Book review

Information Strategies in Public Administration

P.H.A. Frissen and I.Th.M. Snellen (Eds), Elsevier, Amsterdam, 1990.
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This volume is based on a 1989 conference on informatization in public administration. Contributions come from a spread of European countries, France, Germany, Denmark and the United Kingdom.

By way of introduction, the editors identify four strategic approaches for the introduction of computerized information systems in public administration. These are the opportunity, issue, positioning and function approaches, which are developed further in subsequent chapters. They echo the different dimensions of public bureaucracies i.e. political, legal-ethical and organizational managerial.

In examining the opportunity approach Lenk raises the question of why existing opportunities for improving public administration are not seized as they emerge. Van de Donk and Frissen outline preliminary observations on the strategic significance of informatization for innovative management in the public sector. Glover and O'Dwyer describe how IT can support administrative modernization, in the context of the OECD. They give a comprehensive overview of the potential effects of IT in the public sector.

The issue approach tends to be reactive, sought when problems arise. In this framework, Marcel Aucoin traces the development of the corporate plan for the Banque de France and the formulation of a data processing strategy.

The positioning approach designates the jockeying for position which occurs between departments. Sally Wyatt identifies the influencing factors behind choices made by UK government departments for telecommunication networks. Jens Hoff and Klaus Stormgaard, from a Danish perspective, test the 'reinforcement hypothesis' – that information will strengthen existing organizational features serving the interest of the dominant power coalition(s). Although tested in two very different areas, a tax administration system and a social welfare system, the results confirmed the hypothesis. The tax case was clear-cut, the social welfare system less so, until distributed computing was available to mirror the decentralized structure.

The functional approach deals with strategy formulation across different functional areas. Ignace Snellen differentiates between types of policy – institutional, strategic, structural and operational, while examining the supporting role of information systems.

The conflict between administrative policy and informatization strategy is demonstrated by an account of an office automation project in Germany. The last study is from Holland on the necessary cooperation between central government and local administration for the use of IT. The four approaches to strategy formulation are again described and illustrated.

This is a theoretical work, although frequently supported by empirical evidence. Familiar themes prevail albeit in different geographical contexts and administrative arrangements – such as the Operatie Comptabel Bestel, in the Netherlands in 1988, for the improvement of financial administration, with echoes of the earlier Financial Management Initiative in the UK. Anne Höhmann's recommendations for systems implementation following from the BAR project include a warning against over-reliance on external consultants, not least as it militates against what Willcocks and Harrow (1992) term 'inward learning'.

Given the high level of theoretical content and the fact that many of the contributors come from backgrounds in political science or public administration, this book is clearly aimed at the academic sector. Even so, it is not an accessible text; at times the phrasing is somewhat awkward and stilted. The contributors have been ill-served by their copy-editors, as typographical errors abound, in a variety of languages. This is inexcusable, given the high cost of the work. A reference to the Chapterwork Reduction Act (1980) in the United States (p. 12), is taken as meaning the Paperwork Reduction Act.

While it may be apparent to the contributors, a definition of informatization would have been welcome as a benchmark. One assumes that it concerns both the use of IT and the dissemination of information. How then does it relate to information management? Given that the focus of the work is on informatization is there a nuance to be gleaned from one contributor's use of the term 'data-processing strategy'.

The most accurate description of this work, unfortunately is frustrating. While it contains interesting and thought-provoking work, the poor presentation frequently jars. Perseverance is necessary, and is indeed rewarded at times. Comparative studies of the use of IT and information management issues in the public sector across Europe would be most welcome, whether from political science or information management viewpoints.

Willcocks, L. and Harrow, J. (1992) *Rediscovering public services management* (McGraw Hill, London).

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