1. Introduction

Historically information systems development projects have been viewed as an exercise in technical change, rather than socio-technical change [2][3][8]. Accordingly, most IS analysis tools focus more on technical systems analysis than for example, on the impacts of the new developments on the political systems of organizations during information systems developments. Although the development of new IS is considered a recipe for organizational conflicts [14][17], and for that matter, demanding a good knowledge of political dynamics of organizations, an in-depth consideration of organizational politics in mainstream IS literature is rare [18].

This paper explores the relationship between the development of IS systems or IS projects and organizational conflicts and suggests the need for IS project managers to become politically savvy to be able to proactively and effectively preempt and deal with political conflicts that arise as a consequence of information systems creation or modifications in organizations. There are suggestions for ways IS managers can become politically savvy and a discussion on some of the negative impacts of mishandling organizational politics.
2. Overview of Organizational Politics in the IS Field

As noted above, mainstream literature on IS typically shies away from politics within organizations although every IS project in an organization takes place within a political system. As political units, organizations consist of individuals and/or groups of people who have diverse and conflicting sets of interests [4][10][18]. According to Robey [14][18] IS projects are high sources of organizational conflicts because new systems not only change the way of doing things but also the status quo, leading, in many cases, to changes in the power structure within an organization. As it is the case with any political system, those whom the current status quo supports are happy to keep it as it is and in order for them to support a new system they must be satisfied with the answer to the “WIIFM” (What’s in it for me - more on this below) question. Pichault (1995) hypothesized that an organization that is essentially ‘centripetal’ would most likely suffer conflicts when an organization-wide integration system is to be adopted [11][18].

The size of IS projects also has a strong bearing on organizational politics; the bigger an IS project, the more people that are affected and the more likely it will result in conflicts [18]. According to Doherty and King,(2003), confidence in the application of information systems has been severely dented by the spate of high-profile systems failures[3]. Increasingly, however, the impact of organizational politics on IS project management is gaining attention, especially as many cases of failed IS projects continue to be attributed to people and organizational factors [18][6][8], the combination of which is the crux of organizational politics. Warne asserts that some project managers either prefer to be in denial about the inextricable relationship between project management and organizational politics or choose to avoid participating in it. [16]. According to Warne, most IS professionals would rather ignore or avoid a conflict situation than attempt to solve it as they do not believe they should concern themselves with organizational politics, that politics arising as part of an IS development project is top “management” problem [Warne 1998: 490][16]. Warne also theorizes based on an investigation of conflicts in IS projects
that conflicts among developers and users, which are the least destructive are usually recognized as having direct impact on the project and subsequently resolved. On the contrary, conflicts among users, which are the most destructive however, are usually ignored, as a result of systems development project managers not wanting to get involved in organizational politics. According to Warne, “If developers ignore the politics endemic in large, intra-organizational developments they risk the project becoming embroiled in a number of destructive; time consuming disputes.” [Warne 1998: 490][16]. Thus, to engineer a successful implementation, developers must gain a clear understanding of the political dynamics of the organization and how it impacts the IS project. In doing so, they must particularly pay attention to those stakeholders who are likely to win and those who are likely to lose from a potential information systems development [7]. IS project management therefore demands that IS project managers are not only technically competent but also politically savvy, who are able to leverage their political astuteness to successfully achieve project objectives. With the right knowledge and appropriate leveraging of political aptitude, a project manager is likely to overcome common project management problems such as:

- Recalcitrant functional managers
- Unclear lines of authority
- Tentative resource commitments and
- Lukewarm upper management support. etc Source: Pinto [12]

3.0 Politics and IS Project Management

The Project Management Institute (PMI) defines organizational politics as the informal process by which personal friendships, loyalties, and enmities are used in an attempt to gain an
advantage in influencing project decisions. [1][20]. The concept has also been defined in a more narrow term to connote the negative use of influence in an organization to achieve selfish personal interests at the expense of organizational goals [5][13]. This paper agrees with Pinto [12] on the point that although organizational politics is sometimes perceived with repugnance due to the potentially damaging effect it has on organizations, nevertheless, the process is one of “the prime moving forces within any organization, for better or worse”. Organizational Politics should therefore not be avoided, system development managers must make conscious efforts to participate in organizational politics and successfully leverage their influence to achieve project objectives. For example, a good way of achieving this is to conduct an organizational impact analysis for the new system to better understand how it impacts on design of the business, its economic performance and the working conditions of members of staff [3]. Additionally, a political management plan (See video 2 below), is recommended for project managers to better understand various stakeholders’ reactions and influences on a project’s success and how to systematically bring them onboard.

4.0 Managing without Authority

Although organizational politics have been shown to impact projects’ success, the position of the IS project manager (and most project managers for that matter) has been shown to present specific challenges to exercising authority in the systems development process. In relation to a traditional organizational structure, the IS project manager is generally in a position that is neither exactly authoritative nor exactly subservient. A project manager’s position is a temporary position with no permanently established authority [12]. For instance, the IS project manager may not necessarily become the boss when leading his superiors (senior management executive members) in a given IS project situation. Technically, he or she is also not the boss when working with the rank and file of the organization most of whom are ‘borrowed’ from
concerned departments within the organization and who for that reason already have their various departmental supervisors, to whom they must report.

In his article on power, authority and organizational politics, Russo [15] distinguishes between organizational power and organizational authority. He explains that organizational power is personal and depends on the personality characteristics of the leader whereas organizational authority is positional. IS project managers, by virtue of their position, cannot rely on organizational authority [12] to carry out their tasks. They are in a position whereby responsibility is not commensurate with authority. Russo further talks about 5 types of organizational power, including; reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent* power and expert power. To be a successful project manager systems development managers must resort to the use of referent power (power gained through influencing others) and expert power (the ability to demonstrate expertise in an area of the assigned project). Project managers are thus, expected to adopt a non-authoritative leadership style labeled by some experts as “Servant leadership.

Pinto suggests that systems project managers must learn important `human' skills such as; how to bargain, how to influence as well as conflict management and negotiation skills[12], which can equally provide the needed political influence when properly applied to influence projects' outcomes. The rest of this paper discusses some of these important skills and the significance to the systems development project manager.

4.1 Practice ‘good’ Political Tactics

Pinto distinguishes among 3 main political behaviors in his article: the Naïve, the Sensible and the “Sharks”. As already mentioned above, politics can be enabling for leveraging project goals or destructive depending on how it is used. The managers in the naïve category want nothing to do with politics since it is unpleasant. On the other extreme are the “Sharks” who basically
believe politics must be used at all cost to serve their selfish agenda such as career advancement. The sharks are aggressive towards their competitors and find ways to ‘eliminate’ them through manipulation, use of fraud and deceit when necessary. For politics to be enabling, project managers who use it must belong to the ‘Sensible’ category. They must acknowledge the necessity to use politics to network, expand connections and also use the existing system to give and receive favors; negotiation and bargaining for important resources necessary for successful project implementation.

4.2 Understand and Accept Individual Interests and align them with project goals.

Another point Pinto makes is the foot-dragging and nonchalant attitudes some department exhibit during systems development projects. This is because individuals within organizations want to know “WIIFM” (What's In It For Me?) before they commit themselves to the project. According to Pinto, a common mistake new project managers make is to assume that other departments should accept the new system which ‘is good for them’. It is the responsibility of the project manager to recognize this false thinking and use appropriate political tactics to align the goals of various interest groups with that of the project. Project managers must understand how project participants perceive potential losses and benefits likely to result from participating in the project and the future use of the new system.

4.3 Understand the dynamics of conflict process

IS developers must recognize conflict as a normal part of the project process and offer appropriate responses. To do this they must understand the conflict resolution process. They must actively participate in organizational politics and use their problem solving skills to solve conflicts especially, among users. Conflicts must be dealt with in a timely many to prevent further explosion.
4.4 Learn the art of Influencing

As suggested by Malan and Bredemeyer [9], project leaders need to understand both the organization and individual objectives of stakeholders, and get them to be personally committed. To achieve this "means listening, networking, articulating and selling a vision, and doing all this continuously over the life of the project". Pinto points out that, influence is individually based. Some people are more powerful by virtue of their dynamic personality or charisma. Project managers must therefore make the conscientious effort to learn the art of influence and apply it in project processes.

In addition, according to Dr. Zeitoun of the International Institute for learning [20] a project manager’s success is associated with his or her ‘likeability’ factor. How much a project manager is liked by his team or stakeholders forms a major contributory factor in the project’s success. Among the top likeability attributes voted on by respondents on a likeability test conducted included; trustworthy, respectfulness, listens well to others, open personality and knowledgeable. Project managers are expected to have compassion and the skill to get familiar with their team members at a personal level, even to the extent that team members are able to share personal stories with them. Finally, it came up in the survey that team members expect their project managers to have the ability to handle organizational politics and yet have a low interest in ‘playing’ politics. Thus, project managers must choose to use politics for positive outcomes.

- Below is a list of some skills needed to establish sustained influence
- Develop a reputation as an expert
- Prioritize social relationships on the basis of work needs rather than on the basis of habit or social preference
- Develop a network of other experts or resource persons who can be called upon for assistance
Choose the correct combination of influence tactics for the objective and the target to be influenced

Influence with sensitivity, flexibility, and solid communication

Source: Keys and Case [12]

5.0 Impacts of organizational politics on IS projects

The diagram below captures the ubiquitous role of politics in the failure of many IS project. This diagram resulted from the attempt of Al-Ahmad et al., (2009).[21] to construct a taxonomy of causes of IS project failures. They came up with 6 major categories of causes having considered literature on domain specific IS project failures including; Web-Based project failure causes and health informatics failure causes. As can be seen from the diagram, the root causes of project failure attributed to organizational politics are;

1. **Project Management Factors:** the skill to get users involved, which includes aligning their various conflicting interests.

2. **Top management Factors:** The skill to influence top management from their lower position as a project manager. A great deal of political astuteness is required of IS project managers to secure the commitment of top management in a given project.

3. **Technology Factors:** IS development project managers, despite their technological expertise must continuously seek to surround themselves with others in to frequently discuss current trends in IT innovation. Without the skill to network and maintain friendships with others, IS professionals are less likely to be aware of most current innovations especially in the ever changing world of information technology.
4. **Organizational Factors**: Enough has been said about understanding the political dynamics of a given organization and how that impacts the development of a new system. Systems development project managers must be politically savvy to achieve this.

5. **Complexity/Size Factors**: This paper has alluded to the fact that the bigger a project the more people in an organization it affects and the higher the political skills needed to effectively deal with conflicts resulting from diverse interest groups and individuals.

6. **Process Factors**: It is important that the initial feasibility studies of IS projects in addition to considering technical and economic feasibility, include a detailed analysis of political feasibility and how conflicting interests can be systematically aligned with project objectives.
Conclusion

It is important for information systems developers or project managers to understand the dynamics and the inextricable relationship between organizational politics and IS development project. A good dose of aptitude in organizational politics can pave the way for the systems developer to smoothly work with all stakeholders involved by pre-empting conflict points and resolving them quickly before they explode. It is imperative that project managers acquire ‘people skills’ to successfully work with their usually eclectic team as the manager operates from a non-authoritative position. This paper has advocated that project managers actively participate in healthy organizational politics and appreciate the constructive as well as the destructive nature of organizational politics while leveraging healthy participation to bring about successful systems project development.

Source: Al-Ahmad et al., (2009).[21]
*The original article spells ‘referent’ as ‘Refernt’

Reference:

Auchamore (March 12, 2010) Organizational Politics, Business as usual .


Malan and Bredemeyer(2002) Organizational Politics Architect Competency


www.bredemeyer.com/pdf_files/PoliticsCompetency.PDF


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