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Manager or Technician? The Nature of the Information Systems Manager's Job

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ABSTRACT

The role of the information systems manager has evolved in twenty years from that of a technician managing a relatively unimportant service function into that of a vice presidential-level, general manager whose department can substantially impact the entire organization. In this paper we trace, by example, the historical evolution of the job and, through an observational study of six information systems managers, examine the position today. The analysis includes the daily activities of the managers, the nature of the oral contacts that constitute 76% of their day, and other notable observations.

We found that the information systems manager is clearly more of a manager in the classical sense than a technician. The information systems manager relies heavily on interpersonal skills and the ability to motivate and guide subordinates. The manager is surrounded by technical specialists who provide expertise as required. The manager is not preoccupied with the day-to-day operations of the data processing organization, but spends a great deal of time planning the overall strategy for the information systems function. A great deal of the manager's planning concerns human resources.

A very small portion of the information systems manager's contacts are with users at any level. There was some informal evidence that the managers' subordinates had responsibility for contact with operational users, particularly during development of new information systems. However, one can only conclude that the contact of information systems managers with functional management at their own level is noticeably absent. Such a conclusion is surprising in view of the plethora of literature advocating "top management involvement" (on the user side) in development of new information systems.

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Our research suggests a variety of "problems" that future research efforts can constructively address. These include the following:

1. Distinguishing the characteristics of information systems managers that separate good and poor performance.
2. Developing organizational structures that will better integrate the roles of the information systems manager and the user managers served.
3. Considering the implications of minicomputer proliferation and developing strategies for effectively utilizing this powerful resource.
4. Developing strategies for dealing with the information systems budget during periods of economic decline or for shrinking industries.
5. Developing appropriate decision support systems and office automation systems to assist the manager of the information systems resource.

We see the information systems manager's role as primarily that of "manager." Good technical support from subordinates replaces much of the manager's need for "hands-on" technical skills. Despite the advocacy of "user involvement," however, much remains to be learned about the relationship between the information systems manager and user management.