

# CIO Political Behavior Across Cultures: US, India, Italy, Israel

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## Abstract

Much of what CIO's do can be defined as "political", and, yet, there is relatively little discussion of the political aspects of the CIO role in the MIS literature. The study is based on a model of political behavior which links the political behavior of CIO's with cultural dimensions. Combining in-depth interviews with survey data, the study compares the self-reported political behavior of CIO's in four cultures: the US, India, Italy, and Israel. As this is research-in-progress, the concluding sections discuss suggestions for future research.

## Keywords

cultural dimensions, political behavior, political strategies and culture model, system development life cycle, upper echelon theory

## Introduction

The Chief Information Officer (CIO) role is often referred to as the most challenging role for managers. There are four characteristics of the CIO role that make it particularly challenging. First, when used incorrectly, information systems can lead to the downfall of the organization. Second, designing and implementing systems requires totally different skill sets than maintaining systems. Third, CIO's are responsible for information systems in the whole organization, including supervising the actions of users not directly under their control. Finally, the CIO, as a manager of change is potentially in conflict with the preservers of the status quo in the organization.

Given the complexity of the CIO role, there is an implicit acknowledgement in the literature that CIO's engage in "influence attempts" and, therefore, can be seen as acting politically (Enns, Huff and Higgins, 2003). There is also some discussion of the impact of culture on CIO's behavior. However, the question of how CIO behave politically and how culture impacts their political behavior has not received sufficient research attention to date. It is the goal of this paper to address this question conceptually and offer suggestions on future empirical research in this area.

The research that is presented in the following sections focuses on three major research questions (with the requisite discussion leading to the research question below):

How does system development life cycle stage determine the type of political strategy employed by the CIO?

How do stakeholder groups that the CIO needs to gain support from affect the political strategy utilized?

How does the interaction between the above variables produce the specific strategy or mix of strategies deployed by the CIO?

## Literature Review

An important body of literature on the CIO role concerns CIO effectiveness (for a full literature review on CIO behavior, please contact the authors). In this context, a number of CIO attributes have been identified as contributing to CIO effectiveness. Harmonious relationship with co-workers have been highlighted by a number of authors (Keen, 1991; Earl, 1993, and others), integrity and ethical conduct were identified (Kotter, 1982), and the importance of conducting communication “impersonally” was highlighted too (Feeny et al. 1992). More recently, Bharadwaj, (2000) proposed that while three types of CIO’s skills: technical, managerial, and leadership skills are key drivers of CIO performance, the most important skill is choosing the appropriate skill set for a given situation. This point has been reiterated by Pagels et al. (2000) who found that the CIO’s discretion in choosing the most effective strategy for a given situation is essential to the CIO effectiveness.

Additional CIO attributes that have been identified as associated with CIO effectiveness particularly in terms of influencing others within the organization relate to the CIO’s values and compatibility with the values of the organization. Thus, the ability of the CIO to build shared understanding with the rest of the management team has been noted by Appelgate and Elam (1992) and the alignment of the goals of the IT unit with the strategic goals of the organization has been emphasized by others (Earl, 1993; Reich and Benbasat, 1996; and others).

Another body of research tried to link CIO effectiveness to the demographic attributes of the CIO. Thus, Hambrick and Mason (1984) synthesizing their findings into an “upper echelon theory”, argued that the best predictor of CIO’s success is their experience, education, and technical skills. These characteristics, together with the characteristics of the organization (size, prior performance), determine the overall success of the CIO.

Following the same line of research, Spencer and Spencer (1993) demonstrated that CIO’s competencies can be conceptualized along three major dimensions: (1) “know-what”, (2) “know-how”, and (3) “know how to be”. The “know what” dimension relates to the CIO’s previous work experience (e.g., having worked in the same industry for many years). The “know-how-to-be” dimension relates to the CIO’s education (e.g., being a graduate of a top university in an area related to the business of the organization), while the “know-what” dimension relates to the number of years that the CIO’s spent in his/her role. The assumption being that the longer CIO’s play this role, the more skilled they are, and, therefore, the more able to respond to changing circumstances. Further research on the above conceptualization demonstrated that the “know-how”, “know-what” and “know-how-to-be” characteristics of CIO’s are key contributors to an organization’s superior performance (Ravarini et al. 2003).

Before we consider the literature on CIO behavior and culture, it is important to define political behavior as applied to the CIO role. For the purpose of this research, we rely on the Drory and Romm (1991) definition of organizational politics. According to these authors, while organizational politics may consist of a large number of elements that can be considered “political” (e.g., “the existence of a state of conflict”, “working against one’s organization”, “power attainment”, “concealment of motive”, etc.), only one element, “influence attempt” is considered essential. Hence, our definition of political behavior is “influence attempt”. This definition encompasses “explaining”, “convincing”, “manipulating”, “selling”, as well as many other potential political strategies.

One of the earliest attempts to examine and quantify the influence attempts undertaken by managers was led by Kipnis et al. (1980). The authors developed a survey instrument based on stories or scenarios that respondents were asked to rate on how the actors “got their way”. The findings from this research resulted in the identification of eight influence dimensions: “exchange”, “sanctions”, “ingratiation”, “rationality”, “coalitions”, “assertiveness”, “upward appeals”, and “blocking”.

The survey was published as the Kipnis and Schmidt (1988) Profiles of Organizational Influence Strategies (POIS). A number of investigations modified the POIS instrument, based on its applications to different populations. Thus, the application of the instrument to MBA students resulted in the creation of

the Influence Behavior Questionnaire (IBQ) by Falbe and Yuki (1992), with additional refinements added by Yuki (1994).

One of the most important lines of research to emanate from the development of the above scales focused on the effectiveness of different influencing techniques. Thus, comparing the different techniques, Yuki and Tracey, (1992) found that “rational persuasion” was highly effective in triggering commitment, “consultation”, “personal appeals”, “ingratiation” and “exchange” were effective in some situations but not others (Falbe and Yuki, 1992; Yuki and Tracey, 1992), and “coalition building” and “pressure” were ineffective and likely to lead (in some circumstances) to resistance.

One of the most important conclusions from the study of influence behaviors and their effectiveness is the finding that different influence techniques vary based on their target. Thus, “rational persuasion” seems to be more effective when applied to superiors while “pressure” tends to be more effectively utilized in relation to subordinates (Schilit and Locke, 1982).

Building on the above findings and on the previous research in this area, Enns, Huff and Higgins (2003) developed a model of influence strategies and their outcomes. Outlining seven influence strategies (“rational persuasion”, “consultation”, “personal appeal”, “ingratiation”, “exchange”, “coalition” and “pressure”), the authors hypothesized that the first four influence strategies were positively related to influence outcomes while the last three were not.

A more recent study by Romm and Rippa (2010) extended the Enns, Huff and Higgins (2003) model by adding a third variable to their conceptualization. According to Romm and Rippa’s Political Strategies Framework, there are three variables that affect the choice of political or influence strategies by a CIO: (1) the personal attributes of the CIO; (2) the personal attributes of the object of his/her influence attempt; and (3) the stage in the implementation project.

Since the major objective of this study was to explore the impact of culture on CIO behavior, it is important to explain how culture can affect CIO’s behavior. Our understanding of CIO political behavior across cultures relies on the Hofstede’s Managerial model (Hofstede, 1984). This model has been more widely quoted than any other model on cultural differences in managerial behavior. Even though Hofstede’s work has been criticized for a number of problems (most specifically, the use of employees from one single company and the assumption that cultures remain the same over time), Erez and Early (1993) indicated that most of the issues that have been mentioned by critics are not valid and that the Hofstede model is sufficiently “clear and parsimonious” to lend itself to empirical applications, including its application to our study. For these reasons, the Hofstede model was deemed appropriate as the basis for our understanding of CIO political behavior across cultures.

Four of Hofstede’s dimensions are central to our understanding of CIO political behavior across cultures: (1) Power Distance; (2) Uncertainty Avoidance; (3) Individualism/Collectivism; and, (4) Masculinity/Femininity. Hofstede’s fifth dimension, “time orientation”, which was used by Hofstede in later research (Hofstede, 1994), was not used because it is not as well supported by empirical data as the first four dimensions.

Table 1 presents a brief description of each of the Hofstede’s four dimensions, with references to how the four cultures in our study are ranked on each dimension.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Highs/Lows</b>	<b>Scores for US, India Italy and Israel</b>
Power Distance	The extent to which a society accepts that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally.	Highs: Philippines, Venezuela, India Lows: Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Israel	US – Medium/low India - High Italy – Medium/High Israel – Very Low

Uncertainty Avoidance	The extent to which a society feels threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations and tries to avoid them.	Highs: Japan, Portugal, Greece Lows: Singapore, Denmark, Hong Kong	US – Medium India – Medium/Low Italy – High Israel – Very high
Individualism/Collectivism	Individualism - relates to loosely knit social frameworks in which people emphasize only the care of themselves and their immediate family.  Collectivism - relates to social frameworks where people emphasize the co-dependency between individuals and their groups.	Highs: US, Australia, Holland, New Zealanders (high individualism)  Highs: Colombia, Pakistan, Taiwan (high collectivism)	US – Very high India – Medium/Low Italy – High Israel - Medium
Masculinity/Femininity	Masculinity - relates to the extent to which the dominant societal values are characterized by assertiveness, acquisition of money and “things”, and not caring for others and for one’s quality of life.	Highs: Japan, Venezuela, Italy  Lows: Sweden, Norway, Denmark	US – Medium/High India - Medium Italy – Very high Israel – Medium/Low

**Table 1. The Hofstede Dimensions**

There are some conceptual and methodological issues associated with Hofstede's research. For example, all his subjects were from IBM, a company that in the late sixties and early seventies was a male dominated company and their employees were mostly white-collar workers. This impacts the generalizability of the findings. Understanding intra-national diversity and influences of sub-culture can be more nebulous and challenging when compared with deciphering cross-national distance in cultural dimensions because so many variables - such as ethnicity, age, gender, generational differences (for example, first generation (East) Indian Americans vis-à-vis second and third generation Indian Americans), religion and so on - can come into play in affecting the values, behaviors and practices of peoples within a given nation state.

A number of investigators have explored empirically how IT professionals behave differently across cultures. A seminal study on this subject was undertaken by Davison (2002). The author compared the behavior of IT professionals in the US and Hong Kong, finding that culture played a major role in decisions such as granting access to information and empowering employees. Thus, in the US, project managers enabled free information sharing while in Hong Kong, they did not. In addition, the author found that users in the US, a culture relatively low on “Power Distance” were more willing to take responsibility for their role in the implementation project, while people in Hong Kong, a culture lower on “Power Distance”, were reluctant to accept “empowering initiatives” (p. 110).

Similar findings have been reported by Soh et al. (2000), who looked at the differences between the Chinese and the US experiences with implementation of information technology projects and by Akbulut, Subramanian, and Motwani (2006) whose study compared implementation projects in the US and Mexico. Other related studies offered insights on the unique features of system implementation in India (Karahanna et al. 2005, Kumar and Keshan, 2009), and in the Middle East (Al-Mashari, Al-Mudimigh and Zairi, 2003).

The above studies and many others, attest to the importance of studying CIO behavior, including the political aspects of the CIO role, not only within but also across cultures. At the same time, these studies demonstrate that even though there is an implicit acknowledgement that the CIO role involves “influence

attempts”, and, therefore, is political (Enns, Huff and Higgins, 2003), there is relatively little discussion of the impact of politics and culture on CIO’s behavior.

To rectify this situation, we have initiated a study that explores CIO political behavior in four cultures: the US, India, Italy and Israel. The methodology combines face to face interviews and survey data. Based on the findings from the case study research, we identified the dimensions of CIO political behavior that differ across cultures. These dimensions have been synthesized into a model of CIO political behavior across cultures and are the basis of the survey instrument that we are in the process of administering to samples of CIO’s in the above four countries.

## The Political Strategies Model

The starting point for the survey research is the Political Strategies Model. As explained in the following sections, other than the literature, the basis of the model was in-depth interviews conducted with CIO’s prior to the survey stage of the investigation.

As indicated in Figure 1 below, the Political Strategies model consists of three sets of variables: (1) attributes of political actors, (2) political strategies and (3) outcomes. The attributes of the political actors consist of (1) the attributes of the initiators of political acts, and, (2) the attributes of the objects of political acts.

The political strategies are divided into four groups, each aligning with one of Hofstede’s four dimensions. Thus, some political strategies are expected to reflect the “Power Distance” dimension (e.g., centralizing decision making, tolerance for conflict, etc.), others are expected to reflect the “Uncertainty Avoidance” dimension (e.g., research to support decisions, proximity to vendor/consultant, etc.), others are expected to reflect the “Individualism/Collectivism” dimension (e.g., mentioning job losses and involvement of the union as justification for projects), and, finally, some political strategies are expected to reflect the “Masculinity/Femininity” dimension (e.g., references to improvement of work processes or quality of life as justifications for projects).

Finally, the outcomes component of the model refers to three measures of project success: (1) meeting the project expected deadline; (2) staying within the project expected budget; and (3) assessing the project overall outcome as successful.

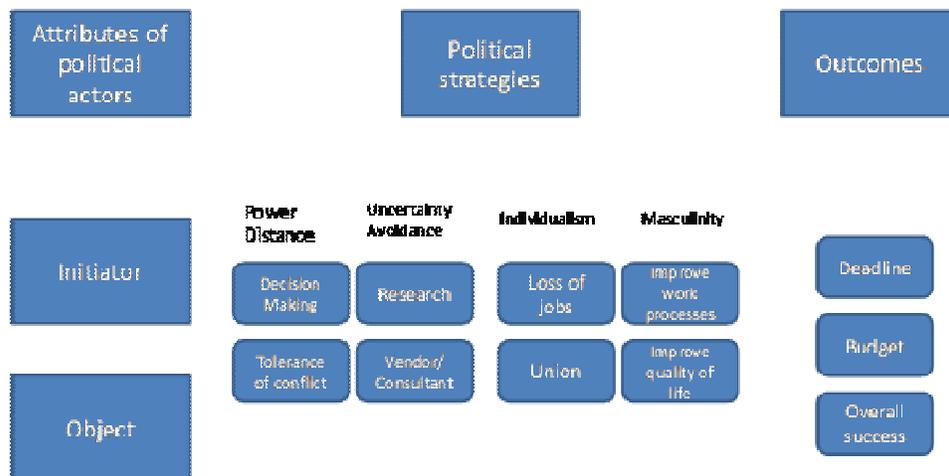


Figure 1. The Political Strategies and Culture Model

Based on the model we propose the following:

Proposition 1 – Initiators of political behavior - The early stages in the implementation process will involve more political initiation on the part of top management than the later stages

Proposition 2 – Objects of political behavior - The early stages in the implementation process will involve more top management members as objects of the political initiatives than the later stages.

Proposition 3 – Strategies – the political strategies will differ across the implementation process, progressing from a limited array of strategies at the beginning of projects to a larger repertoire at the end.

Proposition 4 – Culture - The choice of political strategy will be highly affected by the implementation stage and culture.

Proposition 4.1 - Managers in cultures high on Power Distance will exhibit more concentrated decision making and less tolerance of disagreement than managers in cultures low on Power distance.

Proposition 4.2 - Managers in cultures high on Uncertainty Avoidance will be more inclined to research vendors thoroughly and will know the vendors more closely than managers in cultures low on Uncertainty Avoidance.

Proposition 4.3 - Managers in cultures high on Individualism will be more inclined to expect loss of jobs as a result of implementing IT projects and will expect less involvement of unions in the project relative to managers in cultures low on Individualism

Proposition 4.4 - Managers in cultures high on Masculinity will be more inclined to justify projects by referring to improvement of work processes and less inclined to justify projects by referring to quality of life issues than managers in cultures low on Masculinity

## **Methodology**

### ***First stage - Case study research***

Interviews were held with 10 CIO's in each of the four cultures. In each culture interviewees were drawn from mid-size organizations in the electronic industry. Interviewees were identified following initial correspondence and telephone communication with the organizations. An interview schedule, which included a range of open-ended questions, was utilized for all interviews.

During the interview, CIO's were asked to describe one specific implementation project in detail, focusing on the behaviors that they displayed at each stage of the implementation project life cycle. In particular, CIO's were asked to comment on how they influenced others at each stage, who the others were, and what specific influencing techniques they utilized. In addition, the CIO's were asked to comment on the behavior of the others, the final outcome, conflicts that may have occurred, the manner in which conflicts were resolved, and the lessons that the CIO's drew from their experiences.

The interviews in the US, India and Israel were conducted in English. The interviews in Italy were conducted in Italian. Each interview lasted about an hour and a half. During the interviews, detailed notes were taken with quotes from the interviews. The data from the interviews was analyzed in two "rounds": First, sections in which references to political behavior were made were highlighted. Second, patterns that were typical of most interviewees within a culture were identified. Once the above analysis was completed, it became possible to identify behavioral dimensions that were most highly related to CIO political behavior within each culture. These dimensions were the basis for finalizing the model and for constructing the survey instrument.

### ***Second stage - Questionnaire building and distribution***

As the questionnaire was developed for this study and was not previously used by other research, a two stage pretest was used to test it for content validity. The first step involved 8 experts (3 PhD students and five faculty members) who reviewed the survey and the research model. This resulted in some modifications to the survey.

The second stage involved ten CIO's who were asked to fill up the full questionnaire. A telephone conversation was held with each of the participants in the pre-test to gauge their reactions. Several changes were made to the instrument as a result of this stage, including the addition of two items that respondents felt were missing from the original survey and the deletion of two items that respondents felt overlapped with other items.

The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of CIO's in the four cultures. While the questionnaire was administered in English in the US, India and Israel, it was translated to Italian for the Italian sample. The process included a two way translation by two translators. One translated the questionnaire from English to Italian and the other translated the questionnaire from Italian back to English. This process continued until the translation back to English was identical to the original. It was at this point that the Italian questionnaire was deemed ready for administration.

For each culture, a sample of about 45 CIO's was identified based on national databases and personal contacts. The CIO's were contacted by e-mail with information about the study. Once they confirmed willingness to participate, the questionnaire was sent to them with instructions to return the completed questionnaire to the researchers. A total of 400 CIO's were contacted and asked to participate – 116 CIO's eventually submitted complete and usable questionnaires. This represents an effective response rate of 29% percent (Segars and Grover, 1998) and reflects the difficulty of obtaining information from top level executives.

## Conclusion

At present, the findings from this investigation are being analyzed based on a rigorous data analysis plan. Preliminary analysis indicates the following:

Life cycle stage has a major impact on who initiates the political acts. As indicated in the previous sections, irrespective of culture, it appears that during the first two stages of the implementation project (Initiation and Selection), top management is the major driver of all political activities. It is only in the later stages (Implementation and Maintenance and Evaluation), that other political players (most specifically employees of the consulting firm) become important political players.

Culture affects the identity of the object of the political act at each stage of the implementation process. Culture also seems to affect the political strategies that are utilized to influence the objects of the political behavior at each stage of the implementation process.

As data analysis is still undergoing at this time, we trust that more details pertaining to the impact of culture on the political behavior of CIO's will be revealed. In particular, it is our hope that the specific impact of each of Hofstede's cultural dimensions will be possible to identify. In addition, as our questionnaire includes items about CIO's demographics and the outcome of implementation projects, it is our hope that the findings will shed more light on how CIO's in the various cultures differ as individuals and how the manner in which they behave politically affects the outcome of the projects that they lead.

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