BEHAVIOURAL ASPECTS OF MIS
Some Dysfunctional Elements

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MIS as a support system needs to be assessed by way of its reliability with respect to its purpose. This paper examines the usefulness of MIS by exploring (a) management attitudes towards computer-based MIS, and (b) control evasion at the managerial level and organisation culture. In the final analysis, the effectiveness of MIS depends upon the philosophical orientation of the top management — openness of communication, trust and avoidance of stresses rather than isolated aloofness and inflexible behaviour.

I

Introduction

To start with, even at the risk of oversimplification, let me characterise Management Information System (MIS) as a system essentially concerned with the generation, processing and making available relevant information for managerial purposes. It includes both formal and informal sub-systems providing past, present as well as projection information (written and oral). The information provided relates to internal operations and the environment.[1] And to be effective, it must be geared to the information needs of management at the strategic planning level, at the management control level and the operational control level, corresponding to the top, middle and lower-level management. Let us note further that information flows may comprise not only factual, quantitative data, but also information based on qualitative judgement tinged by subjective values and preference ordering. MIS as a support system needs therefore to be assessed in terms of its reliability with respect to its purpose. What follows in this paper is an attempt to focus on some dysfunctional elements of MIS with reference to behavioural implications.

II

Digression on Managerial Roles

A brief digression on managerial roles will be useful in the beginning for reasons which will surface hereafter. Mintzberg's categorisation of managerial roles is familiar now, though it has not percolated the class-room lectures to the extent it should. Briefly speaking, the Mintzberg thesis is that the formal authority of a manager and the status that goes with it enables him to play three' categories of roles — interpersonal, informational, and decisional.[2] His interpersonal role may include ceremonial duties as a figurehead, liaison duties as a

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contact person interacting with other managers and outsiders, and more importantly the leadership role of training and motivating his subordinates. In his informational role, the manager acts as a monitor and is constantly in need of in-- formation bearing on the performance of his responsibility centre. As a part of this role the manager also acts as a disseminator of information, issuing orders and instructions, besides acting as a spokesman passing on information to superiors. The third category of managerial roles (decisional roles) has been delineated by Mintzberg in terms of what managers do as an entrepreneur (innovating for improvements in performance), as a disturbance-handler (tackling unanticipated problems), as a resource allocator (assessing resource needs), and as a negotiator (resolving conflicts and disputes).

Obviously, managers at different levels and in different functional areas have certain roles to play more often than others. Pavett and Lau[3] in their empirical study found that top-level managers valued some of the roles as more important e.g. figurehead and liaison roles, and those of monitor, disseminator, spokesman, resource allocator and negotiator. These roles were not highly valued by lower-level managers who considered only the role of leader to be most important. But the perceived value of different roles may also differ according to the socio-psychological conditioning of the managers. For instance, an executive under stress may not value his role as a monitor as highly as that of a resource allocator, or vice versa. Sales managers may devote more time in their interpersonal roles than (say) monitoring roles. So long as results are achieved, it may not really matter which roles are valued more, But the perceptual differences of managers are likely to make a difference as regards the usefulness of MIS.

III

Dependability of MIS as a Decision Support System

One cannot ignore the fact that MIS is a support system. It cannot and does not relieve the manager of his responsibility for the decisions made. The quality of decisions may be said to reflect the timeliness and nature of information made available, but equally, if not essentially it reflects the judgement exercised by managers.

On the basis of his study of executive roles in American firms, Mintzberg made a sweeping comment on the usefulness of MIS. According to him, "the manager identifies decision situations and builds models not with the aggregated abstractions an MIS provides, but with specific tidbits of data.[4] Does it reflect why recent studies also reveal that there is continued reluctance at the top-management level to embrace computer support?[5] Or, does it imply that the information needs of managers are only partly met by MIS?

IV

Management Attitude towards Computer-based MIS

It is common place in India to come across employee resistance to computerisa-

tion of routine jobs. With the huge backlog of unemployment, and with the sense of insecurity that pervades every job-holder in the face of change of technology, one does not have to go far to appreciate the reasons underlying resistance. A handy argument given in this connection is that we cannot afford the luxury of computers implying thereby that developed countries can. While talking of employee resistance, it is assumed that Indian managers are all keen on computer application. A study made by Dickson and Simmons[6] provides a glimpse of the American scene. Apart from specific individual characteristics of those with many years of service in an organisation who resist change due to their inherent faith in the acquired know-how, the study refers to two types of disruptions leading to employee resistance. One is the organisational change accompanied by changes in departmental boundaries. For instance, inventory and purchasing departments may be merged to ensure greater efficiency of the MIS. Another type of disruption is that relating to the informal system of communication. If the introduction of MIS alters communication patterns and more formal channels are set up for the purpose, organisational members resist it because of a stronger preference for informal mechanisms of securing and disseminating information.

Three types of behavioural manifestations have been noted by Dickson and Simmons, all associated with the frustrations caused by the computer-based MIS. Aggression is manifested when individuals hit back at the object or persons, using the equipment incorrectly, or by putting incomplete or inadequate information into the system. Projection behaviour is manifested as a psychological reaction blaming the computer system for problems caused by human error or other factors unrelated to the system itself. A third behavioural manifestation is avoidance and withdrawal, as for instance, managers ignoring the output of MIS and depending more on their own information sources. Interestingly all these psychological reactions – dysfunctional behaviour – were found to have the maximum likelihood of occurrence in the case of first-line and middle managers. The information supplied by MIS to top management being the basis of evaluation of operating managers, it was left to the top managers to decide when and how the information was retrieved, interpreted and used. Secondly, computer-based MIS enabled top management to make decisions which increased their control over operating managers. Thirdly, there was always the likelihood of some of their jobs being eliminated or substantially altered. The kind of anxiety felt by middle managers on these accounts naturally made all the difference.

<center>V</center>

Control Evasion and Organisation Culture

The phenomenon of control evasion at the managerial level has been evidenced by many empirical studies including those of Chris Argyris, Jasinski, Elliott Jaques, Ulrich, Booz and Lawrence, Turner, Frick and Sumby.[7] The findings of these studies have been labelled as 'managerial adaptation to control that evades

their spirit but conforms to their letter'. Let us note that these studies were conducted before MIS designs of recent times came to be recognised. But the relevance of the studies even today arises from the enduring sociological and psychological conditioning of human nature. The basic question therefore is whether computer-based MIS provides adequate safeguards against the managerial attitudes toward control, their dysfunctional behaviour in the face of top management pressures. There are two reasons at least which give rise to strong doubts on this count. One relates to the adequacy and relevance of information provided by MIS, and the other to managerial motivation.

One cannot doubt the capability of MIS − the computer-based MIS − to process all kinds of information, formal, informal, oral, written, and so on. However, the emphasis is likely to be on formal, written information. This is for obvious reasons. Informal communication by its very nature is susceptible to human predilections at the point of origin as well as at the processors' end. On the other hand, there is also a danger of information overload making the decision variables intractable. Even if cross-checking of informal information to ensure their veracity is built into the system, the complexity of processing cannot be altogether avoided. Secondly, to what extent can MIS check on the authenticity of formal communications, particularly those of a qualitative nature? Again there are limits to this capability of MIS. If it is attempted, the system may turn out to be more costly in terms of effort and time. One cannot ignore the importance of the time-frame within which decision supports must be available.

The other dimension to be taken note of is managerial motivation. How can one ensure conformity in letter and spirit? Ultimately, this is best taken care of by organisational climate and culture, not by MIS alone. The effectiveness of MIS, in the final analysis, depends upon the philosophical orientation of the top management − openness of communication, trust and avoidance of stresses, rather than isolated aloofness and inflexible behaviour. The decision variables then are likely to be tinged by a different set of overtones than that may follow from exclusive reliance on MIS.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. See Walter J. Kennevan, 'MIS Universe', in *Data Management*, September 1970; also Raymond McLeod, *Management Information Systems*, Science Research Associates Inc., Chicago 1986, 3rd edition, pp. 17-19.
2. Henry Mintzberg, 'The Manager's Job: Folklore and Fact', *Harvard Business Review*, 53, July-August, 1975, p. 49.
3. Cynthia M. Pavett & Alan W. Lau, 'Managerial Work: The Influence of Hierarchical Level and Functional Speciality', *Academy of Management Journal*, 26, No. 1, 1983, pp. 170-177.
4. Mintzberg, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
5. McLeod, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
6. G.W. Dickson & John K. Simmons, 'The Behavioural Side of MIS', *Business Horizons*, 13, No. 4, August 1970.
7. An excellent summary of the studies is available in Robert Dubin, *Human Relations in Administration*, Prentice-Hall of India, New Delhi 1970, 3rd edition, pp. 433-42.