
Reviewed by Steve Sawyer

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I was drawn to reading this book by its title. Like many readers of this journal, I am interested in the relationships among humans and information technologies (IT). So I was intrigued to see what the authors meant by the human side of information technology. What challenges does this side portend for managers? What are the solutions posed?

The preface lays out the 13 chapters, explains why they are divided among four parts (leadership, learning, groups and culture), and ties the current book back to a previously published volume that has a similar intent (Szewczak & Khosrowpour, 1996). The authors of these collected works come from a wide range of schools and countries, making this a very inclusive and international collection of scholars. I see this as a strength of the book.

In particular, I found three of the chapters to be especially valuable. These three contribute both solid conceptualizations of their area and empirical evidence to support their theorizing. Each is a contribution to particular streams of information systems research. I found Ruel’s chapter on the nontechnical side of office technology to be both an exemplary use of adaptive structuration and a strong piece of empirical work in studying office-level implementations of information technology. Likewise, I found Neece’s extended review, theorizing, and case study (of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory) about organizational learning to be a valuable read. And Yoong and Gallupe push concepts of action research (tied to group support systems facilitation) beyond their previously published work in this area. If you are interested in these research areas, I would recommend reading these chapters.

In addition to these three chapters, Szewczak’s chapter on personal information privacy is an excellent synthesis of current issues. It would be highly readable for both undergraduate and graduate students. My only quibble with this chapter is that it underplays the influences on, and potential impacts to, social norms. And, given the pace of change in this topic, it will need supplementing within a year or two.

In the end, though, I am not sure that the collected work provides more than just the summation of the individual contributions from each chapter. The division of the chapters into four parts is not well developed, and I think the book would have been stronger if there had been an introductory section for each part. In these introductions it would have been useful to have some perspective on how the topics included reflect the contemporary or emerging issues in managing the human side of IT, and how these papers move that discussion. At a larger level, I am not sure that the four parts of the book reflect the most pertinent issues facing those who study the human side of IT.

The questions that came to me when I read the title of the book are only partially covered. For example, it is still not clear to me what is meant by the human side. Much of the conceptualizing about humans in the early chapters is on being a transformational leader of an organization. Over the course of the book, the meaning of human seems to shift from being a leader to managing the needs of employees to coordinate and communicate. This seems to be a narrow view of human and a bit too managerially focused. If I were to be a manager now, I would rather know more about my workers’ needs and interests.

In an odd contrast to the title and focus of the book, the meaning, elements, and roles of IT are not often well developed. Many of the chapters touch on IT as some vague and rapidly changing external force: in the world, but vaguely. I get the sense that IT defined in this amorphous way is either the “bogeyman” or the “emerging star.” Thus, it seemed to
me that many of the chapters are not about IT, but rather about aspects of some humans that happen to be present in the same context (such as leading organizations, learning organizations, collaborating within and among organizations) with some amorphous form(s) of IT. So, I’m left wondering: What is it about IT that makes managing it so hard, using it so difficult to understand, and its value so difficult to explain?

Regarding the challenges that IT poses to managers, my read from this book is that they are mainly the following: IT changes, IT is being used to do more things, and our theories about their effects are still rather limited. Since these challenges are reasonably well known already, I am not sure how the collected material in this book pushes us forward. Moreover, there is limited empirical support for the theories and models employed in many of the chapters. For the chapters that present empirical data, the findings stand in contrast to the hypotheses, propositions, and expectations espoused. Several of the empirical pieces are done as exploratory work, perhaps because of the need to develop richer and more precise theories and models of IT and organizations. Thus, the value of this work is in the development of new theories, the extension of existing theories, and the connection to contemporary literatures. However, most of these chapters did not push toward these goals. Thus, these chapters left me wishing that there was one more section to read.

Finally, I read this book to see what solutions are being posed. My grounding in systems thinking makes me wary of books promoting solutions to challenges brought about by IT. Thus, I was particularly interested by the claim made in the title. What I read in the collected chapters are, instead, recommendations and responses to specific issues; no solutions were proposed. Adherents to the algorithmic formulation of cultural levels advanced by Targowski and Metwalli may see this as a partial solution. In the absence of empirical evidence, though, such debates are merely speculation. My own view is that the absence of named, and particularly computational, solutions to managing the human side of IT is, at this point, pragmatic scholarship.

REFERENCE