Book Reviews

The formulation and implementation of strategic information systems – case studies.
D.S.J. Remenyi, NCC Publications, London, 1990. 188 pp.

This recent offering from the NCC builds on Remenyi's previous book* and defines strategic information systems as those systems which support company activities in the business environment. Remenyi's main purpose is to introduce Strategic Information Systems as a new research area and to review some recent case study work on the evaluation and implementation of these systems. The introduction is lengthy, but fails to provide the reader with any clue as to how the case study findings are to be used.

There are three case studies; one from IBM, one from Peat Marwick McLintock Management Consultants (PMM-MC), and one based on the introduction of an SIS into a disguised company known as 'Associated Commodities'. The case study evidence is preceded by a review of some recent research on SIS from the DTI; the Butler Cox Foundation; the Oxford Institute of Information Management and a consultancy firm known as PRISM. There is a substantial overlap in the core findings of these reports – but Remenyi raises the interesting point that the first three studies are 'based on what had already become the established view of SIS', i.e. that 'there are specific information system opportunities which, if properly exploited will afford the firm a competitive advantage'. The fourth research study according to Remenyi 'very substantially challenges this view by suggesting that a search for so-called hot systems is a non productive exercise'. According to the PRISM group, 'the reality of competitive information systems is far more complex than many of the current reports suggest. Failures are widespread and very costly, and for obvious reasons tend to be less well documented than successes.

Remenyi argues that 'There are in fact fundamental misunderstandings and misapprehensions about the nature of strategic and competitive edge systems . . . systems should not in themselves be considered strategic or competitive as they are not usually entities

Increase profits with Strategic Information Systems, D.S.J. Remenyi, NCC Publications, London 1988.

in their own right . . . Systems are strategic insofar as they are 'capable of supporting or enabling important business change and insofar as they do so may acquire a strategic status. Thus a strategic or competitive system is only a component in a much larger business issue, and it is not the implementation of the system *per se,* but rather the greater business change question which delivers the competitive advantage.

The above points are reflected in the 'Associated Commodities' case study, which is particularly strong on the ways in which poorly focused consultancy practices can fatally undermine IT projects at an early stage. The IBM provides a convincing account of the complexity of the role of the information systems department at IBM UK.

The main conclusion (as with so many studies which lack a clear statement of objective), is that there is a need for more detailed research. The fact that the case studies are not written to a common format means that they address a number of related issues, but do not systematically address the questions one would most like to have seen explored, that is: how do firms evaluate the need for these systems and how do they select the critical success factors which are their supposed *raison d'être?*

It is likely to be some time before a definitive work on SIS will emerge, and it can be argued that the success of such a project will necessarily depend on the ability of the author to identify clearly specified cross-disciplinary analytical bearings at the outset. From this point of view Remenyi's contribution should be seen as an honest, but rudimentary attempt to provide us with an introductory guide to a field of enquiry whose boundaries and salient features are as yet far from clear.

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Information technology – the catalyst for change, CBI 1990
PA consultancy Group. W.H. Allen, London, 1990.
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Information Technology – the catalyst for change forms part of the CBI series on European integration and its inclusion in the 1992 series marks the emergence of IT