Evasive Maneuvers and Guerilla Tactics

A Scandinavian institutional perspective on Chief Information Officer's strategies for legitimization

Johan Magnusson & Bo Oskarsson

Göteborg University, Centre for Business Solutions & SYSteam AB

Johan.magnusson@handels.gu.se; bo.oskarsson@systeam.se

Abstract

Scandinavian Institutional Theory studies the travel of managerial ideas in time and space. This paper reports results from a study conducted during the summer of 2006. The study was initiated through a joint collaboration between a large management consultancy firm and the academia, and consisted of in-depth interviews with 27 Chief Information Officers (CIOs) from large, Swedish organizations. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the strive for legitimacy as displayed by CIOs faced with norm divergence. This is done through interviews where norm divergence is induced through the use of paradoxes. As the results show, the CIOs employed a number of different strategies for legitimizing his or her organizations' particular norm divergence, ranging from evasive maneuvers to expressions of guerilla tactics. These results are discussed in relation to the implications for future studies of IT Governance practice and research design, as well as in relation to the implications for individual managers living between evasive maneuvers and guerilla tactics.

1. Introduction

IT Governance (in this paper defined as the creation of settings for the management of IT, comprised of decision rights and accountability structures (definition influenced by Weill & Ross [48])) has since the advent of the introduction of information-processing and -storing technologies been a fundamental activity in large organizations [17,7]. Corporations and public organizations alike have invested large amounts of time and money in the creation of the right settings surrounding their technological infrastructure. Despite this, it is only recently that we see organizations actually differentiating between the governance and management of IT [5].

On the research side, there has been a heavy emphasis on the development of recipes for success and best practices surrounding IT, yet apart from a large amount of frameworks and models we have yet to see substantial research that is not in essence normative [42]. Sambamurthy & Zmud [38] highlight the need for a less reductionist and normative approach to IT Governance.

The supply of mainly normative research (for a more elaborate discussion on this, see Watts & Zimmerman [47] and positive accounting theory) along with a rapid evolution and a strong belief in external companies providing analyses and standardized consulting solutions, has contributed to the field of IT Governance being closely related to Abrahamson's [1] notions of managerial fads and fashions. In this type of situation, managers follow trends on aesthetic and legitimizing grounds rather than more rational, leading to a gap in causality between the adoption of a trend and the expected (positive) benefits [7]. A ritual [29] rather than rational following of external influence will in the long run lead to isomorphism, or a state where organizations within the same organizational set display a homogenization over time [21].

One recent school of thought that has offered interesting insights into the concepts of isomorphism through ritual following of managerial fashion (For a further note on this, see Hedmo et al [25]) is that of Scandinavian Institutional Theory [35].Through researchers such as Sahlin-Andersson [37], Czarniawska

[10,14] Sevón [41] and Erlingsdottír & Lundberg [23], an alternative approach to the understanding of how managerial action is influenced by more or less general organizational ideas has evolved.

Central to this theoretical movement are the findings related to the "travel of ideas" and how the process of translation (defined as the moving and reconfiguration of an object from one social world to another) can be better understood through a strong influence from both earlier institutional theories as well as the works of French intellectuals such as Latour, Callon, Barthes, Tarde and Serres. Along with this, there is a strong focus on understanding how ideas travel across time and space as a process rather than the results of these travels.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the strive for legitimacy as displayed by Chief Information Officers when faced with norm divergence. This is achieved through a cross-sectional field study based on field experiments.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Scandinavian Institutional Theory

"The image we are evoking is as follows: guided by fashion, people imitate desires or beliefs that appear as attractive at a given time and place. This leads them to translating ideas, objects, and practices, for their own use. This translation changes what is translated and those who translate." [11:10]

Building on the work of amongst others Meyer & Rowan [29], an alternative stance on institutional theory evolved during the early 1990s in Scandinavia. Czarniawska & Sevon [14] describe (and consequently dub) it as having an ambiguous approach towards the concept of change, something that the developments within Neoinstitutional theory [26] have not addressed sufficiently.

Czarniawska & Sevon [14] call for a need for a paradoxical view of organizations, or a view accepting logical parallelism:

"Change and stability together become an organizational norm, as the logic of appropriateness is seen as complementary to the logic of consequentiality."

This approach to institutional theory is also complemented by a more process-oriented focus on the actual institutionalization itself [23].

In focusing on process rather than outcome of the institutionalization and influence of institutions in the organizational environment, the theoretical field of what has become known as Scandinavian institutionalism or the Scandinavian school of Institutionalism (perhaps more accurately neoinstitutionalism) has taken a constructionist as well as materialistic turn (These turns in themselves signify differences in degrees rather than direction. I am not arguing that institutional or Neoinstitutional theory would not be materialistic and constructivist) in their approach towards studying change.

The constructionist turn can be seen in for instance the strong rhetoric stance towards the use of the concept of "diffusion" as a model for social change.

"… has recently been replaced by the notion of translation." [15:7]

According to for instance Czarniawska [15], diffusion is an overly simplified, mechanistic and deterministic model for understanding the travel of ideas. The "flavor of the day" is instead the notion of "translation", borrowed from Serres [40] through the works of mainly Latour [26] and Callon [6].

This differentiation of translation and diffusion, along with the critique directed towards the tradition of diffusion studies, is however in turn somewhat simplistic and based on a simplified version of diffusion studies (see Rogers [36] for a thorough dismissing of this). Concepts such as for instance re-invention, has increased the richness and complexity of diffusion theory, or in the words of Rogers [36:180]:

"The new idea changes and evolves during the diffusion process as it moves from adopter to adopter. Diffusion scholars now recognize the concept of re-invention, defined as the degree to which an innovation is changed or modified by a user in the process of its adoption and implementation."

The highly politicized and power-laden concept of translation in the works of Latour and Callon is however de-contextualized in Scandinavian Institutional theory and made more general, as it is used as a model to understand "little narratives" [10] in the way ideas are materialized, moved and institutionalized.

Czarniawska & Jorges [10] discuss the diffusion of ideas under the heading of “travel of ideas”. According to this theoretical variant of the sociology of translation [6], ideas go through the following four phases when they are translated by organizations (previously mentioned in the introduction):

1. Disembedding (separation of idea and institutional surrounding)
2. Packaging (translation of idea into object)
3. Unpackaging (translation to fit new context)
4. Reembedding (local translation into new practice)

Given the focus of the Scandinavian School of Institutionalism on change and the process of institutionalism, a great deal of research has been conducted on the institutionalization, or “idea to action” element of this model (see for instance most articles in Czarniawska & Sevon [11]) This could perhaps be seen as an over representation of action/practice-oriented studies, vividly described by Czarniawska & Jorges [10:41]

“The magic moment when words become deeds is the one that truly deserves to be called materialization…”

The focal point of Scandinavian Institutional Theory could be regarded as the object of organizational idea. This concept is rather loosely defined by the scholars within Scandinavian Institutional Theory through a reference to Mitchell [30] and the definition

“…ideas are images which become known in the form of pictures or sounds…” [10:20]

This differentiates the idea from its manifestation or materialization (objects or action). With inspiration from previous institutional theorists such as Parsons [31], the concept of norms could be introduced as an alternative to that of ideas.

Norms can be viewed as *“generalized rules governing behavior”[39:18]*, and in this manner, their influence on the cognitive aspects of individual action becomes apparent. At the same time they can be regarded as a subset of the more general notion of “ideas”, where the norm is both generalized and rule-based. It is in other words an idea that is expressed (packaged) in the form of a normative statement.

When Institutional theory depicts institutionalization as the process of supplying structure with a source of stability, and Neoinstitutional theory depicts it as a process of supplying the individual with a sense of meaning, Scandinavian Institutional theory emancipates the individual’s sense making by stressing the heterogeneous and receiver-dependent aspects of diffusion.

2.2. The Strive for Legitimacy

“Organizations receive support and legitimacy to the extent that they conform to contemporary norms – as determined by professional and scientific authorities – concerning the ‘appropriate’ way to organize.” [39:110]

The notion of legitimacy can be regarded as one of the key necessities for any organization and also an “anchor-point” in institutional theory [45]. Through the upholding of legitimacy, the organization in question signals that it is in tune with external norms, values and expectations [2]. According to the same authors, legitimacy is attributed the organization in question by its constituents.

Researchers such as Pfeffer [32] and Richardson [34] have identified different management approaches for the seeking of legitimacy. Through substantive (referring to changes in organizational goals, structures, processes etc) and symbolic (referring to changes in the meaning of acts) management, organizations seek to uphold or capture legitimacy.

According to Ashforth & Gibbs [2], the mix and intensity of legitimizing practices (being either substantive or symbolic) varies whether the organization seeks to defend, maintain or extend its current legitimacy.

Through work on the adoption of new organizational forms, Tolbert & Zucker [46] differentiate between institutionalization through law or gradual legitimization, implying a fundamental difference between law and gradual legitimization. Law in this case being direct and legitimate more or less par definition, and various other forms of legitimization categorized as gradual in essence.

“Under some conditions, these pressures lead the organization to be guided by legitimated elements, from standard operating procedures to professional certification and state requirement, which often have the effect of directing attention away from task performance. Adoption of these

legitimated elements, leading to isomorphism with the institutional environment, increases the probability of survival."[30:443]

The quote above highlights the almost contradictory relationship between the strive for legitimacy and the subsequent isomorphism (since the constituents and sources of legitimacy within an organizational set are shared) and operational efficiency. In neoinstitutional theory, much of the research conducted on adoption of legitimated structures, strategies and practices is conducted by organizational ecologists and students of organizational population such as Zucker [50] and Hannan & Freeman [24]. This research accentuates the relationships between organizations that are regarded as legitimate and organizations that survive (examples of this can be seen in Deephouse [18] and Elsbach & Sutton [22]). The correlation between performance and legitimacy is however much more elusive (see for instance Zucker [50] and DiMaggio & Powell 21]).

3. Methodology

This paper reports on findings from a study conducted in the summer of 2006 as a collaboration between a large management consulting firm and two academic institutions. The study consisted of a sample of 27 interviews with CIOs from large organizations selected from a targeted population of 40 organizations. These organizations all fitted the description of "Excellent IT-governance practice" as defined by the management consulting firm.

The respondents were contacted by regular mail and then phone with an invitation to participate in the study. Out of the 40 organizations that were contacted a total of 27 eventually participated in the study. The organizations that participated in the study were:

Alfa Laval	Försvarsmakten
Riskpolisstyrelsen	Sveriges Television
Apoteket	Försäkringskassan
SAS	TeliaSonera
Arbetsmarknadsstyrelsen	Handelsbanken
SEB	Trygg-Hansa
AstraZeneca	Ica
Securitas	Vattenfall
Com Hem	IKEA
Skandia	Volvo Lastvagnar
Folksam	Mölnlycke Health Care
Skanska	Volvo Personvagnar
FöreningsSparbanken	Nordea
SKF	

Table 1: List of participating organizations

The interviews were held face-to-face in the respondent's own facilities, and lasted for 60-120 minutes. The interviews were conducted on the basis of a structured interview schema and coded into a standardized report that later was aggregated for a quantitative analysis. A majority (17) of the interviews were also audio-recorded and transcribed for further qualitative analysis.

Previous studies within Scandinavian Institutional Theory have to a large extent been inspired by the ethnographic approach. This highlights the importance of getting as close as possible to the object of study in order to gain a more fundamental understanding of what is actually happening. With the increased focus on the process of translation and travel of ideas, it has been regarded as natural to avoid any form of analytical decomposition of the process at hand, or to be more precise; the processes that have been studied have been studied as a whole and not broken down into sub-processes, where an understanding of the different sub-processes have been seen as the main achievement.

This has made it natural to focus on relatively large, longitudinal studies where the travel of ideas has been studied in detail for one organization at a time. This has made it natural to avoid mini-case designs and more quantitative designs that could achieve results with a higher potential for generalization [27].

The methodology applied in this study differs from most previous studies that have been conducted within Scandinavian Institutional Theory (see Czarniawska & Sevón [4]). Instead of following a longitudinal approach where one case is studied in detail, a cross sectional field study methodology [27] is applied.

With the focus of this paper being the CIO's legitimization of norm divergence, the cross-sectional field study approach has worked with a particular type of analytical selection to identify and isolate instances in the interviews where norm divergence occurs. This analytical selection has been previously reported in Ask et al[42] and is based on the concepts of paradox, dichotomy and contradiction in the works of mainly Luhmann [28] and Czarniawska [11].

Following the logic of Luhmann and Czarniawska, the presence of paradoxes in everyday life leads to an induced strive for action. With the existence of paradox being the existence of logical parallelism, the CIO (when exposed to a question containing a paradox) is forced to choose between two contradicting norms. Hence, regardless of how the CIO chooses to respond, there is no way to avoid norm divergence.

This leads to the logical conclusion that questions containing paradoxes, or to be more precise questions where the available responses contain a paradox can be used as a possible means for inducing norm divergence in an interview. The paradoxes previously identified are presented together with the questions in the table below.

Paradox	Question
IT regarded as Cost Center vs Strategic asset	What is the perception of Top Management on IT?
Investments as Separated vs Linked	How are IT investments linked to corporate strategic directions and priorities?
IT Management vs Top Management responsibility for realizing value	Who has the responsibility for realizing added value from IT organized within the company?
Bottom-up vs Top-down establishment of the IT agenda	Who determines the IT-agenda within the company?
Unformalized vs Formalized decision process for IT-investments	What processes exist for making IT decisions?
Unformalized vs Formalized performance management	To what extent is performance measurement implemented in your company?
Cost vs Value Added of IT	Which statement best describes the focus of performance management reports?
Ad-hoc vs Enterprise wide resource pool	Which statement best describes the resource management process for IT in your company?
Corporate insight into Costs vs Benefits of IT	What is the level of insight into both costs of IT and resulting benefits?
Overhead vs Business unit autonomy over costs	How are IT costs allocated within your company?

Table 2: List of identified Paradoxes and corresponding questions

The analytical selection [3] resulted in a selection of ten questions (see table above) in the study, which in turn resulted in a focus for the transcription and translation of the audio files (interviews) into English text.

These texts were then read with a focus on an inductive approach where the material itself was to lead to a structure for further analysis. This was inspired by work within discourse analysis [33, 49]. As a starting point for this, Austin's [4] strategies for excuse and justification provided additional inspiration to a thorough reading of initially one of the ten questions, resulting in a working model for further analysis consisting of four general strategies. These strategies are presented further under Results.

After this, this categorization of strategies was used as a basis for approaching the rest of the empirical material, question by question. The categorization of strategies was used as a foundation for coding, while at the same time there was a focus on developing the categorization further by introducing new strategies that became apparent during the continued analysis.

4. Results

On a general level, this study found that legitimization is handled through one of four strategies.

Strategy	Description
Direct response	Response is directly related to one of the pre-defined alternative answers to the question, totally free from any form of problematization
Excuse	Response is initiated through a statement that expresses an inability in the organization, often followed by a statement that highlights that the respondents awareness of this inability.
Evasive Maneuver	Response is often direct but followed by a problematization leading to a gradual assessment of faults in the original answer.
Momentum /Direction	Response is focused on the organizational inabilities but these are consistently framed within a statement of momentum and clear direction when it comes to what is currently done within the organization.

Table 3: List of strategies and descriptions

These will now be presented in relation to the empirical material.

In the table below we have summarized the quantified categorization of responses per norm. After this we will in more detail address one of the norms and use this as an illustration of how the different strategies are employed by CIOs.

Norm	Direct Response	Excuse	Evasive maneuver	Momentum
1	5	0	0	4
2	9	6	2	4
3	9	0	2	0
4	6	0	0	1
5	11	6	0	1
6	5	2	1	7
7	10	2	0	2
8	10	2	0	5
9	6	8	0	3
10	9	2	0	1

Table 4: Quantitative summary of findings

The norm related to the *linking of IT investments to corporate strategic directions* (norm number two) can be regarded as a subset to the area of strategic alignment. Strategic alignment has been regarded as one of the central areas of IT in general and IT Governance in particular [8,19].

In the case of the norm investigated through question number two, this could be expressed through the following statement:

IT Investments should be linked to business

When it comes to the direct response, the respondents were categorical in their answers and the interviewers experienced a reluctance to answer the question more in detail. Examples of answers included

"We put these (IT investments and corporate strategic objectives) into the same plan. We do this annually and on a three year basis." Government

and

"In my case it is integrated, fully. It is a part of strategy." Biotech

This strategy could not be seen as an instance of either excuse or justification, since no legitimizing account was provided by the respondents. Instead, the response to the question leads to the necessary exclusion from the study given the focus on strategies for excuse or justification.

When it comes to the strategy of excuse, a more diverse collection of accounts appeared. The respondents fitting this category all gave the impression of being in full accord with the validity of the norm, or in other words the correctness of a full out linking of IT investments with corporate strategies.

This was displayed in statements such as:

"Ah, yes it would be truly beautiful if everything was in total symbiosis…" Government

In cases such as the one above, the respondents made it clear that the goal of linked investments was apparent and sanctified. On the other hand, the full range of answers displayed a more heterogenic collection of ways to motivate their own inability to meet the set and agreed upon norm.

The first of these sets of motivations was the identification of organizational contingencies as a source for norm divergence.

"Product ownership governs the use of IT, whereby it becomes a little bit harder to control." Finance

"It depends very much on the task given to us by the Government and the Riksdag." Government

The empirical material also contained a category of responses where the identification of fundamental differences between IT and Business professionals was used as source of norm divergence.

"The question is…are they really communicating vessels?... They are lawyers, and thereby different. From one side there comes the demands from the business, and from the other side the demands from my own organization." Government

This somewhat classical we/them dialectics display the often strenuous situation of the CIO and highlights the marginal attributes [43, 44] of the role of CIO. With this in mind, it may not be so surprising that the range of responses to the identification of fundamental differences as a source of norm divergence vary from compliance and social consensus to full out guerilla tactics, as displayed by one organization from the Production:

"Not really… but in many cases we on the IT-side hear about something and then we have to ask… Then you have to say that you started with this three months ago, that's the easiest way to do it. We are not always present when you initiate an investment, but we often feel that we should have been present earlier." Production

In this particular case, the CIO gave the interviewer the impression of being locked in a war-like state that made it necessary for covert operations and deceitful practice. This is illustrated in one such colorful example of an investment initiated on the business side containing a strong IT element, which the IT professionals need to act upon "below radar" so that not to be caught off guard when action from their side will be absolutely necessary.

Another illustrating example of this marginal status of the CIO can be found in the following quote:

"The X Project appeared from the side, from out of nowhere last year and hit us very hard budget-wise." Production

The third strategy employed by the respondents in the study was that of Evasive maneuver. In this type of account, the respondents started off with accentuating the correctness, and their own understanding (and apparent compliance), of the norm, only to later on move steadily towards a confession-like response involving non-compliance.

"It (IT investment) is purely driven by demand, it is demand driven… We strive to with more or less accuracy conduct a sort of benefit calculation… The benefit calculations are off course very hard to conduct accurately… There is no real requirement for IT investments to be linked to the business. No, I am going to be honest." Government

This can be seen as highlighting the strength of the norm in question, where the first response is one of political correctness. As ultimately responsible for IT Governance within their organization, the CIO displays a full understanding of the necessity of norm compliance, often wrapped in strong rhetoric notions using ideal boundary objects (such as "benefit calculation" as seen in the example above). Given that the organization does not display a high degree of norm compliance, the unpackaging can be seen as moving through several states (to elaborate more on this, further analysis will be necessary. The results from this particular question could however be seen as containing indications of this).

The final strategy of unpackaging is that of Momentum/direction. This involves accounts where the respondents accentuate the strength of the norm and then illustrate their own organizations strive towards full compliance (this tactic is employed regardless of what the actual state of current compliance).

"But we are on a discussion level here, we have not yet introduced it… So much has happened in one year, one year ago we were almost on an ad-hoc level. There has been a dramatic change for the better." Government

5. Discussion

As the results of this paper shows, the CIO is faced with the choice between four different strategies when faced with an IT Governance related norm. From the strategy of direct response where the executive avoids all problematization to the strategy of evasive maneuver where he or she initially avoids problematization but then gradually become more and more analytical in their response

In this matter of interpretation, the choice could be seen as one between categorical and analytical answers.

At the same time the statements underpinning and constituting these strategies for legitimization show a high degree of diversity. From managers living in close relation and with an almost friendly and utterly collegial relationship with top management to managers involved in what can almost be described as a trench-war.

Scandinavian institutional theory could be seen as a perspective that highlights the heterogenic aspects of organizational behavior and the following of fashion. This in turn could help in understanding how managers tackle institutional pressures without succumbing to full-scale isomorphism.

According to traditional and neo-institutional theory, isomorphism is one of the leading principles where organizations strive for homogeneity over time. The Scandinavian perspective offers an alternative way of understanding how diversity among organizations is actually possible and furthermore actually comes about.

As numerous researchers have stressed [46,50], organizations and individuals are guided by ritual following of fashion rather than utilitarian and rational choices in conduct. This would imply the need for addressing this perspective within IT Governance further in future studies.

Research within IT Governance has been criticized for taking an all too normative stance [38], and an infusion of neo- and Scandinavian institutional theory could be seen as one way to approach a more theory-driven stream of conceptual research.

The theories related to the Travel of ideas could also aid one further element of understanding to the study of IT Governance. With IT Governance traditionally being highly normative and consisting of a wide variety of out of the box solutions, the field could be described as consisting of a large amount of black boxes that more get evaluated based on their external rather than internal attributes.

The ideas surrounding Travel of ideas (as well as modern diffusion theory) offers further insight into how these ideas travel and what actually leads them to be adopted.

This study is as previously stated a study of Swedish organizations through the application of an explicitly Scandinavian theoretical perspective. With the focus of the study being managerial behavior, this leads to a potential shortcoming when it comes to the generalizability of the findings.

This brings us to the implications for individual managers, where a further understanding of the less than rational aspects of adoption could aid the managers in their choices and ratification of choices. Without initiating a debate concerning the rational versus ritual value of models and frameworks, a more nuanced appreciation of what guides the managers in their choices would be beneficial both for the legitimizing procedures and for the strategic fit of the choices.

Further more, while conducting the study we noted that very few of the managers actually reflected on their responses. The typical response would not contain a problematization, which given the complex nature and paradoxal attributes of the questions could be seen as noteworthy. This could be seen as a strong indicator of ritual rather than rational following of responses, and would benefit from being addressed in further research.

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