TECHNOLOGY EXPERTISE ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH: TOWARD A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PURPOSIVE INDIRECT SOCIAL INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR OF IT PROFESSIONALS

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Abstract

This paper proposes a behavioral construct called Purposive Indirect Social Influence (PISI) and its conceptual framework to examine a particular subordinate-supervisor influence behavior of IT professionals in the workplace. This article answers two questions (1) Why and how do IT professionals engage in PISI attempts? (2) What are personal and organizational benefits of PISI activities? This study postulates that (a) PISI is a response to cultural, social, organizational, and professional constraints and limitations, which IT professionals are subject to, and (b) PISI helps improve perceived performance, alleviate job stresses, defuse workplace tensions, increase social capital, and strengthen social effectiveness on both intra and extra organizational relationships.

Keywords: indirect social influence, IT human resource management, social capital, social effectiveness.

Introduction

"*As many [IT] professionals have learned, however, technology expertise alone is often not enough*." (Kern et al., 2005, p. 202)

Despite the facts that the IT industry has been one of the fastest developing sectors of the economy and that the IT workforce has grown significantly in the last few decades, social behaviors of IT professionals have not been adequately investigated. This study proposes a construct called Purposive Indirect Social Influence (PISI), a subordinate-supervisor social influence tactic often appears observable in IT organizations, and a conceptual framework of the PISI process. An analysis of PISI's cultural, social, organizational, and professional contextual factors, and their corresponding propositions explains why IT professionals display this particular social behavior and describes how they do so. The paper also discusses various outcomes, which include personal and organizational benefits, of PISI activities. The propositions suggest that, besides their regular technical duties, IT professionals also contribute to the organizational effectiveness with their social activities.

Theoretical Background

Organizations are socially constructed of a sophisticated and complex web of social relationships between individuals and groups (Weick, 1979). Social dynamics of organizations, that social influence is a vibrant topic, have long been researched. Researchers have studied social influence, entirely and partially, under a variety of names, such as impression management, self-presentation, interpersonal influence, organizational politics, social power, emotional intelligence, and leadership.

Goffman's (1959) seminal work on self-presentation, which asserts that individuals maintain specific "public faces" for different social situations, can be considered as the inception of social influence research. Social influence is an active behavior of organizational parties. Individuals consistently maintain strategic self-presentation through social influence work for impression purposes (Schneider, 1981). Empirical studies have found that social influence

increases perceived performance (Judge & Ferris, 1993), affects the organizational decision making process (Pfeffer et al., 1976), and modifies personal attitudes (Wood, 2000).

In organizational settings, there are various targets and tactics for social influence. However, influence tactics towards supervisors have drawn a lot of research interests in the last two decades (Hochwarter et al., 2000). This study goes beyond the present literature by adding PISI to the corpus of upward influence research.

A Proposed Framework of the PISI Process

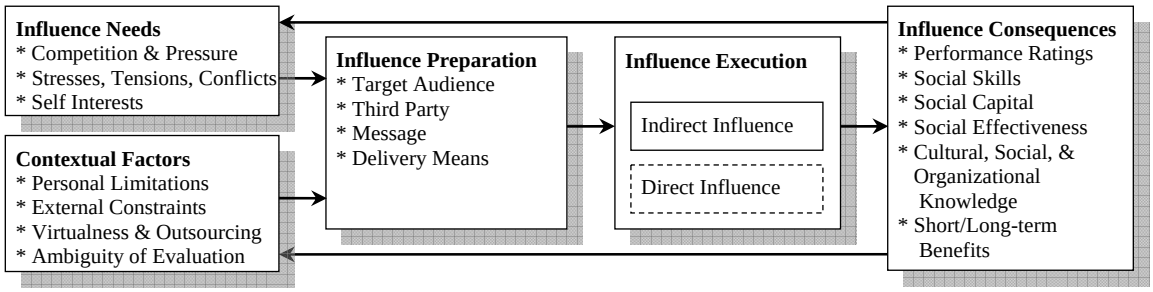

Figure 1. A proposed framework of the PISI process.

Purposive Indirect Social Influence is a social influence tactic whereby the beneficiary deliberately uses a third party to convey an influence-intended message to the target audience. Unlike Goffman's original idea that individuals are social actors on the self-presentation stage (1959), an indirect influencer is the show director who selects a third party, scripts the message, and directs the person to deliver the message to the target audience, who usually is the immediate supervisor, with anticipated outcomes. The influencer may combine indirect and direct social influence attempts for improved effects. The preparation and execution of PISI activities are triggered by personal needs and constrained by contextual factors that IT professionals are subject to. Influence needs and the influence environment are in turn affected by consequences of previous influence attempts. While influence needs are common across occupations, IT professionals have particular limitations and constraints that are different from other groups.

Contextual Factors of PISI Behaviors of IT Professionals

Personal Limitations and External Constraints

Because of its strategic role, IT department is one of the most knowledge-intensive and dynamic units in many organizations. Nowadays, IT professionals are highly talented individuals from various cultures and nationalities. Non-immigration visa programs, such as H1B and L1, have allowed million foreign high-tech workers and their families to come and compete in the American IT job market (Chaudhuri, 2004). Statistics from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services show that most of these professionals are from countries where English is not the first language. These new comers may need time to learn and be familiar with the American culture.

In comparison to workers from other occupations, IT professionals change job more often (Prabhakar et al., 2005; Litecky et al., 2006). They have been known for the so-called "turnover culture" (Moore & Burke, 2002). As a result, they do not stay in the same organization long enough to understand its formal and social structures. Additionally, because IT services are not the core business of most organizations, institutions often do not pay enough attention to acculturate new IT professionals as they do with new employees of other professional groups.

Most IT jobs are obviously technical. Many IT professionals spend a sizeable time dealing with technical tasks, such as installing network and servers, coding application logics, and developing data models. Infrequent social interactions with organizational members would reduce their opportunities and limit their social skills for direct social influence. The most frequent job-related social interactions are with business users. Because users are vital to IT services, IT management policies tend to channel social exchanges of IT professionals toward their users (Guimaraes, Staples, & McKeen, 2004).

Computer science and information systems disciplines, that most IT professionals have their educational background on, have emphasized too much on technical instead of social and interpersonal skill training. A world-wide study by KPMG found that "poor communication" between IT and business units was among the most cited reasons for IT project failures (Clark, 2002). These training traditions have made new IT workers less skillful in dealing with job-related social situations and unready for direct social influence activities.

Not only IT educators and trainers, IT recruiters and employers have also focused too much on technical yet neglected human-facing skills. Todd, McKeen, and Gallupe (1995) studied IT job advertisements during a period of 20 years and found that recruiters had mostly ignored communication and social skills but increased requirements on technical credentials. Recent studies still showed that employers often searched for rounded "hard skills" rather than "soft skills" (Gallivan et al., 2002). These recruiting and employment practices systematically force IT professionals to communicate with their supervisors and other organizational parties in a technical and system-oriented language instead of a business and user-oriented one.

> *P1*: IT professionals engage in PISI attempts to overcome cultural, organizational, and professional constraints and personal limitations.
> *P2:* IT professionals use PISI to learn interpersonal skills and gain organizational knowledge.

Virtual-Team Environment and Outsourcing

Recent technological advances have allowed organizations to be structured and managed virtually. The virtual-team structure helps enhance flexibility and cut down costs, while still sustain organizational performance and effectiveness (Martins et al., 2004). Because of these advantages, many organizations have adopted virtual units. As a result, many IT professionals are working in the virtual-team environment. These virtual team members do not always have regular face-to-face professional and social exchanges with their supervisors as others do. In virtual organizations, the meaning and application of organizational culture and social norms are different (Jackson, 1999). The organizational changes caused by virtualness would certainly modify personal and team behaviors.

> *P3:* Virtual team members launch more PISI attempts than those who work in proximal teams.

Since many organizations have considered outsourcing a vital business strategy (Dibbern et al., 2004), IT jobs and IT-related services have been increasingly outsourced to vendors. Consequently, IT consulting has become a robust sector of the IT industry (Kern & Willcocks, 2002). IT professionals who work on consulting jobs are frequent travelers between different client sites. Most IT consultants often spend more time with their clients than they do with their own organizational parties. These work conditions do not allow frequent subordinate-supervisor face-to-face communications, thus reduce opportunities for direct social influence.

> *P4:* More PISI attempts are launched from client locations than from corporate offices.

The Ambiguity of Role and the Gap of Expectation and Performance

IT professionals are subject to role ambiguity (Shen, 2005), and performance and expectation gaps (Klein, Jiang, & Sobol, 2001) which are caused by the fast developing pace of the field and increasing expectations from the organization. In addition, many intangible items of their job deliverables would make it difficult for less technically savvy managers to systematically observe and measure their subordinates' job performance. These factors would make performance evaluation affected by social influence activities by IT professionals.

> *P5a:* When their supervisors are not technically knowledgeable, IT professionals use PISI to improve perceived performance.

> *P5b:* Supervisors with less technical confidence tend to rely on information from third parties for performance evaluations.

Preparation and Execution of PISI Attempts

The Target Audience and Selection of the Third Party

Social influence activities by subordinates have been found effective on supervisors for performance evaluations (Judge & Ferris, 1993). Selecting and preparing a third party are very important because this person is the key success factor of PISI attempts. Information systems users are usually the best because they are potentially the most influential third party. Positive comments from users on information systems, services, and the person who delivers those to them would effectively impress the target audience. IT vendors can be the second best option because they are definitely willing to cooperate with the IT professional. They can prepare materials and make presentations that would improve the image of the IT professional and his or her job. Co-workers are less likely to be the third party because they may have conflicts of interests. However, co-workers can intentionally work together in launching joint PISI attempts. If so, the influencer and the third party can do an exchange, thus each of them can benefit from the other's PISI efforts.

> *P6:* Those with stronger influence power, better communication skills, and more social similarities with the target audience are favored to be the third party.

The Influence Message and Means of Delivery

The third party can deliver the intended message to the target audience in different ways. The influencer and the third party can work together to choose what to do, or the IT professional can leave it open to the third party to decide what is the convenient way to deliver the message. A PISI attempt can be as simple as sending a thank-you email or letter to the target audience acknowledging the quality of the job and the person who did it, or it can be as complicated as setting up a presentation by the vendor to demonstrate the complexity of the job that the IT professional has to handle. The IT professional may suggest the third party when to deliver the message and how often to repeat it. However, the timing and frequency of PISI attempts depend on several factors, for example, the initial response of the audience, the availability of the third party, and the complexity of the PISI attempt.

> *P7:* Quality of the social relationship between the IT professional and the third party determines the message content and the effectiveness of PISI attempts.

Combined Indirect-Direct Influence Tactics

From the beginning or at one point in time, the IT professional may decide to combine PISI with direct influence attempts to improve and prolong the outcomes. The proportion of indirect and direct influence may change as the IT professional's social and interpersonal skills improve.

> *P8a:* PISI is more effective when combined with direct influence attempts.
> *P8b:* Direct social influence is more effective when combined with PISI attempts.

Consequences of PISI Activities

Social Capital

To launch a PISI attempt, the IT professional first has to create a good relationship with a third party so this person would be willing to assist. In most cases, the third party is from outside the IT department, such as a business user, or from outside the organization, such as an IT vendor. This good social relationship often is an outcome of real quality professional services delivered to the party. This relationship is quite beneficial to the IT department and the organization in any sense because it proves that the IT professional has performed a good job and kept the third party person happy. Social capital will keep developing as these intra and extra organizational social ties grow (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998).

> *P9:* PISI activities increase social capital of the IT professional and related organizational parties.

Social Effectiveness

Social effectiveness covers a broad range of constructs, including social intelligence, emotional intelligence, practical intelligence, self-monitoring, social skill, social competence, political skill, and others (Ferris et al., 2002, 2005). Social effectiveness has been found to benefit the individual as well as the organization. PISI activities would help IT professionals become more effective players of both intra and extra organizational social performances. These activities are assumed to bear lower risks compared to direct social influence because they would be non-confrontational and take fewer non-job-related efforts to carry out.

> *P10:* PISI helps improve the social effectiveness of the IT professional.
> *P11:* Regarding social capital and social effectiveness, PISI contributes more to the IT department and the organization than direct social influence.

Perceived Job Performance

A better performance rating is arguably the most concerned outcome of subordinate-supervisor professional and social relationships. Multiple empirical studies have showed that the subordinate's direct social influence enhances the supervisor's liking and perceived similarities, and improves ratings of the subordinate's performance (Judge & Ferris, 1993). PISI activities are also expected to result to personal liking and improved perceived performance.

> *P12:* PISI is positively correlated with personal liking and perceived job performance

Job Stresses, Work-Related Tensions, and Interpersonal Conflicts

IT professionals have been suffering from job stresses (Sethi, 2004) and burnouts (Huarng, 2001) because their jobs are highly competitive and stressful. These sufferings can be lessened once the IT professional achieves positive perceived performance and social effectiveness resulted from PISI activities. Workplace interpersonal tensions, conflicts, and broken social and professional relationships may happen and need to be handled (Barki, & Hartwick, 2001). In these situations, a suitable third party person can serve as an intermediator and help resolve the problems.

> *P13:* PISI activities help reduce job stresses.
> *P14:* PISI activities help defuse workplace interpersonal tensions and conflicts.

Short-Term and Long-Term Outcomes

IT professionals may launch PISI attempts for both short-term and long-term benefits. Short-term benefits are often decision focused. For example, when the IT professional wants the supervisor make a certain decision on a particular issue, he or she then works with a third person to launch PISI attempts toward the supervisor. Long-term benefits are often career focused. For example, a consistent good team player image can be systematically built in minds of the supervisor and other organizational members by sending multiple PISI messages from different third parties toward the audiences in a long period.

> *P15:* PISI is effective on both decision-focused and career-focused objectives.

Conclusion

There are three purposes for this paper. First, it proposes a conceptualization of the Purposive Indirect Social Influence behavior of IT professionals by defining the construct and introducing a framework of the PISI process. Second, it explains PISI behaviors with contextual factors and their corresponding propositions. Third, it highlights typical outcomes of PISI activities by postulating that PISI helps improve social skills, increase perceived performance, reduce job stresses, defuse workplace conflicts, develop social capital, and strengthen social effectiveness of the IT professional. By introducing PISI, which has remained unaddressed in the information systems literature, the article adds to current efforts to better understandings of social behaviors of IT professionals in the workplace. The propositions suggest that, besides their ordinary technical duties, IT professionals also contribute to the effectiveness of their organizations with their interpersonal and social activities.

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