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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 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. 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 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, 1992).
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.
References


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