

## Behavioural Aspects in MIS



*An MIS (Management Information Systems) report is periodically submitted to somebody higher up in management in order to facilitate and help establish an effective and efficient decision-making system in a department or a section. This report provides information that departments of a company seek and use in order to have a smooth management in place. Therefore, MIS is often taught as a distinct course in almost every management and business schools across the world. Using MIS, companies can identify their strengths and weaknesses and, thereby, can consolidate their business operations, including the area of direct marketing and promotion activities. It can also help us attain a competitive advantage, i.e., time and cost-effective performances in comparison. Introduction of MIS in a company would mean knowing what the truths are and who and what all caused them. It would mean thereafter changing things impacting the user-departments, eventually in the best interests of the entire company. The author discusses various issues connected to MIS including resistance to its introduction, conflict resolution, rationality and ambiguity, etc., and tries to evaluate its merits. Read on...*



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### 1. Resistance to Introduce Information Systems

Introduction of MIS would mean knowing what the truths are at particular stages and who and what all caused them. It would mean, thereafter, changing things according to the set-up standards and ideals. Its introduction will impact the user-departments in the best interests of the entire organisation. This would mean giving up old and routine methods of

thinking and awakening to new truths of ground realities—good, bad or indifferent. It often would mean a psychological death to past habits, and ways of truncated thinking in terms of one's departmental interests, and learning to see the total picture. Above all, it would mean putting specific managers in the spotlight, who could not then hide themselves in the crowd of poor performers and non-performers. In any business set-up, no one is secure, as she/he may be swept off by unforeseen factors, apart from one's wrongful doings, and even by accidents. Resistance is opposed to most by those who are used to the feelings of insecurity. At lower levels, resistance is much higher, but not less at higher levels, for the fear of getting swept off their high pedestals, consequent to the ugly truths that would be brought out by an MIS from time to time.

Resistance to changes is by no means unnatural and is usual and even universally witnessed at all levels. It would need to be weakened; however, it can never be eliminated altogether until some time has elapsed and when users would see that as empowering, than designed to catch their faults and weaknesses. Foremost, there has to be a clear understanding that it is introduced not to castigate, but to act as enablers to improve individuals and group performance. Users have to be educated to have this perspective so that they would accept that wholeheartedly. Users have to be assured repeatedly that it will be a constant endeavour of the organisation to create ideal conditions for optimum productivity. And that the organisation is committed to provide training, may be found necessary, so that all individuals are enabled to give their very best.

Resistance is best weakened when the architecture of a business organisation is brought forth to all employees, where all of them would be called upon to work. And the organisation truly believes that from the humblest daily wage workers to the CEO, all are not to lose sight of the grand architecture. In this light, everyone's labour is regarded as needed and dignified, and no one is small or demeaning. Comparison among employees would then become onerous. This feeling of innate human dignity tends to get obliterated, when employees would work under the conditions of division of labour, which is inevitable, however.

The narrow departmental activities that loomed large earlier to managers, now get replaced by the total wellbeing of an organisation. Instead of mistrust, defensiveness and antagonism, positive qualities like

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trust, concern and openness come into play. As these dysfunctional activities become entrenched in the system and defenses that hide the original causes are rigidified and locked into places, there is a tendency in the system to reduce the probability that accurate information will flow through the system. Poor management is known to intensify further controls, which only exacerbate the original causes into a new state of entropy. Such managements do not realise that there is a time for maturing of the system and, therefore, would require a period of adjustment and levelling off.

It should be appreciated that people possessing the same technical qualifications may have different abilities depending upon their sensibility. Initial period of adjustment has to be allowed patiently. Technical sophistication is learnt with much less difficulty like learning to cope with organisational changes – bringing in its social and economic changes, and behavioural modifications. Many social scientists have identified the threatening factors: poverty in ego, low economic and social status, job complexity, isolation, superior-subordinate relationship change, and time rigidity. A change is soonest acceptable when it is vividly brought to the notice of the users that they would need to perform their best, since their very survival will depend upon high performance. Some have suggested the use of formal as well as informal leaders in order to cope with inevitable changes. Once users would be convinced, their progress lay in self-discipline. In acquiring better knowledge through the MIS mode, they would gladly play a positive role. At the outset, it is by no means enough to take care of machineries until attention is paid to human resource management equally.

## 2. Distribution of Power between MIS Department and Users

While the specialists install, operate and develop the MIS software, and work for the users of various

departments, the users supply the data to the MIS software personnel. We had earlier postulated that the role of MIS is to provide critical data on the status of working of various departments, in the backdrop of acceptable standards set for each department from time to time. The working of the users is reported upon by the MIS department, which at once results in a conflict. The MIS department then becomes an immense seat of power, in the sense of being able to influence thinking of others. Power factor has not been deeply studied, as it operates on the ground. Twin driving forces of life have been identified as power and form (or beauty). It is so that the love for power is so strong and innate that it outstrips that for money. Initially, it would look like power being transferred from users to the MIS department, but with users seen to be empowered to improve their performance, initial distrust begins to wear off, giving rise to happy and collaborative efforts, since the users make fresh demands on the MIS to give newer data requirements emerging from larger experience.

There will always be a need for periodical meetings between the users' department and the MIS department to iron out the misunderstandings that arise, and to appreciate each other's responsibilities. The MIS department is to be judged by a measure of usefulness the users' departments perceive. There will always be a requirement of self-discipline on either side. Data provided by the MIS would always have to be reliable and timely. The MIS department would always need to understand the decision-making process in the concerned users' departments and provide data accordingly. One can't think of a competent MIS department, tied to inept users' departments or vice versa.

### 3. Conflict between Users and MIS Department and Its Resolution

Conflicts arise owing to centralisation of data-crunching operations to MIS department. Often, these arise owing to sharing credit for successful management. The MIS department gets the lion's share of the kudos. Delayed processing of data

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causing output not to be delivered on time, is one of the potential areas of conflict. These arise as a result of unclear delineation of responsibilities of the MIS department and the users' departments. Skills required for the MIS and the users are different, and the absence of trust often leads to belligerence. The MIS department is known to develop its programs based on some mystique, which only they would understand. In extreme cases, mutual recrimination does go to the extent of one manager plotting against that of other departments. If not resolved, satisfactorily, in good time, an undercurrent of mistrust would persist undermining both the MIS department and the users' departments.

It is true that, with the introduction of the MIS based on complex software, users would need to be intelligent and conceptually more competent than they had been in the past. A superior of the users' department could not use her/his power to dictate a course of action. Subjectivity would be replaced by the objective data. Emphasis shifts from authority to explication of refined data. It is no longer possible to think in the air with sophisticated data. The MIS tends to make things run on rational basis. Departments can no longer afford to remain in their isolated silos without impacting other departments and being impacted by other departments, equally. Everywhere there is a cry for valid, reliable information as the only basis for action. In order to ensure smoothness of operation between the MIS department and the users, emphasis shifts to interpersonal competence than to mere technical skills.

Some have spoken of the primary need for individual self-reliance as a first step, which no other measure could make up for its lack. This would be a certain condition that would lead to trust, openness and risk-taking, rather than confrontation and conflict. Some have proposed that the organisation develops a culture of frankness.

Conflicts are also known to arise from limited use of computer time. Software personnel are paid highly as compared to the employees of users'

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department, and this leads to jealousy and mutual distrust. Adding to the communication obstacles, are the uses of flowcharts and sign language, which look alien to the users and might not be understood by the MIS department, because of the use of jargon. Also, performance rewards are known to differ drastically.

In extreme cases of conflict, the users and the MIS department are known to sabotage the entire system. Users are known to feed erroneous data or even withholding vital data, which then would show the MIS department in a bad light. The controls established could be wrong. On such an exacerbated atmosphere, the users and the MIS department may complain of a lack of empathy on the part of each other to top management. Turnover then becomes high among the software personnel. In older organisations that have elderly staff, conflicts are bound to be much greater than those in newer organisations. Veterans may point-blank refuse the introduction of MIS, or, if introduced, may even withhold critical information that may incriminate the old employees.

Text books on management tend to play down the conflict existing at all levels, and urge employees to be reasonable and co-operative. Man, for all that, is a bundle of emotions and even highly-qualified trained professionals are no exception to this. All managers have their own aspirations and value-systems, which they like to adhere to. They are working in concert with superiors and subordinates, who have also aspirations in life. Let us not forget that managers are always in competition with their peer groups. Added to this, the daily life of an average manager is full of stress and strain, and is under pressure to achieve with an inadequate or no data. He is constantly in interaction with other people, who are in a similar position, who may be reluctant to co-operate or

even to actively obstruct. The view taken here is by no means exaggerated. They exist in all organisations and the chances of success in implementation of any MIS system would be greater, where non-rational human element is duly taken into consideration. Researchers have observed that a sizeable part of employee time is devoted to discussing colleagues' love affairs and idiosyncrasies, cars, houses, *etc.*, and seemingly irrelevant conversations contain data about other people's interests and attitudes, and form the basis for bonds of friendship, which grow between colleagues. Practical jokes on superiors constantly consume a great deal of business time.

The process of decision-making and the areas of conflict are more complex than it appears. In decision-making, many precedent and bargaining factors are taken into account. People relate to their feeling and evaluate the systems to possible outcomes of the action proposed, and adjust their decisions accordingly. Managers will place themselves in a situation, where they could glean information about other managers, and the departments and people have known to read others' letters upside down; then, it always happens that attempts will be made to suppress information or distort it, in certain directions, to one's advantage. While harmonious relationships are likely to lead to accurate reporting, wide discrepancies and half-cooked data suggest suspicion and distrust. The informal MIS then works in large business organisations. Particularly in public sector undertakings where there is generally poor or non-existent governance, carrying tales showing peers in bad light by blowing up their weakness, is by no means uncommon, when superiors would be too willing to listen to the tales. Even in face-to-face interactions, facial expression and gestures are judged and interpreted. The fact remains that a good organisation is about interactive workforce, ambitions, expectations and values, with a



mechanical system. A successful manager, therefore, has to be a system artist coordinating both tangible and intangible sub-systems.

#### 4. Rationality and Ambiguity in MIS

The MIS covering all departments of an organisation would bring in a rarified atmosphere of cold and brutal data, which could be a little challenged. Decision-making in the past, by hunches of superiors and forced down the throat of subordinates, get replaced by the availability of cold facts, whose veracity is unquestionable. A system external as the MIS would then determine both thinking and decision-making. People without ambition are then pushed into action to raise their standard or quit the race. Initially, there is an extended large-scale frustration, as somebody puts it: "*comparable to the engineer in the past, as a result of industrial and quality-control measures.*" Even today, as between workers and management, time study of operations becomes a big issue of contention between the contending groups.

The fall out of MIS is leadership that gets transferred from authoritative power to competence based on unchallengeable facts. There is now more power to valid information and technical competence. These become a new currency of power and survival. This would always be seen as a threat to older managers, who would not have seen the role of MIS. The grim fact is that managers would now be asked to provide information, which they had learnt to withhold for their safety. MIS would not allow this manipulation by living in ambiguity. Power then gets transferred not to those who are highly qualified, but to those, who take right and bold decisions based on the MIS. Organisational politics would then be given a death blow, as it cannot survive in an atmosphere, where facts would speak. With ready availability of valid information, all departments would be required to co-operate. Departments would be called upon to look beyond the boundaries of their concerned departments. The MIS would change the hungry, competitive and angry departmental units into a wholesome unity of interrelated activities.

Lead given by the top management would then determine the scenario that would come into play. Some naturally fear rationality owing to their poor self-reliance. Others would get enthused but could take devious actions unless controlled and directed by the top management. General level of competence among line managers is then bound to go up considerably, when effectively managed. Seniors,

who don't take umbrage in their age, would equally need to rise up to be perceptive enough to appreciate the rapidly changing scenario, when everyone would be required to put on the thinking cap.

#### 5. Meetings to Discuss MIS Reports and Their Dynamics

MIS reports are supposed to be acted upon by the concerned manager-in-charge to take corrective action to be on a predetermined course. Even otherwise, it is desirable for a CEO to have monthly meetings with her/his managers, where shortcomings of each department are reviewed and remedial actions are evaluated. She/he then emphasises all HODs of their interdependence, when assurance of mutual support is doubly confirmed.

MIS involves setting up targets for departments and even for individuals, which then brings managers to the spotlight. Research work done at the Harvard University concludes that success or otherwise of MIS does not so much depend on the range and depth of data scrutinised and reported upon, as the manner in which decisions are taken by individual managers, and above all in the manner in which a CEO would conduct meetings of HODs to discuss MIS reports. No CEO is likely to succeed, who would not be aware of group dynamics in a meeting. In a meeting, managers are closeted with their peers, whose esteem they cherish. They are always in the presence of their superiors, in whose eyes they want to appear in the best light. In meetings held with so much emotional pressures, feelings tend to be extremely taut, and unless these be handled carefully, no meetings could achieve any success. *Under worst conditions of emotional stress and strain, and with a long history of bad leadership in holding formal meetings, participants may be expected to be more*

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concerned with their own contribution, and least with helping others. Under these conditions, behaviour that would rarely be observed, would be: Openness of feeling; lack of experimentation with their ideas; the positive norms of trust or individuality. In extreme cases, participants may refuse to express altogether, and may prevent others from talking. It is good to realise that strong, positive and negative sentiments commonly predominate. The participants are then given to discussion of mundane and non-essential ideas; discourage concern for individual ideas; antagonism, more than helping others; listening to others is primarily in terms of winning arguments, and not trying to understand the other man's point of view; marked tendency to competitiveness or withdrawal-behaviour; lack of concern for arriving at group consensus and group effectiveness; complete avoidance of issues loaded with conflict or feelings of any kind; participants airing their own narrow departmental views, in total disregard to the interests of the organisation as a whole.

Meetings held under these conditions leave the participants exhausted mentally and emotionally. Participants under such stressful conditions could be expected to be extremely formal and careful in ventilating their thoughts. Each would be concerned only in preparing her/his contribution, than in listening to others.

The first step for a CEO to realise is that MIS *per se* is not the real problem. The basic problem is that specialisation of tasks leads to many dysfunctional activities, which the MIS brings out into the open, and where competence is more important than power, and collaboration and interdependence are more important than cut-throat competition. Factors outlined above tend to create many fears and resistance on the part of individuals, groups and inter-groups.

## 6. Self-Interest versus Reason

The basic assumption that people are rational is not wholly true. They are more rationalising than rational. Even the most highly qualified are driven by gross self-interests and cannot follow the path of reason. Even a sophisticated MIS that churns out data for managers, corrective actions, is not always seen to be governed by reason, commonsense and rationality. When things go wrong that, many a time, these actually do even in the best run organisations, the mutual blame game comes into play. In a practical setting, conflicts do arise with the littlest

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of provocations, where people would threaten each other in subtle ways. All attempts to suppress such conflicts have only tended to not really suppress them. There could be suppression of conflicts in front of a CEO, but when the meeting gets over, participants collect in warring groups and accuse each other for the failure.

## 7. Business a Way of Life—Dignity for All

MIS does create an atmosphere, where a new type of sophisticated executive would be called for, who could lead and inspire people that, being flexible, place creativity above rigid disciplines and rules. Authoritative methods such as browbeating are counterproductive. Human beings irrespective of intellectual status must be given their due dignity. Serving their material needs through fat salaries cannot bring out the best in them, until their metaphysical needs are equally recognised and met. The fundamental flaw is not to understand that business organisations should satisfy the economic needs of their workforce. Business is a way of life, where metaphysical and material needs should be taken care of simultaneously. We should understand that each of us is a unique classifier, and our uniqueness relates to the manner in which we collect facts (or truths), and sort them out according to immutable laws governing our affairs. ■