Managing without Authority: Records Managers in Interorganizational Contexts

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Abstract
Information professionals are taking on new roles in modern organizations. Specifically, these professionals are tasked with gaining coworkers’ compliance with information communication and management policies. However, they often lack the formal authority of traditional managers. We report on preliminary findings from a qualitative study of records managers, focusing on the interpersonal skills they use to achieve compliance.

Keywords: Records management, compliance, social influence, information work.


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1 Introduction

The role of information professionals in modern organizations is rapidly evolving. Organizations are making enormous investments in information technology (IT) systems to capitalize on the value of information resources and require professionals who can manage and provide access to these systems (Grimshaw, 1995; Choo, 2000). In addition to managing IT systems, information professionals are charged with developing guidelines for use and encouraging users to adhere to information policies. In response to shifting roles, researchers in Library and Information Science (LIS) diligently study how to best train information professionals to contend with the dynamics of the digital environment. Many studies point out the increasingly important role of interpersonal skills in accomplishing this work (Ashcroft, 2003; Kennan, Willard, & Wilson, 2006), particularly in organizations outside of traditional information institutions such as libraries and archives. Although these studies identify the importance of such interpersonal skills, they have done little to uncover the types of skills needed to manage users of IT systems in the absence of formal managerial authority.

In this paper, we report on preliminary findings from observations and interviews with information professionals in charge of gaining compliance from multiple government organizations without formal authority over the individual agencies. Our early results suggest that information professionals in this context rely on an understanding of workers’ motivations and existing practices to encourage appropriate behaviors, or what Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) refer to as social influence. We first review how changes in information work necessitate the use of social influence. Next, we discuss research on social influence strategies, with particular focus on Cialdini and Goldstein’s (2004) three goals framework. Finally, we adapt this framework to explain how one type of information professionals—records managers—use “soft,” interpersonal tactics to gain compliance in the absence of formal authority.

2 Changes in Information Work

Past LIS research made many accurate predictions about how information work might change with the advent and uptake of new technologies. Perhaps the most surprising and accurate prediction was that information professionals would increasingly rely on interpersonal skills, rather than technical skills, to accomplish their work as colleagues in the workplace began adopting and using computing technologies (Cronin, 1998). In particular, recent studies found that modern information professionals are charged with the tasks of project management (Fisher, 2004), coaching coworkers through the selection and use of information technologies (Choo, 2000), and helping coworkers achieve information literacy (Ashcroft, 2003; Kennan, Willard, & Wilson, 2006). These changes reflect a growing emphasis on information
professionals’ ability to not only teach coworkers the technical skills needed to navigate new technology implementations (Cronin, 1998), but also to manage IT use and develop guidelines for best practices. Recent work provides little empirical evidence, aside from select survey analyses (Blankson-Hemans & Hibberd, 2004; Farmer & Campbell, 1997), of this shift in information professionals’ role from that of IT gatekeeper to that of informal manager of people.

LIS scholars often overlook how the day-to-day work of information professionals changes when they relinquish their roles as gatekeepers or sole custodians of information networks, repositories, and systems and become managers of coworkers’ use of these technologies. Researchers refer to the process of granting wider access to information resources and losing some degree of information control as “disintermediation,” and its effects may be highly variable depending on the type of information work under consideration (Gellman, 1996). Reference librarianship provides one of the best examples of an occupation that is experiencing the effects of disintermediation on requisite skills and role evolution (cf. Boyd-Bynnes & Rosenthal, 2005; LeMaistre, Embry, Van Zandt, & Bailey, 2012). As LeMaistre et al. (2012) found, librarians openly reinvented roles to accommodate these changes; in other cases, they defended traditional roles and practices. Similar changes are occurring outside of traditional information professions, yet they have not received adequate research attention.

The effects of disintermediation on the role of other information professionals deserve thorough evaluation. IT systems are ubiquitous in many workplaces outside of traditional information organizations, often placing information resources in the hands of users not formally trained in information communication and management. As a result, information professionals must exert influence over their coworkers to ensure compliance with information management policies, yet these workers often lack the explicit organizational authority held by traditional managers. Although some programs and institutions are available to aid information professionals who are officially situated in management positions (e.g., Evans & Alire, 2014), this guidance is largely for those who work in traditional information organizations such as libraries and archives. The current reality, though, is that the information-intensive activities of nearly all professional workers places information professionals at the locus of management of the behavior and actions of others. However, information professionals often lack the designated authority to enforce organizational policies and guidelines. To investigate how modern information professionals gain compliance when they lack such formal authority, we ask: How do information professionals gain compliance with the policies they develop, particularly in interorganizational contexts where they lack formal authority over IT users?

3 Compliance-gaining without Authority: Social Influence

Organizations often hire modern information professionals to develop information management and communication guidelines and to gain compliance with these policies. Defined broadly as acquiescence to a request, compliance involves action from two parties: the requester and the target (Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Researchers in organizational psychology have conducted the bulk of studies on compliance-gaining behaviors, largely in the context of hierarchically-structured organizations. In such contexts, requesters hold authority over the target and can effectively ensure compliance.

Early research into the form, content, and use of compliance-gaining messages produced a variety of typologies of compliance-gaining techniques that had subsequent uses as research instruments (Marwell & Schmitt, 1967; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980). Researchers based foundational work in this area on hypothetical statements for gaining compliance provided by participants in experiments. Marwell and Schmitt (1967) listed 16 compliance-gaining techniques, including the promise of a reward for compliance and the threat of punishment for noncompliance. Later research characterized these types of techniques as “harsh tactics” and contrasted them with “soft tactics,” or those techniques not based on power relations (Barry and Shapiro, 1992). Many information professionals cannot enforce the policies via harsh tactics (e.g., punishment) because they lack formal authority. In these cases, they must rely on soft, interpersonal strategies to influence the behavior of their coworkers.

For an interpersonal approach to gaining compliance to be effective, Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) argue that compliance to a request is contingent upon social influence, or aligning the request with three personal goals of the target: accuracy, affiliation, and maintaining a positive self-concept. Accuracy refers to the goal of responding to requests based on accurate information in the environment. A key piece of information in the environment is the perceived expertise of the requester, which grants a greater sense of credibility. A target also strives to respond to requests that reinforce feelings of belonging and
acceptance, or affiliation. One particular tactic that builds feelings of affiliation is face-to-face interaction. Burger et al. (2001) found that even brief face-to-face interaction induces positive feelings in the target toward the requester. Finally, targets are more likely to respond to requests that align with a positive self-concept, or the values with which they most closely identify. For example, requesters can increase the likelihood of compliance by framing a request as an opportunity for a tangible benefit to the target. Below, we report on initial findings from a study of records managers that suggest the use of soft tactics, as defined by Cialdini and Goldstein (2004), to help understand how requesters achieve compliance in the absence of formal authority.

4 Methods

4.1 Case Description

Compliance is a particularly salient topic in the world of records managers in government agencies. Ideally, maintaining a records management program designed and administered in accordance with applicable regulations allows an organization to store and retrieve records easily. A methodical records management program also provides some measure of legal protection for an organization and has significant implications for democratic government. Citizens’ ability to question or challenge a government depends, in part, on access to government records. Rules about the organization and retention of records then become important for providing access, by ensuring that people do not unlawfully destroy records or make records difficult to retrieve. An organization’s failure to comply with records management regulations may result in legal action against those responsible and the failure may inhibit citizens’ ability to hold the organization accountable for its practices. The three agencies included in this study create or promote records management policies and programs. They also share a significant underlying goal: gaining the compliance of their “clients.” Their clients are other government organizations, departments of government organizations, and individuals.

We collected a corpus of qualitative data for the present study at three government agencies employing records managers. The first, pseudonymously referred to as OCC, is a department within the municipal government of a large Southwestern city. OCC has the responsibility to oversee records management in all departments of the city government, of which there are nearly 50. Our team observed six different individuals employed as records managers at this site. The second site, CSD, is an individual department within the same municipal government. Thus, the records management program at CSD is overseen at a high level by OCC. CSD employed a single records manager, whom we observed, to oversee the department’s records management program and to liaise with OCC. The records manager at CSD was to perform his duties in accordance with policies developed at OCC. The third site of study, Horseshoe, is a state government agency in the same state as OCC and CSD. We observed four records managers at Horseshoe, who have the responsibility of advising and approving records management programs for municipal governments, such as OCC, and other governmental organizations, such as school districts and county governments. Policies at OCC are then governed, at a high level, by those set by Horseshoe. In total, our study captured data about the work of eleven records managers across the three sites of study, all government organizations.

4.2 Data Collection

To undertake the investigation of records managers and their compliance-gaining techniques in the absence of formal authority, we conducted a qualitative study using ethnographic techniques. A team of twelve graduate students, including both authors, collected data about records managers’ work at three sites.

First, we performed three sets of at least three-hour observations of records managers’ work during the course of normal workdays at the three sites, resulting in at least 72 hours total of observation time. Along with a team of observers, we generated highly detailed fieldnotes that described actions, settings, and conversations that we observed. We noted the time in our fieldnotes, at least every five minutes, in order to capture frequent snapshots of what we observed. Our data collection efforts often included audio recording during observation periods to capture conversations more accurately than with written techniques in observation. Immediately following each three-hour period of
observation, we typed up our fieldnotes, clarifying and ordering episodes appropriately as well as adding transcription of any audio files to create a time-stamped narrative account of what we saw and heard.

In addition to our observations, based upon points of interest and further questions that we developed in close-reading of our fieldnotes, we conducted semi-structured interviews of records managers at our sites of observation (Weiss, 1994). Our team conducted twenty-four interviews, each lasting between thirty minutes and one hour, based on interview protocols designed to get participants to elaborate on common themes, such as episodes of communication in the workplace. We asked participants to recall episodes that they found memorable or poignant to prompt them to tell detailed histories regarding their work. We strived to elicit highly specific stories, rather than generalizations about multiple ongoing events. We utilized audio recording during these interviews to capture our conversations, augmented with the practice of note-taking to capture nonverbal actions and other important details not captured by recordings. We transcribed our recordings and integrated our supplemental notes to create complete transcripts of the interviews.

4.3 Data Analysis

Upon completion of observations and interviews, we imported our fieldnotes and interview transcriptions into ATLAS.ti© software for review and coding. The analysis process comprised two steps: iterative readings of the fieldnotes and interview transcripts and open coding. In the first step, we read through our entire corpus of fieldnotes and interview transcripts to identify salient points in the data, or those quotes and actions that demanded our attention to reach deeper understanding of their meaning. After our readings, we discussed the points we identified and generated preliminary code lists to probe the data for themes. We identified the communication practices of records managers as a primary topic of interest in the data, noting that records managers’ interactions with record creators and other employees, as well as their talk about records creators, displayed multidimensional activity around how to obtain compliance to the records management program. Following this theme, we performed another round of coding to identify episodes of communication in which the records managers worked with record creators. For these episodes, we noted the organizational affiliation of the communicants, their relationship to each other in terms of the hierarchy and structure of job titles, and the apparent purpose of the communication. Within interview transcripts, we identified episodes in which records managers talked about interactions with records creators. Below are several examples of records managers leveraging social influence, particularly soft tactics, to achieve desired outcomes.

5 Preliminary Findings

Records managers across all sites employed a number of strategies to build relationships with clients and gain compliance with the records management program. Some of our respondents noted the importance of observing and gaining information about the records creators early in the process to manage organizational information. We observed common personalized communication practices at two of our research sites, OCC and Horseshoe. These practices took several forms: suggesting collaboration between records managers and records creators, meeting face-to-face, and offering professional development opportunities to records creators.

We observed multiple accounts in which records managers suggested collaboration with records creators. These instances included all phases of the document creation, storage, and retention process, but our informants emphasized the importance of early action. Records managers made compliance a collaborative process from the outset of a relationship to informally build rapport and to gain greater insight into the clients’ organizational settings, work practices, and decision-making rationales. Collaborative work often allowed clients to understand the goals of records managers and records managers to better understand the clients. Armed with these understandings, our informants promoted active, creative approaches to the task of gaining compliance, as demonstrated in the following two accounts:

Very rarely do I throw out the devil’s advocate but I like to do that since they don’t think about records management everyday, I want to get them thinking about some of the consequences.
So they'll say, “I want to do this,” and I'll say, “Well, what happens if this?” And they're like, “Oh, I didn’t think about that,” and it really kind of helps to bring them over to, you know, to my way of thinking and to think about it properly. And you know, HHSD is really good at you know, talking the advice I give them, thinking about it and going, “Okay, yeah maybe that is the best way to go.”

And then we write up a report and the Department Records Analyst, she writes the same report and then I send her my report and she compares it with hers and then we combine them. Then we kind of look at what kind of records do we have and we make a general list and where the records are, whose office they are in.

Allowing input from clients likely increased the effectiveness of implementation. In addition, records managers’ efforts often required phone calls and other types of communication to collaborate with clients. In particular, face-to-face communication appeared to be a preferred and effective practice for gaining compliance. In this example, the client’s question about cost of records storage could have been answered with a simple, direct response; however, Nancy inquired further about the client’s records management plan and suggested they work together to develop it:

This is Nancy. Ann said you were looking for information on cost of storage ... And so before you start doing all that, let’s talk about what the retention is of the records ... Because you need to take that into consideration before you start scanning them ... Yeah, or maybe you could just set up a meeting? ... Okay, just so we can talk about it. What are they going to do with them [the records] once they scan them? Those are questions we need to ask.

Collaborative, face-to-face work demonstrated the records managers’ commitment to their clients and expressed a “help me help you” attitude. To ensure that clients complied with processes and to coordinate work, records managers told us that they also responded to compliance problems by increasing coordination or supervision of the client’s work, typically by meeting with the client at the client’s office. Several of our informants expressed a preference for the face-to-face mode of communication for situations of monitoring, as in this episode concerning a client group’s recent issue with compliance:

I met with one department on Wednesday to deal with some records that they had questions about and it turned out that one of the reasons they had asked me to come over was that the person who set up the meeting did notice that there were some issues and there were some records that we had actually determined were getting disposed of prematurely, so we were discussing those issues and also discussing their records control schedule ... I tried to find out why are they getting rid of these without waiting for the end of the retention period. Is it a case of they didn’t understand the control schedule or they didn’t properly identify the records on the control schedule? And I let them know it’s a serious liability issue to dispose of records early.

However, these interpersonal tactics alone did not ensure compliance; records managers also had to offer opportunities that appealed to clients and made compliance-gaining a personally, rather than organizationally, beneficial process. To gain support among clients and make compliance with best practices more appealing, records managers offered professional development opportunities as by-products of compliance. This practice involved showing clients the practical, career-building benefits of gaining expertise in records management as well as providing formal certifications for completing in-person training sessions:

We have a certificate program within the city to kind of help people use as a career ladder or a career opportunity type thing and we did a, we had a meeting on it back in January and where we were talking about changes we were making to the certificate program and one of the people from one of my departments brought up the fact, “Well this isn’t like a certification where you can put initials behind your name or something.” We said no, it’s not. Um, we're not really accredited to do that and the reply was, “well, so this is just a certificate you can hang on your wall.” And we said not really, because people have used it to get better jobs. Sandra mentioned
that she was able to use it in lieu of a degree or at least some education in order to get the job here.

In each of the above instances, records managers demonstrated soft, interpersonal tactics in gaining the compliance of their clients. In analyzing these tactics, we identified three core strategies that facilitated compliance in the absence of formal authority—collaborating with clients, meeting face-to-face with clients, and offering clients professional development opportunities. With continued analysis, we hope to move beyond descriptive accounts of how records managers use these tactics in interorganizational settings and produce generalizable claims regarding other information professionals’ compliance-gaining behaviors. The first step in this process includes narrowing the definition of “soft” tactics and exploring how these tactics are used both inside and outside of established power hierarchies. By comparing specific types of interpersonal interaction used by information professionals with and without formal authority over their clients or coworkers, we aim to understand the evolving set of skills needed to manage modern information work.

6 Discussion

The primary limitation of the present study is the size of the corpus of data that we draw upon. We gathered data with our team of observers in three-hour increments at three different sites for a total of seventy-two hours of observation. The resulting transcripts reflect only a fraction of the interactions records managers engage in during working hours. Additionally, we conducted these observations over just a four-week period, limiting our ability to capture how interactions change over the year. It is possible that records managers interact with a different set of clients over the course of a year and thus may use different strategies to gain compliance. To mitigate the effects of some of these constraints, we conducted observations at staggered times, making sure to schedule observation periods so that we saw records managers’ work at different times of the day and days of the week. We also conducted follow-up interviews upon the conclusion of most of the observations, which allowed us to compare records managers’ retrospective accounts of compliance-gaining behaviors with those we observed over the four-week period.

Another pressing limitation of this study is the setting. We conducted our observations and interviews solely within government agencies, which may or may not provide accurate insight into work in private organizations. Records managers work in a variety of settings, including the private sector, and we cannot speak definitively to the features of such a work setting that might affect records managers’ strategies in a non-governmental context. We can, however, posit that some features of the organizational context might become more or less important in a different type of work environment. For example, the records managers’ position in an organizational hierarchy influences the use of certain compliance-gaining behaviors. In private organizations that maintain records not only for legal purposes, but also for business continuity and general efficiency of the organization, we expect that gaining compliance might become more difficult for records managers. In these types of contexts, clients and coworkers must understand both the legal ramifications and the operational implications of complying with records management programs.

Despite these limitations, we believe our study provides a useful initial account of the behaviors information professionals use to gain compliance with the policies and practices they are hired to develop. As workers at all levels of the organization become active producers and consumers of information via increased use of information technologies, information professionals will likely continue to contend with issues of compliance in carrying out their day-to-day work. These issues, then, deserve further research attention and exposure to concepts and theories from organization studies, psychology, information science, and other related disciplines.
References


