

POLITICKING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY STRATEGY IN ORGANISATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF A SELECTED ORGANISATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

The paper discusses the impact of organisational politics on IT strategy formulation and implementation in an organisation. The objective is to determine the extent of organisational politics on strategy implementation in an organisation. The paper considered the interplay between stakeholders in influencing IT strategy formulation and implementation in an organisation as a socially constructed phenomenon. Thus, the phenomenon can be interpreted and understood by using social theories such as Structuration Theory. Hence the paper adopted ANT as a lens through which to understand and interpret the sociotechnical processes associated with IT strategy formulation and implementation in an organisation. Through IT strategy, many organisations attempt to set out key directions and objectives for the use and management of information, communication and technologies. A shared view among these organisations is that IT strategy allows all parts of the organisation to gain a shared understanding of priorities, goals and objectives for both current and future states as defined in the organisational strategy. It is therefore arguable that IT strategy, for the foreseeable future will remain a key aspect of development within organisations. As a result, there has been more focus on how IT strategy is formulated and articulated. What is missing though, is less attention to the implementation of it. Using interpretive research philosophy and employing semi-structured interviews as data collection instrument, this paper attempts to suggest a matrix that will assist organisation to comprehend and deal with organisational politics to reduce its negative impact on IT strategy formulation and implementation in an organisation.

Keywords: IT Strategy, Implementation, Organisational Politics, Structuration Theory and Actor-Network Theory

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1 Introduction and existing work

Despite the willingness of employees to support and help achieve the interests of an organisation, they are sometimes driven by self-interest to seek their own needs. Markus (1983) argued that "regardless of the degree to which an employee may commit to the objectives of the organisation, personal interests are likely to be different from those of the employer." According to Morgan (1986), "organisational politics arise when people think differently and want to act differently." In view of Morgan's description of organisational politics, it is arguable that organisational politics are activities orchestrated by staff and stakeholders in an organisation. In Morgan's (ibid.) own words, they do so "to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources to obtain their preferred outcomes in a situation that predicts uncertainty," lack of clarity or a lack of consensus about choices. Organisational structure is therefore a key component of organisational politics, and power becomes the focal point of organisational structure.

According to (Holbeche 2004), politics is a fact and part of life in organisations. Armstrong (1994) argued that the danger of politics is that it can be carried to extremes, and can then seriously harm the effectiveness of an organisation. In a study by Robbins et al. (2001), many employees and employers confirmed the recognition of legitimate and illegitimate politics in the organisations. It is a serious oversight to pretend that politics does not exist. Since the beginning of time, politics has been a part of every human equation (Butcher, D. & Clarke 1999). Politics is the means; power is the end. Organisations are the most fertile breeding ground for politics. This is due to the fact that the actors seek different personal interests such as success, professional growth and financial security (Kling, R. & Iacono 1984). According to Hanbury (2001), "If a project is not facing a lot of organisational politics, it is a sure sign that it is not doing anything significant." Much work such as Markus (1983), Pfeffer (1992), Hardy (1994), Butcher & Clarke (1999), Mintzberg (2000) and Lewis (2002) has been done on

organisational politics, and on IT strategy, such as Ciborra (1996), Lederer & Gardiner (1988, 1992); Boar (1998), Gottschalk (1999), Wolff & Sydor (1991) and Mack (2002). These works are often separately articulated. What is missing is the interaction between IT strategy and organisational politics. It is in this area that further research is vital to both the academic and corporate domains. Orlikowski (1993) argued that organisational politics has an important influence on the degree to which IT, through its strategy, can be used. Where people are involved, politics exists. Scarbrough (1998) argues that IT strategy needs other elements with a strong influence such as politics to achieve the set goals and objectives. Therefore, Information Technology (IT) strategy can be described as “a complex mixture of thoughts, ideas, insights, experiences, goals, expertise, memories, perceptions, and expectations that provide general guidance for specific actions in pursuit of particular ends within the computing environment” (Ward & Peppard, 2002). It has been demonstrated, analytically as well as empirically, that technical issues get caught up in a host of organisational issues such as politics. Orlikowski & Barley (2001) state "... to include insight from institutional theory, IT researchers might develop a more structural and systematic understanding for how technologies are embedded in complex interdependent social, economic and political networks, and consequently how they are shaped by such broader institutional influences."

IT departments in organisations have many and diverse stakeholders and this makes politics inevitable. Straub & Wetherbe (1989) argued that IT strategy helps to set direction, comprehension and focus on the future in the wake of change in the organisation that it supports. Walsham & Waema (1994) also indicated that IT needs strategy to achieve its aims and objectives. This has made “IT Strategy” a significant contributor to an organisation’s specific direction making the outcome of an IT strategy even more significant. The question is what influences or causes the IT strategy outcome (implementation)? Orlikowski (1993) argued that organisational politics has an important influence on the degree to which IT, through its strategy, can be used. The way in which the IT strategy is developed and implemented have a significant impact on its success, and can have a direct impact on the organisational culture. According to Gottschalk (1999), implementation is key to the success or failure of IT strategy. Those who develop the IT strategy will probably be different people from those who carry out the implementation. If the IT strategy is understood or interpreted differently, the implementation is likely to encounter problems Walsham & Waema (1994). Implementing IT strategy depends on key people within the organisation (Daniels 1994). In essence, unless all major stakeholders are involved, successful implementation is unlikely. However, analysing the

peoples’ perspectives opens the door for political intent within the organisation. Where there are different people and technologies, there are conflicts and difficulties (Orlikowski & Gash 1994). Given Orlikowski & Gash (ibid.) accession, one can argue that indeed people are susceptible and driven by different forces, such as ‘politics’, in organisations. Of the numerous, including the above mentioned works, there is no definitive definition of IT strategy and the existing literature and debate, as commented by (Orlikowski & Barley (2001), have focussed on Strategic Information Systems Planning (SISP). This paper uses the following IT strategy definition to examine the formulation and implementation of IT strategy:

“The technical design which serves as the road map over a period of time for the implementation of information technology and information systems by people using a formal process”

The reasons for the use of the above definition are as argued by Rosser, Kirwin & Mack (2002): (a) It recognises that IT strategy can neither be formulated nor implemented in isolation from Information Systems (IS); (b) It recognises the inseparable relationship between the social construction of the IT environment and technology; (c) It acknowledges the role of human involvement. The main aim of this study therefore, was to explore the impact of organisational politics on the implementation of IT strategy. The study was shaped by three key issues: (a) how IT strategy is implemented, which includes the people and structures; (b) the influencing factors, such as organisational politics in the implementation of IT strategy; and (c) the impact of organisational politics on the implementation of IT strategy in an organisation. The research question was: “What influence does organisational politics have on IT strategy in an organisation that deploys it?”

2 Research approach

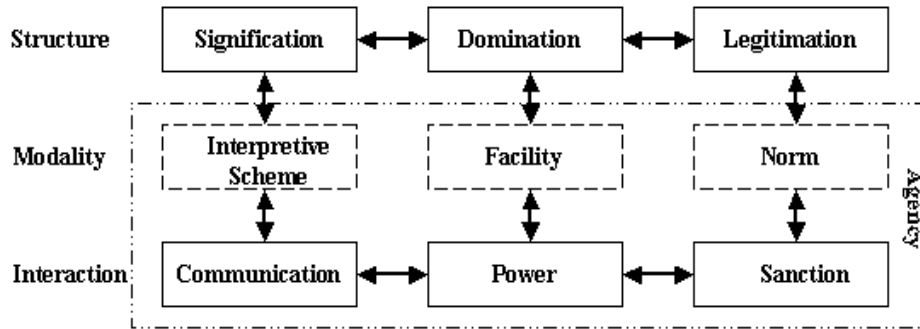
2.1 Overview of duality of structure

The overview attempts to summarise the various attempts made in literature to explain Giddens' (1984) ‘*dimensions of the duality of structure*’ of Structuration Theory (ST) (Callon & Law 1989). The concept enabled the analysis and interpretation of the case study and as such a good understanding of it and how it was applied, particularly, in the area of IT strategy, is very important and useful. It certainly impossible for any organisation to determine what the choice(s) of an agency will be in any particular circumstance. Agency/Agent and Structure (see Figure 2) are the two core paradigms of ST. Giddens' (1984:14), Twum-Darko (2014a; 2014b); Twum-Darko and Sibanyoni (2014); and Twum-Darko (2011) argue that agency is anything that has the ability to take action (also known as ‘transformative

capacity’). That is, from Giddens (ibid.), social actors like you and I (agency), by our actions, reproduce the prerequisites (structure), which allow and enable our actions. Thus, in simple terms, structures are the medium and the outcome of social actions i.e.,

making structure and action mutual prerequisites. These result from modalities (i.e., interpretative schemes, facilities and norms) that link particular types of interaction with particular structural elements Giddens (ibid.)

Figure 1. Duality of structure (Giddens, 1984)



2.2 The case

The study adopted a qualitative, single case study involving a selected organisation in South Africa based on the following factors: (a) that the organisation have a wide range of cultural diversity within its information technology (IT) environment; (b) the organisation provides a very good representation of the financial sector; (c) accessibility; many organisations were approached but access was not easy to obtain due to the nature of the study as it has to do with organisational politics, which is considered a sensitive issue in many organisations. The case study approach enabled in-depth exploration of this complex socially constructed phenomenon: politicking IT strategy in an organisational. Yin (1994) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between

phenomenon and context are not clearly defined.” Structured and semi-structured interviews were used as data collection instrument. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Other secondary and relevant documentations such as memos, emails and periodic strategy review reports were used as data collection. A set of balanced respondent demographics (See Table 1) was formulated and adhered to, as it was the unit of analysis that provided a true reflection of the phenomenon. The unit of analysis included race and genders within the hierarchy of the organisation and in particular, IT department. The interviewees included senior staff: Executives, IT Managers, Business Managers, IT Architects and Project Managers; and junior staff: Programmers, Business Analysts, Business consultants, Practitioners e.g., human resources, and finance and network administrators.

Table 1. Unit of analysis

	Job title	White	Non-White	Total
Male	Senior	6	2	8
	Junior	4	4	8
Female	Senior	5	3	8
	Junior	4	3	7
Total		19	12	31

The IT environment was structured hierarchically such that activities took place and managed by individuals and teams of employees. Responsibilities were allocated on the basis of organisation’s rules and regulations. The IT executive committee of the organisation formulates IT policies which are binding on all employees. However, the IT department had specific rules, regulations, processes and procedures enforced through organisational structures. In terms of “Agency” staff involved in the

formulation of the IT strategy was not necessarily the implementers, however, they included the IT managers, IT Architects, IT Technical staff and users. The CIO of the organisation has the mandate to decide on any unclear instances in the formulation and implementation of the IT strategy. Relating “structure” the case, the CIO’s approval of the formulated IT strategy authorizes the implementation of it. Thus the CIO instructs the IT managers to enforce performance contracts for the implementation

of the IT strategy. Based on the organisation's rules, the CIO was mandated to allocate the available resources for the development and implementation of the IT strategy. On another level, the organisation's rules permits the IT managers to make decisions concerning different resources. The interdependency of agency and structure and their link via modalities within the IT environment of the organisation are discussed in Section 3 of this paper.

2.3 Methodology

The study has three lines of investigation: (a) it applied an interpretive perspective to investigate the relationship between technical and non-technical factors in the implementation of IT strategy; (b) it investigated the organisational politics within the computing environment in the implementation of IT strategy. This area of investigation was more carefully phrased because of the sensitive nature of the subject (politics); and (c) it focused on the impact of organisational politics on IT strategy. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 31 employees from the organisation. The appropriate questions for the collection of data were grouped into three categories to enable the use of process-based research as described by Roode's (1993) framework for information systems research.

The first group of questions focused on interviewees' understanding of IT strategy as understood by the respondents: the purpose was to determine the meaning and definition of IT strategy. The second group of questions followed an inductive logic with the view of drawing in any relevant information on the topic of how IT strategy is implemented within the organisation to surface. The last group of questions aimed to explore in more depth the nature of influence of actors within the implementation of IT strategy. Drawing from the work of Audet and d'Amboise (2001) and stated here verbatim, "an interview guide was used to avoid losing focus, and to ensure that all relevant questions were asked. Questions were both closed and open-ended. Indeed, while some questions required a brief and precise answer, it was also desirable to let information emerge. Respondents were thus given the opportunity to express their thoughts on the topic of interest as freely as possible." The approach proved useful to the study in the following ways: (a) to observe, capture and explain participants' behaviour, which cannot be easily identified with other research approaches; (b) it allowed for an in-depth analysis of the case studies to be presented, a factor necessary due to the nature of the topic; (c) to study individuals in their natural setting, which involves physical interaction and gathering of material and to emphasise on the epistemological context as an *active learner able to* narrate the story from the participants' view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants. According to Klein & Myers (1999),

information systems researchers should explore 'how' and 'which' principles may apply in any particular or different situation.

3 Findings and discussions

3.1 Introduction

Given the Figure 1 above, the action and interaction of actors and the (interplay between agency and structure) were established and recognised in the different situations in terms of time and place. This analysis, focusing on the emergent regularities of the situation, is an interpretative scheme and dealt with how the understanding of agents was exhibited. To effectively apply duality of structure as a lens to understand and interpret the phenomenon, the social structures and human interactions in the formulation and the implementation of the IT strategy were categorized into three dimensions. The dimensions are recursive in character and linked by modalities as illustrated in Figure 1 above - Structure and Interaction: Signification and Communication; Legitimation and Sanction; and Domination and Power.

3.2 Factors of organisational politics

The above duality of structure (Figure 1) is interpreted and mapped onto four factors of organisational politics shown in Table 2 and summarised below. The factors were drawing from the works of Pettigrew (2003), Pfeffer (1992), Morgan (1996) and Morgan and Goldsmith (2004). These factors were manifestations of organisational politics as critical factors which impacted on the implementation of the IT strategy in the organisation. The mapping was done to make sense of the interplay between the findings and the interpretation.

3.2.1 Racial behaviour

Although the organisation advocated racial integration in the computing environment, racial diversity was misconstrued as a political racial divide, and actions were often interpreted as acts of racism. Some employees resorted to racial discrimination to ingratiate themselves with their superiors. This resulted in negative relationships and a lack of trust among employees in the computing environment. Some whites at times excluded employees of other races in communicating some of the processes and activities in the implementation of IT strategy. Similarly, some blacks, coloureds and Indians segregated themselves from the whites, which made it difficult for them to be part of the allocation of tasks. All of this added up to a divided workforce. This was not conducive to productivity, especially with respect to the implementation of the IT strategy.

3.2.2 Exploitation of job insecurity

The absence of any process of measuring progress with tasks allocated to employees meant that individual managers used their power to decide how to measure employees' performances. With appraisals in terms of the individual employee's performance contract also measured on a timescale shorter than the period of IT strategy implementation, employees resorted to seeking the approval of their managers instead of focusing on the task at hand. Power was unequally distributed among the different departments, and this, coupled with an unhealthy competitiveness and rivalries to gain personal advantage meant that employees and managers alike were constantly insecure about what they had to do and about their jobs as such. This situation was not improved by acts of disinformation. Some employees were dominated by others, which meant that those dominated were often deprived of the resources needed to do their job, adding to their insecurity.

3.2.3 Exploitation of performance contracts

The performance contract was regarded as a *sine qua non* in the organisation. All employees, including managers, were obliged to conform and sign their contracts. However, employees were not forced to perform the tasks as stated in their individual contracts. This depended on the agenda of individual managers, who might coerce employees to perform tasks aligned with their (the managers') interests. Using their power and authority, and the "threat" of performance appraisal, managers therefore exploited the performance contracts. At the same time, employees did their bit of exploitation as well. Employees who had more organisational knowledge and information related to the implementation of IT

strategy at their disposal, and those highly skilled employees whose expertise were heavily relied upon during implementation, became dominant and they used that as power to dictate activities and processes during implementation, regardless of specific performance contract stipulations.

3.2.4 Pursuit and protection of personal and group interests

IT managers, especially heads of departments, promoted their individual interests through the facility to allocate and authorize the use of available resources. These actions led to counterproductive rivalries, where personal and group interests, often in conflict with the interests of the organisation, were put first. The driving force behind this pursuit of individual and group interests was often the feeling of superiority of one manager or the particular group over others. This had a negative effect on many of the employees, particularly, on those at the lower levels. It led to reduced productivity, created a lack of trust, increased internal conflict and negatively affected the implementation of IT strategy in the organisation.

3.3 The impact of organisational politics on the implementation of IT strategy

The four factors of organisational politics identified are, of course, not independent. In order to discover the relationships between the factors, they were further analysed. From the findings, the concepts related to organisational politics were identified as domination, inequality of power, disinformation, coercion, self-interests, rivalries, lack of trust and conflict (Pfeffer 1992). Table 2 shows the analysis where each factor, regarded as a category, shows the concepts that make up that category.

Table 2. Matrix of relationships between factors of organisational politics

	Racial behaviour	Exploitation of job insecurity	Exploitation of performance contracts	Pursuit and protection of personal and group interests
Domination & Power				
• Domination	X	X	X	
• Inequality of power		X	X	X
• Self-interests	X		X	X
Signification & Communication				
• Disinformation	X	X	X	
• Coercion	X		X	X
Legitimation & Sanction				
• Rivalries	X	X		X
• Lack of trust	X	X		X
• Conflict	X	X		X

In terms of the analysis, Table 2 shows the relationships between the factors of organisational politics and duality of structure. The implementation

of IT strategy is the result of peoples' actions, through procedures, processes, activities and use of resources. Even though the CIO, IT Managers and

other employees acted within the defined processes and procedures, organisational politics influenced and negatively impacted on the implementation of IT strategy in the organisation. The participation or enrolment of employees in the implementation of IT strategy was marked by different negotiations, but mainly, the performance contract was the basis for all negotiations. And here the rules allowed the IT managers to use their discretion (as they saw fit) in certain scenarios. The performance contract did not permit any employee to avoid participating or enrolling in the implementation of the IT strategy, forcing them to be committed individually and collectively. While this made it easier to involve all employees in the implementation of IT strategy, individual actions resulting from the performance contract did not guarantee a positive outcome. First, employees were not forced to perform the tasks as stated in their individual contracts – this, in many cases, depended on the agenda of individual managers, who might coerce employees to perform tasks aligned with their (the managers') interests. Second, using their power and authority, and the "threat" of performance appraisal, in other words, exploiting the job insecurity of employees, managers exploited the performance contracts, often to achieve their own objectives, which did not necessarily align with that of the organisation in terms of IT strategy implementation. Third, employees did their bit of exploitation as well. Some employees who were privileged shared and communicated information with colleagues of their choice, while the information was supposed to be made available to the entire department. Some highly skilled employees whose expertise was heavily relied upon in the implementation of IT strategy in the organisation, used their power to dictate activities and processes in the implementation of IT strategy, regardless of specific performance contract stipulations. Through their actions they inhibited and dominated other individuals.

Due to the huge dependency on people, technologies and processes in the implementation of IT strategy, relationship was key and fundamental. As the analysis revealed in Table 4 above, the feeble relationship which was a manifestation of organisational politics was instrumental to the derailment of IT strategy in the organisation. Some employees, including some IT managers, felt insecure about their jobs or financial aspects related thereto. As a result, their actions were based on furthering their personal interests rather than those of the organisation. For example, some managers felt that they could not report the truth about the activities in and the state of their department, in case it might have an adverse effect on their employment. Managers exploited performance contracts by using their power to decide how to measure employees' performances. There were stiff and unhealthy competitiveness and rivalries, which led to constant insecurity. This

situation was not improved by acts of disinformation or non-information, which, as pointed out above, were often racially motivated. Some employees were dominated by others, excluded and deprived of the resources needed to do their job, adding to their insecurity. The flow of information during implementation was top-down in approach. The autonomy of managers also allowed them to interpret the implementation tasks differently, depending on the interest of the head concerned. IT managers used the mandates and authority bestowed on them to share the information they received and their interpretation thereof as they pleased and in the process, imposed constraints on the performance of those who were not privileged or favoured by them. Such actions were informed by personal interests, exploited the performance contracts of employees and prevented employees from carrying out tasks that the managers would prefer not to undertake.

IT managers, especially heads of departments, also promoted their individual interests through the facility to allocate and authorize the use of available resources. These actions unavoidably led to counterproductive rivalries, where personal and group interests, often in conflict with the interests of the organisation, were put first. The driving force behind this pursuit of individual and group interests was often the feeling of superiority of one manager or a particular group over others. This had a negative effect on employees and increased the job insecurity of many of the employees, particularly, those at the lower levels in dominated departments or groups. The organisational politics led to reduced productivity, created a lack of trust, increased internal conflict and negatively affected the implementation of IT strategy in the organisation. These factors of organisational politics as captured and illustrated in Tables 2 and 3 above, derailed processes and activities in the implementation of IT strategy. As a result of the derailment, IT strategy is developed or reviewed each year, making it a cost prohibitive exercise.

4 Conclusion and recommendation

4.1 Conclusion

During implementation of the IT strategy, employees were mobilised by their managers to undertake aspects of the implementation by allocating these as tasks to them. Communication was restricted, and the focus was on technical aspects. These communicative actions reproduce structures of significance, which were the technical aspects and must always receive priority, regardless of their match with particular aspects of the developed IT strategy. Employees use their technical abilities to manage their authority to protect their own interests. These actions produced and reproduced the structures of domination, dictating implementation based on pragmatic considerations. Finally, employees accepted their tasks, together as

they were, to performance related incentives, and continue with their work without full understanding of the implementation. Their work is affected by a variety of issues which created an environment of poor cooperation. All of this reproduces the structure of legitimation during the implementation of IT strategy in the organisation.

Due to the relative instability of the computing environment as a result of different interest groups and at different levels, implementation of the IT strategy could become increasingly difficult over time. As alluded to in this paper, the actions of agents always carry within them the seeds of change, but such change, to improve alignment of interests of all interest groups, would also require a change in the processes to create new norms, facilities and interpretive schemes. As mediators of the actions of agents, they could contribute to new structures of legitimation, domination and signification, which in turn could lead to a better and effective interplay among stakeholders in an organisation. The findings from the analysis represent the current irregularity in practice, which is likely to continue unless an effort is made to change it.

4.2 Contribution

The use of Structuration Theory as lenses through which the analysis was undertaken, revealed a rich context that otherwise would not have been observed. It enabled the explanation of the interaction between technology, human action and organisational structure, affecting the strategic IT direction of the organisation. This represents a contribution to Information Systems Research methodology. It is envisaged that this approach (use of Structuration Theory as a lens to study the impact of sociotechnical processes in organisations) could, in many cases, be used to conduct more in-depth analyses of the social aspects that so often lead to failures of information system projects. Further contribution of the study is the support it gives to decision makers, professionals, including managers and employees of the organisation within the computing environment, and IS researchers. It is expected that the key contribution will arise from the understanding of the impact of organisational politics on IT strategy. Through this, a better understanding of the influences in the deployment of IT strategy will be gained.

4.3 Limitation and future research work

Politicking IT Strategy in an organisation has emerged as one of the factors contributing to inadequate IT strategy formulation and implementation. Many organisations are embracing the need to understand and interpret the interplay among stakeholders that bedevils the sociotechnical processes of IT strategy formulation and implementation. Even though it is justifiable to

conduct a single case study research in information systems or in a computing environment, the case was a very large organisation or of a global status. However, the unit of analysis was limited due to the sensitivity of the research. If a larger sample had been obtained and as well as with a multiple case study, perhaps the results and analysis thereof could have revealed more information. Furthermore, academic literature on information technology and information system strategy formulation and implementation has been covered very extensively since its foundation. However there is little literature coverage on the impact of organisational politics on these strategies and their effective implementation and there was no readily available framework or guide that organisations can use to identify and address the negative impact of organisational politics on IT strategy implementation. This research has gone a long way in addressing this because it had suggested a matrix as a framework that will serve as a guide to many organisations to determine and address their sociotechnical processes leading to IT strategy formulation and implementation. However, politicking IT strategy in an organisation is still evolving and the underpinning sociotechnical processes are broad. This research has just scratched the surface as it only addressed the context of the social aspects. Future research is required to expand the knowledge on factors influencing politicking of technology appropriation in support of business strategy in organisations. Finally, it is recommended that further studies be done for multiple organisations with a broader unit of analysis and from different developing countries to further examine the theoretical validity and empirical relevance of the suggested matrix. It is also recommended that further studies be conducted to determine the degree of politicking on IT strategy implementation in an organisation.

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