CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was conducted to identify and validate IT competencies required for administrative support staff employed in networked organizations in Malaysia by asking job incumbents to rate tasks that were initially validated by a panel of experts. Job incumbents were queried regarding the performance, importance and competency in performing tasks and related IT competencies. This chapter therefore reports the conclusions as well as proposes recommendations for further research, office educators, management and trainers.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are based on the findings of the study:

The findings resulted in a list of IT competencies required for administrative support staff employed in networked service organizations in Malaysia. The list of IT competencies was initially identified through a review of literature and validated by a 14-member panel of expert through a three-round Modified Delphi Technique approach. The levels of performance, importance and ability for the 45 IT competencies categorized into 10 competency categories of "Word processing", "Communications", "Manage files and records", "Presentation", "Monitor activities and events", "Perform financial functions", "Internet research", "Basic computer maintenance, security and troubleshooting", "Desktop

publishing" and "Develop Web page" were obtained from administrative support staff employed in networked, service organizations in Klang Valley, Malaysia. There is no intention to suggest that the scope of job functions for administrative support staff be limited to the tasks and IT related competencies generated in this study. Rather the tasks and IT related competencies generated from this study are representative of the core tasks typically performed by administrative support staff. Therefore, input from SMEs validated by a sample of job incumbents suggests that the inventory is representative and presents a baseline set of IT competencies necessary for employment and survival of administrative support staff employed in networked service organizations in Malaysia.

The handling of text processing and communication technologies continue to be a significant and typical function of administrative support staff employed in networked organizations. The findings of the study reflect that tasks and IT competencies related to "Word processing" and "Communications" are most frequently performed. The tasks and IT competencies related to "Basic computer maintenance, security and troubleshooting", "Manage files and records", "Perform financial functions", "Monitor activities and events" and "Internet research" are occasionally performed by administrative support staff. There is evidence, however, that administrative support staff are beginning to carry out higher-level tasks using complex technologies such as tasks and IT competencies related to the competency categories of "Presentation" and "Desktop publishing", while the competency category of "Develop Web page" is never performed in the work of administrative support staff.

The findings for task importance reflect that all the competency categories are perceived as important or somewhat important in the work of administrative support staff. The competency categories of "Presentation", "Desktop publishing" and "Develop Web page" are not frequently performed, yet the higher levels of importance placed on these

tasks and related IT competencies justifies the need for administrative support staff to be equipped with these competencies. Thus, there is a need to continue to emphasize competencies related to the typical functions of administrative support staff and to include new and complex technologies in the curriculum for the development of administrative support staff.

The findings of the study indicate that administrative support staff are most proficient in the competency categories of "Word processing" and "Communications" that are traditionally related to the administrative support function. Administrative support staff rated their ability as acceptable in the performance of "Basic computer maintenance, security and troubleshooting", "Perform financial functions", "Manage files and records", "Monitor activities and events", "Internet research" and "Presentation". However, administrative support staff believe that their abilities in performing the newer technologies of "Desktop publishing" and "Create Web page" as Marginal.

Related to the reports of task ability are the findings of discrepancy gaps between task importance and self-ratings of task ability. The findings show that the priority for training is still in the area of "Word processing" despite reports of proficiency in performing this task. The findings of low discrepancy scores for all competency categories suggests that administrative support staff have the competency to perform the basic operations; nevertheless require additional training to perform advanced operations. The findings of significant differences across several variables disclosed the reasons for the considerable variance in the ability to perform tasks. The IT competencies selected most for additional training are associated with higher level tasks that require competency in using complex technologies. These IT competencies are: a) create multimedia show, b) create Web page, c) access Web sites, d) protect PC from viruses, e) connect PC to projector, f) upload to Web server, g) use self-help resources to solve computer problems,

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h) create database, i) run operating system tools, j) use PC security features, k) Proofread documents (spell & grammar check), l) produce report from database, m) create slideshow, n) search database for specific information, o) create chart, p) use electronic calendar, q) scan documents, r) use formulae and s) create newsletter. Therefore, educators need to emphasize both the basic and advanced operations in using software and, at the same time, provide knowledge on the importance of incorporating new technologies into their work processes.

Several demographic variables were found to be significant factors that influenced levels of task performance, perceptions of task importance and self-ratings of task ability for all the competency categories. The performance of tasks, perceptions of task importance and ratings of ability among administrative support staff in the age group of 20 to 30 are consistently higher than those in the older age group. Age therefore is an important factor to be considered in the management of information technology.

The level of education attained by administrative support staff contributes to significant difference in the levels of performance of task, perceptions of task importance and self-ratings of task ability for a majority of the competency categories. The higher the level of education the higher the ratings of task performance, task importance and task ability.

Job titles that include the word "Executive" are also found to contribute to higher task performance and ratings of task ability. The number of years in current position and related work experience contribute to significant differences in task performance, task importance and task ability in a number of competency categories. The number of IT training attended in the past 5 years and preference for IT training contributed to significant differences in a few competency categories. The situational variables of method of

learning IT and method of acquiring IT competency do not show any significant difference in task performance, task importance and ratings of task ability.

Significant positive relationships were found between the frequency of task performance and task importance for all competency categories. In other words, all the tasks and IT competencies perceived as important by administrative support staff are also performed in the workplace. Tasks and IT competencies that are less frequently performed but rated higher in importance point to the fact that the IT competencies are important and required for successful work performance.

Recommendations

Based on the review of literature and findings of the study several recommendations are made for future research. Recommendations are also proposed for office educators, trainers and management.

Recommendations for future research

1. This study gathered information to determine the required IT competencies for administrative support staff in networked organizations. Future research should be carried out with office educators to determine if the IT competencies are taught and the method of teaching the technologies in office education programs.

2. It is recommended that further studies be conducted to measure the IT competencies of administrative support staff. However, the self-ratings of task ability can be accompanied with hands-on testing to ensure that there is consistency between self-ratings and hands-on skills testing.

3. If further analyses of IT competencies are performed to determine training needs of administrative support staff, it is recommended that IT competencies that show little or no discrepancy gaps be deleted from the inventory of competencies. This will shorten the survey instrument and result in a higher response rate.

4. This study can be replicated next year to determine the use of IT by administrative professionals in the workplace and determine if IT is being used productively.

5. Further studies can be carried out to determine factors that influence training or instruction that can ensure transfer of IT skills to the workplace.

6. The Delphi Technique should continue to be used as a method to predict future events that concern the area of administrative office management and office technology.

7. The increased usage of the Internet for e-commerce demands that administrative support staff be equipped with computer skills related to the usage of the Internet. Therefore, future studies can be carried out to explore Web-related skills and emerging computer skills that are needed for administrative support staff.

8. The integration of the Internet into all aspects of business demands that research be carried out to examine how administrative support staff have adjusted to the introduction of the Internet in their workplaces as well as examine end user satisfaction associated with changes brought by the new technologies.

Recommendations for Office Educators

1. Students who wish to embark on an office career should be encouraged to complete a three or four-year college degree program or obtain professional certification in order to bring greater recognition to the position of administrative support staff. Additional education, increased professionalism together with greater technical computer knowledge can lead to the improvement of administrative support positions and consequently elevate the status of administrative support function from "under-valued" to a "value-added" function.

2. In order for educators to ensure that the programs for the development of administrative support staff meet the needs of the industry, continual analyses of job functions rather than analyses of technology use need to be performed on a yearly basis. Analyses of job functions are preferred because functions are relatively stable over time while changes in technology can be easily integrated.

3. If office educators expect their graduates to be technologically competent, the educators must possess the competency. Although educators may be enthusiastic about integrating technology into instruction, educators have not been taught to use technological tools for teaching and learning. Therefore technological competency standards for educators need to be developed at the same time that technological competency standards are determined for students.

4. The impact of innovations in technology and e-business on reorganization of administrative work processes requires educators to design programs that promote lifelong learning. The increasing responsibilities being assumed by administrative support staff demand that support staff continually upgrade their knowledge and skills. Students aspiring to become administrative professionals also need to be equipped with critical skills in defining and analyzing problems, identifying, retrieving and analyzing alternative solutions to the problem, as well as developing clear recommendations and solutions.

5. When determining content for the development of administrative support programs, input from job incumbents should be considered to make the programs relevant to the needs of administrative support staff in the workplace.

6. Co-operation between education and industry must be intensified so that knowledge on advances in technology and its effects on organizational behavior can contribute to a relevant curriculum. The presence of the industry in the development of educational programs cannot be discounted nor can the presence of the academician in the business organizations be considered trivial.

7. It is recommended that findings of significant differences in performance of IT across job title and education from this study be used to build the five levels of National Occupational Skill Standards for administrative support jobs. It is recommended that Level 1 include tasks and IT competencies related to the traditional roles of support staff. Level 5 would include higher-level tasks that involve the use of complex technologies.

Recommendations for Trainers

1. When innovations in technology occur, organizations can identify strategies to facilitate performance of higher-level tasks with the use of complex and new technologies. The findings imply that certain profiles of administrative support staff are more receptive to innovations in IT. These are individuals in the younger age group, with higher levels of education, who hold the newer job titles of "Executive Assistant" or "Executive Secretary", and have been in the current position with related work experience between 1 to 5 years. These are the individuals that management may wish to identify when changes in information technology are introduced.

2. On the other hand, management needs to look into alternative methods of instruction for administrative support staff who do not match this profile. The results of the study show that while the level of task performance and ratings of task ability do not significantly differ according to methods of learning IT via self-paced learning, facilitated learning with an instructor and online learning (Internet or corporate Intranet), IT competency was acquired mostly on the job versus formal education or formal training. The knowledge that education with repetition results in learning and that one-day or one-week courses do not work unless sufficient time and opportunity is provided for people to understand and improve performance through practice makes it imperative for management to look into innovative ways of training.

3. Organizations that provide training programs for upgrading IT competencies of administrative support staff must consider the demographic differences of

employees. A strong implication of the study is that differences in the demographics of administrative support staff need to be incorporated into training so that all workers despite their differences are more or less performing at the same level. Administrative support staff with longer work tenure must continually be given courses in advanced aspects of the software and more complex applications in order to increase their performance. Administrative support staff in the older age group naturally have less exposure to newer technologies but do not indicate inability to learn.

Recommendations for Management

1. In networked organizations that emphasize teamwork and a multi-skilled workforce, perhaps, organizations can expand the function of administrative support to include functions that require use of complex and newer technologies. An important implication of the study is the limited function of administrative support staff because of narrow stereotypical views regarding the position and the training required for successful performance. The ratings of higher importance placed on tasks that are rarely performed indicate that administrative support staff believe that the performance of these tasks can enhance their productivity.

2. Organizations need to encourage a culture of lifelong learning among administrative support staff because educators cannot teach everything that a student needs to know within a 3 or 4-year program. An environment that encourages self-learning must be inculcated where administrative support staff are facilitated in the transition towards performance of high-level tasks with

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the use of complex and new technologies. Administrative support staff need to have unlimited access to the new technologies to practise the newly acquired skills as and when necessary.

3. Related to the recommendation of expanding the role of administrative support staff, it is recommended that organizations need to provide an IT support system that facilitates self-learning without the presence of an instructor. As self-learning takes up the time needed for other work, employers need to provide appropriate incentives for employees who engage in self-learning.

4. It is recommended that management consider the National Occupational Skill Standards (NOSS) as criteria for the selection and recruitment of administrative support staff. Such standards could be used to enrich administrative support jobs and provide avenues for continuous professional development