researchers categorized into 14 groups.

In the second study, the 370 influence tactics were drawn upon to create a 58-item survey, which was administered to a second group (n = 754) of lower-level managers. Some of the managers responded with respect to their superiors, others with respect to their co-workers, and a third group responded with respect to subordinates. A factor analysis revealed eight dimensions of influence. The researchers labeled these eight dimensions ingratiation, rationality, exchange, coalitions, assertiveness, upward appeals, sanctions, and blocking.

In a follow-up study, Schmidt and Kipnis [34] studied the upward influence of managers when in pursuit of organizational and individual goals. One hundred and thirteen managers completed a survey that described, among other things, the frequency with which they attempted to influence their superiors for organizational and individual reasons. It was found that managers who exercised influence for organizational objectives held positions of power in their organizations, and that line managers exercised upward influence to achieve individual goals less often than staff managers did.

The managers also commented on the strategies they used to influence their superiors. The influence strategies studied included ingratiation, exchange, reason, coalition, assertiveness, and upward appeal. One of the main findings was that influence strategies varied as a function of the goals (i.e., individual or organizational) being sought. For example, managers who sought personal benefits often used exchange and/or coalition strategies. In contrast, those who were attempting to improve their superiors' assessment of their job performance used ingratiation and assertiveness.

Yukl and Falbe [42] conducted two studies to replicate and extend Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson's [18] examination of influence tactics. For these studies, they developed a new survey instrument. Their instrument reduced the number of items devoted to Kipnis and Schmidt's [19] "sanction" dimension and relabeled it "pressure" tactics. Two additional dimensions, inspirational appeal and consultation, were added based on Yukl and Falbe's [42] review of the managerial leadership literature.

In their studies, the authors obtained both self-reports as well as reports from the targets of influence, a departure from Kipnis, Schmidt, and Wilkinson [18], who had just examined self-reports. While Yukl and Falbe found that there were some differences due to the direction of influence, the relative frequency of use for the eight influence tactics was very similar across conditions. Rational persuasion and consultation were the tactics used most frequently, regardless of the direction of influence.

Yukl and Falbe further refined their instrument, as reported in Falbe and Yukl [10]. This version of their instrument is based on nine influence tactics, or behaviors, derived from their previous work, reference to Schriesheim and Hinkin's

[35] study, as well as the development and testing of a survey specifically designed for the targets of influence [43]. The nine behaviors are defined in Table I.

TABLE I
INFLUENCE BEHAVIORS & DEFINITIONS [44]

| Influence Behavior | Definition |
|--------------------------|--|
| 1. Rational Persuasion | The agent uses logical arguments and factual evidence to persuade the target that a proposal or request is viable and likely to result in the attainment of task objectives |
| 2. Inspirational Appeals | The agent makes a request or proposal that arouses target enthusiasm by appealing to target values, ideals, and aspirations, or by increasing target self-confidence. |
| 3. Consultation | The agent seeks target participation in planning a strategy, activity, or change for which target support and assistance are desired, or is willing to modify a proposal to deal with target concerns and suggestions. |
| 4. Ingratiation | The agent uses praise, flattery, friendly behavior, or helpful behavior to get the target in a good mood or to think favorably of him or her when asking for something |
| 5. Personal Appeals | The agent appeals to target feelings of loyalty and friendship toward him or her when asking for something. |
| 6. Exchange | The agent offers an exchange of favours, indicates willingness to reciprocate at a later time, or promises a share of the benefits if the target helps accomplish a task. |
| 7. Coalition Tactics | The agent seeks the aid of others to persuade the target to do something, or uses the support of others as a reason for the target to agree also. |
| 8. Legitimation | The agent seeks to establish the legitimacy of a request by claiming the authority or right to make it, or by verifying that it is consistent with organizational policies, rules, practices, or traditions. |
| 9. Pressure | The agent uses demands, threats, frequent checking, or persistent reminders to influence the target to do what he or she wants. |

IV. SENIOR MANAGEMENT INFLUENCE RESEARCH

Few studies of influence in the organizational behavior literature have systematically examined top executives' influence behaviors. Most of what is known this topic comes from anecdotal evidence [23, 6, and 32]. While the studies which have been done suggest that some influence behaviors are more effective than others are [e.g., 23], the studies' authors acknowledge the limited generalizability of their findings. In particular, studies conducted with middle-level managers,

common in this arena, are not generalizable to top executives [32].

In their review of research on strategy implementation, Finkelstein and Hambrick [12] discuss several implementation realities. For instance, heterogeneous top management teams (TMTs) often engender conflict [31]. Therefore, it is important to gain their acceptance and commitment [8, 29]; and involvement, endorsement, cooperation or consent [21]. Important considerations in obtaining cooperation and commitment are social integration, which is associated with cooperation [30], and TMT consensus, which promotes commitment [8, 13, and 16]. Furthermore, it appears that persuasion and participation are better forms of facilitating implementation than edicts [28].

V. CIO INFLUENCE BEHAVIORS

Past IS practitioner oriented research have found that the top IS/T executives have not been very influential. Reasons for this include the relatively new position that Chief Information Officers (CIOs) hold in the top echelons of management [2]. After all, the title and position of CIO has only been around for 15 years and many still view this position as “the new kid on the block.” In addition, many have suggested that CIOs have failed to deliver on projects, which weakens their ability to influence the organization. Finally, another reason for this lack of influence, salient for this research, is that many CIOs have been viewed as too technically oriented and still have trouble relating to managers with different backgrounds than theirs [1, 7, and 26]. Thus, from this perspective, CIOs are reluctant to engage in interpersonal interactions and do not vary their influence behaviors much.

On the other hand recent research suggests that *some* CIOs are quite influential in their organizations [9]. A number of reasons account for these CIOs’ increased influence in organizations. This includes the facts that some CIOs have an intimate knowledge of the business and industry they are working in [9]; have developed critical relationships with other top executives in their firms [9]; utilize a wider range of influence behaviors [11]; and are willing to discard influence behaviors that are not effective [11].

A few researchers have identified interpersonal skills that are important for CIOs when trying to influence others in the organization. Effective CIOs tend to be aware of the types of influence behaviors required to influence specific individuals. They also make clear plans to obtain their support [9, 11]. Persuasion skills have also been identified as necessary to accompany the traditional technical skills and business knowledge required of CIOs [24].

There is little research on the topic of types of influence behaviors used by CIOs. This sparse literature has only

discussed a few specific influence behaviors at the CIO’s disposal. For example, coalition tactics are used to: convince executives of the potential strategic impact of IS [24]; gain the acceptance of other executives [37]; achieve a shared vision of IS’ s role in the organization [9]; and create a positive impression of the IS department [11]. Another tactic associated with CIOs’ influence behavior is rational persuasion, which is used to: identify new uses of IT [33]; and create a positive view of IS [9, 11].

Some organizational theory literature has serendipitously examined the influence behaviors of IS managers and executives in general studies of managers and top executives. These data have been gleaned through reports of interviews conducted with IS executives. The available evidence suggests that IS executives do not always fare well when exercising influence in organizations. The case reported by Kotter, of a manager of an IS department, is indicative [22]. The IS manager tried to use an exchange tactic with another middle level manager and was ‘thrown out’ of the middle-level manager’s office. However, it is unclear whether IS executives fare any worse or better than other executives when they exercise their influence.

The anecdotal evidence of CIO influence behavior does not specifically explore the influence tactics CIOs use when they want to initiate new IS projects. Also, it is not clear if CIOs use more influence behaviors than just rational persuasion, coalition building, and exchange. This suggests that an exploratory study designed to examine CIO influence behaviors is warranted.

The strategy implementation research contributes to our understanding of CIO motivation for engaging in interpersonal influence activities. First, the CIO can facilitate commitment and cooperation by being socially integrated with TMT members and by obtaining TMT consensus, which is harder to do when TMT members are heterogeneous. Second, if a CIO wants an important proposal implemented, the CIO requires the commitment of others in the TMT. If the CIO does not obtain it, the project will be difficult or impossible to implement. Finally, it is important for CIOs to use appropriate behaviors. ‘Hard tactics’ such as edicts often do not seem to work as well as persuasion and participation [9, 40].

In addition, the IS literature has not generally explored the role of the CIO in the implementation process. Keen’s [17] discussion of the ‘fixer’ role is an exception. The ‘fixer’ refers to the senior IS executive who has control over resources used to bargain with others and is required for successful IS project implementation. Keen [17] also suggested tactics to overcome resistance by organizational participants. These include: 1) bargain with IS department resources; 2) co-opt opposition; and 3) establish personal credibility. Again, a more in depth study of CIO influence behaviors may shed more light on the implementation role played by CIOs.

Since no broad-based studies of CIO influence have been conducted, little is known about this topic. Thus, we

performed some initial fieldwork with top executives to examine the issues inherent in the study of CIO influence. The original intent was to examine CIO power and influence broadly. However, as the study progressed, more emphasis was placed on how the CIO influenced other TMT members with respect to the *initiation and implementation of IS projects*, and with respect to *overall business strategy*. The interviews provided initial insight into CIO influence behaviors, influence outcomes, and implementation success. The rest of this paper reports the findings from this study.

VI. A FIELD STUDY OF CIO INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR

A. Methodology

Yukl's [44] theory of power and influence, and other pertinent literature, were employed to create a focused interview protocol subsequently used in 14 interviews with CIOs and other non-IS senior executives. Two interviews were conducted in each of seven North American companies. The non-IS executives were all part of the organizations' TMTs, as were the CIOs. The CIOs were initially contacted and they selected a non-IS executive who was a key business partner.

The interviews lasted from one to one and a half hours. The Appendix provides an abstract of the interview protocol used. Each interview was recorded (save one) and transcribed. The transcripts were sent to the executives to ensure that they accurately reflected the executives' responses to the questions. Appropriate corrections were made to the transcripts as a result of the executives' feedback.

In terms of reliability, the responses to the questions asked during the interviews were relatively stable [27]. The executives responded similarly to the same questions even though the circumstances varied (e.g., different organizational conditions). In addition, content validity was assessed when we determined whether the questions asked were consistent with the executives' perceptions of CIO influence [41]. Content validity was demonstrated since the executives never stated or implied that the questions were inappropriate for the CIO influence context.

The data were categorized into appropriate clusters, reviewed for patterns, and summarized for presentation [5]. The final analysis consisted of the notation of patterns and themes, and searching for contrasts and comparisons [25]. The following sections describe the findings from the field interviews.

B. Findings

1) *IS Project Initiation*: A variety of influence approaches were employed by the CIOs to bring initiatives forward for organizational approval and implementation. Most commonly:

Most CIOs "presold" their ideas to other managers on a one-on-one basis

All explained initiatives in non-technical terms

All kept others well informed about project progress and changes

Most listened carefully to their peers and other managers to understand different perspectives and overcome objections

The CIO of a financial services company indicated that "I talk things out and understand the other executives' points of view. I also make sure that their objections are not due to a communication breakdown."

The CIOs we interviewed rarely brought initiatives to the top management group unless they were "pre-approved." The CIO of a natural resources company suggested that he always got others involved when contemplating a new IS/T initiative. He said that, "In our company you do not surprise anyone, or create conflict. You never go forward with a recommendation to the top management group unless you know it will be accepted."

However, there were some influence behaviors that differed notably across the CIOs interviewed. We obtained a perceptual assessment of CIO effectiveness from the peers we interviewed; the more effective CIOs, in the judgment of the peer executives:

Used consultation combined with rational persuasion

Made specific plans to influence specific individuals

Demonstrated the viability of a project through prototypes

Relied less on external endorsement and active higher-level support

Built relationships, partnerships, and networks with other executives which were used to commit these executives and other key individuals to projects

A CIO from the financial services sector told us that when he started working for the company "...IT was considered a cost center. However, due to my relationships with others in the organization, and my track record of delivering on projects, IT is now considered an investment center."

These findings were consistent with more recent anecdotal evidence concerning aspects of CIO influence and success in other situations. For example, CIOs have elsewhere been observed to enlist support from peer managers to indirectly present their views of IS to targets of influence [11].

2) *IS Project Implementation*: Individual commitment to change has been demonstrated to predict the success of IS project implementation [14]. The type of commitment that Falbe and Yukl [10] identify as being important is indicated by the target's enthusiasm, demonstration of unusual effort, and persistence. The commitment of important stakeholders,

usually the heads of the functions most affected by the IS project, was identified as crucial for ultimate implementation success in the interviews .

CIOs educate others about the potential strategic impact of IT [24] in the formulation of IT strategy, and exhibit consultation behavior to communicate key IT issues to others [9]. Our field interviews found these same tactics being used for successful IT project implementation.

In general, all the CIOs used interpersonal influence to implement IS projects. However, the more effective CIOs, in the judgment of the peer:

- Attempted to tailor the influence behavior being applied to the individual target
- Had the ability to vary their influence behaviors and styles to suit the situation
- Knew when to stop trying to persuade someone

These findings contradict previous literature that suggested CIOs generally were reluctant to engage in interpersonal influence and did not vary their behaviors [1, 7, and 26]. Instead, a complete gamut of influence behavior styles was observed that ranged from little variation to proactive experimentation . This represents a key finding of the current study.

3) *Business Strategy*. Every CIO we studied clearly exerted an impact on his organization's strategic decision making. Some had influence throughout all stages of a new strategic initiative (i.e., from the start of a new strategic direction or idea to its implementation) some became involved at the feasibility / analysis stage. In general, more effective CIOs brought forward strategic initiatives that were consistent with the current business strategy. Examples of these CIO activities included:

- Initiated and developed a new customer information system
- Introduced the Web component of a new range of products
- Introduced a new strategic planning methodology
- Provided opinions about the feasibility of new strategic initiatives
- Created a new systems vision, which became a major shaper of the business plan

The CEO of a leasing company suggested that when the new systems vision for the company was introduced it had a major impact on the business strategy because "...the only way to enhance our products is to find easier ways for our customers to do business with us. This tends to involve technological solutions represented in the systems vision because the easiest way to enhance our products is to do away with written contracts and do everything electronically."

Previous literature predicted that more CIOs would be placed in positions where their influence could be felt [e.g., 2 and 37]. Clearly, the findings from our study confirm this view.

VII. SUMMARY

The study's findings enhance our understanding of the relationships between CIO influence and IS project initiation, IS project implementation, and business strategy. For instance, CIOs in general exhibited a consistent approach to bringing forward IS initiatives to the TMT. This pattern revealed that each executive would be approached independently to discuss the initiative. Then, after informal approval was gained, it was brought before the entire TMT group for formal approval. The consistency of this pattern suggests that other CIOs should seriously consider this approach if and when the opportunity to initiate a strategic IS project presents itself.

Furthermore, it appears that successful CIOs possess a sophisticated understanding of the role of effective influence, and possess the skills necessary to execute influence properly. Specifically, the CIOs and their peer executives stated that some CIOs have a greater ability than others to vary their influence behavior to accommodate the situation. An exclusive reliance on rational persuasion (the most common CIO influence behavior) is not effective in all cases, especially in the context of strategic projects. As well, the respondents made it clear that some influence behaviors are more effective than others, in general. For example, rational persuasion combined with consultation appears to be more effective than persistence (a form of pressure).

There were some limitations to this study. For example, the CIO chose the non-IS executive to be interviewed. This could have introduced bias in the responses and results. However, care was taken to conduct the interviews separately and the CIO and non-IS executives only had access to their own transcripts of the interviews. Additionally, there was only one informant from the TMT in every organization that commented on the CIO's influence behavior. This also could have introduced bias in the responses and results. However, given the busy schedules of top executives and limited resources, it was not practical to conduct more interviews.

CIOs today are involved in shaping and supporting business strategy. They exert their influence in more areas than IS/T projects. Consequently, it is important for CIOs to understand the nature and use of influence in organizations. Having power and effectively exercising influence are preconditions for accomplishing tasks in organizations [15]. The CIO who exercises influence well can potentially be more effective in future IS strategy planning, IS implementation, and business strategy planning efforts.

APPENDIX

Sample CIO Interview Questions

Background

- 1) Briefly describe your employment background & training.
- 2) How long have you worked for this organization? In what roles? How long have you worked in your current capacity?
- 3) Are you a member of the top management team (TMT)?

Influence Behaviors

- 1) From your experience, when are different influence tactics appropriate?
- 2) What influence tactics do you commonly use to achieve organizational goals?

Outcomes of Influence Attempts

- 1) Under what circumstances do TMT members commit to or resist your proposals?
- 2) Could you provide an example of a successful proposal or project and an unsuccessful one?
- 3) Can you generalize from these two incidents?

Strategic Initiatives

- 1) Could you provide us with one or two examples of how you attempted to influence the organization's business strategy?
- 2) What strategic initiatives would not have happened in your company if it were not for you?

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