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# Why I Act Differently: Studying Patterns of Legitimation Among CIOs Through Motive Talk

## Abstract

**Purpose** – IT Governance has become the recognized norm system for Chief Information Officers. The purpose of this paper is to understand how CIOs relate to these norms, by studying how they legitimate in-compliance with the norms.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An interpretive, qualitative, structured interview study with 18 CIOs in large Swedish organizations regarded as having excellent IT Governance practice, using Motive Talk as analytical lens to identify the informants' relationship to norms.

**Findings** – The study identifies norm-specific patterns for how CIOs legitimate in-compliance with IT Governance, finding that CIOs use a combination of excuse and justifications as strategies of legitimation. The study also finds that CIOs display a tendency of not contesting IT Governance related norms unless these are in conflict with neighboring professional jurisdictions. This is regarded as an identification of the 'margins' of IT Governance.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study illustrates how the theory of Motive Talk is a viable road ahead for future studies of IT professionals. The generalizability of the identified patterns of legitimation is limited by the selection of large organizations with solely male CIOs, as well as the selection of solely organizations that have succeeded in establishing external legitimacy concerning IT Governance and the organizations being Swedish.

**Practical implications** – CIOs aspiring to increase their legitimacy should avoid direct conflicts with neighboring professions. In addition to this, they should also aspire to be clear in a separation of motive talk and actual practice, since full norm compliance may be detrimental to their factual operations.

**Originality/value** – The originality of this paper lies in the methodological approach of combining motive talk and speech acts to investigate CIO legitimation practices.

**Keywords** – IT Governance, IS professionals, Institutional theory, behavior, speech act theory, motive talk

**Paper type** – Research paper

## 1 Introduction

The rise of the CIO in modern organizations has been characterized by ambiguity, both on their position and their contribution to the overall performance (Banker et al, 2011; Cho and Huang, 2012; Chun and Mooney, 2009; Guillemette and Paré, 2012). He (or, rather seldom, she) is often not regarded as belonging to top management (as a technical specialist), nor has he fully achieved professional status as an IT worker (Magnusson, 2010). This ambiguity creates a legitimation problem for the CIO; it is not clear whether his authority is based on a recognized regulatory system (Powell and DiMaggio, 1982).

In an early study of the professional status of IT workers, Orlikowski and Baroudi (1988) showed that in spite of the management of IT was deemed increasingly critical for the overall business, there was a lack of professionalization among CIOs (or their equivalent). IT workers were seen as being part of an *occupational group* but not a

profession, and there have been numerous accounts published concerning the difficulties in achieving top management attention for IT related issues (Gupta, 1991; Johnson and Lederer, 2005; Guillemette and Paré, 2012). More recent studies, such as that of Joseph et al (2007) and their focus on IT staff turnover, confirm this difficulty of IT workers to achieve true professional status. Hence, one of the main strives for the CIO has been to increase the status of the role through achieving board level acumen (King, 2008), and to be accepted as an equal within the senior cadres of management. IT Governance, as a corporately sanctioned means for ensuring alignment between business and IT, has been instrumental in this strive for increased status (Chun and Mooney, 2009; Basselier and Benbasat, 2004; Guillemette and Paré, 2012).

Directly addressing issues related to the structure and settings of IT Management towards the senior level the organization, IT Governance has been portrayed as an admission ticket for CIOs aiming to increase their status in the organization (Weill and Ross, 2004). Viewed from an institutional perspective, IT Governance hence becomes an institution in its own right, and through this a vehicle for legitimacy for both the CIO and the overall organization. Through an increased focus on IT Governance in the 2000s, and, accounts of firms with efficient IT Governance in place outperforming its competitors (Weill and Ross, 2004), it has become a pre-requisite for successful business.

However, even in well-run organizations compliance with IT governance norms is quite demanding, and CIOs may often find themselves in situations where they act contrary to these norms. This study adopts an institutional perspective on IT Governance, seeing it along the lines of Czarniawska and Sevon (2005) as an institution with the potential of endowing the CIO and organization with legitimacy. This aspired legitimacy is regarded as a state where the CIO has achieved congruence with external norms (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1991; Suchman, 1995). Applying this perspective, the CIO is seen as faced with the necessity to conform or not conform with established IT Governance related norms. It is in this field of tension that this study takes a starting point. Through investigating how CIOs engage in legitimation of IT Governance when they do not follow the norms, the study employs theoretical constructs from the field of motive talk (Semin and Manstead, 1983) and speech acts (Austin, 1961) with the purpose of adding new insights to the characteristics of the CIO. This objective is guided by the following research question:

Which patterns of legitimation can be observed among CIOs when they do not comply with IT Governance related norms?

Through investigating the CIOs relationship with IT Governance related norms as a process of legitimation, the study adds to previous research through an empirically based description of the various strategies and sub-strategies used to achieve legitimacy. In addition to this, the study shows patterns in preferred legitimating practices for different types of IT Governance related norms. These contributions are discussed from the perspective of both practice and research.

This paper is organized accordingly: After a brief introduction previous research into the professional status of the CIO, the role of IT Governance, and motive talk is presented. Then the method is presented, followed by the results. This is followed by a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

## **2 Related Research**

### **2.1 *The Professional Status of the CIO***

Research within sociology of work and occupations have long highlighted the growing professionalization in modern society (Abbott, 1993). Occupational groups strive for increasing their status, moving towards becoming professions in the sociological sense of the word (Raelin, 1989). Key to this definition is a criterion of autonomy, where the profession itself is regarded as the only valid judge of quality in the work conducted (Raelin, 1989; Abbott, 1988). Striving for professional status, occupational groups struggle for jurisdictional control with neighboring occupational groups and professions. This battle for control leads to changes in professional status through both professionalization and de-professionalization (Haug, 1977; Abbott, 1988), where former professions may find themselves demoted to occupational groups. As noted by Miller (1998) and Wagner, Scott and Galliers (2006), it is in these boundary conflicts ('margins') that we see the creation of new standards and practices.

Within information systems and information technology, there have been numerous attempts over the years to distinguish the professional status of information technology (IT) workers. Orlikowski and Baroudi (1989) found that despite substantial efforts, IT workers have not succeeded in constructing a profession of their own. Instead, IT workers are intermittently referred to as IT Professionals, IS Professionals and Systems Professionals, without any apparent need for justifying the classifications (Cho and Huang, 2012; Bassellier and Benbasat, 2004; Trauth, 2002;; Klobas and McGill, 1995; Denning, 2001). As we argue, there has so far been no clear evidence of IT workers having achieved professional status in line with the definitions provided by f.i. Raelin (1989).

CIOs have received ample attention from the research community throughout the years, as they are regarded as the highest ranking IS executive of the organization (Grover et al, 1993; Chun and Mooney, 2009; Guillemette and Paré, 2012) and a member of the top management team. One central element of the notion of profession is that it is a powerful bearer of norms. Through this, it acts as a means for control over the individual's behavior, i.e. the profession as such is a constituting element of everyday work. In this perspective, the profession itself is endowed with norms that the individual worker is inclined towards striving for compliance with (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

### **2.2 *The Role of IT Governance for CIO Legitimacy***

IT Governance was first introduced explicitly in the early 1990's as a means for ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of the information technology resources (Schwartz and Hirschheim, 2003). Weill and Ross (2004) defined IT Governance as a framework for decisions rights and accountabilities in order to encourage desirable behavior in the use of IT. Covering issues that had been dealt with previously in fields such as strategic information systems planning information resource management and IS management IT Governance experienced a rapid increase in popularity. IT Governance highlights the importance of aligning governance of IT with the overall governance of the organization, implying that the issues addressed in IT Governance are of executive-level status (van Grembergen and DeHaes, 2009). With this change, questions related to the role of the CIO as a member of the Board, who the CIO reports to, and how the CIO is appraised became more pressing, resulting in substantial research (Tiwana and Konsynski, 2009; Banker et al, 2011).

We may regard IT Governance as a management idea with dual functions. On one hand, it offers a toolbox for working with issues related to performance measurement and management, reporting structures, investment prioritization, alignment et cetera. On the other hand, it acts as a means to inter-connect the governance of IT with that of the overall organization, thereby becoming a natural meeting point for discussions concerning IT in executive settings. This dual role of IT Governance has been highlighted previously in the literature, primarily through talking about IT Governance as a means for securing board-level attention to IT related issues (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Hussain and Cornelius, 2009; Banker et al, 2011), and the concept of ‘best practice’ as addressed by e.g. Wagner, Scott and Galliers (2006). Hence, it becomes an admission ticket for the CIO to the higher echelons of management, or in other words a *vehicle of legitimation* or what Giddens (1979) would refer to as a ‘structure of legitimacy’. Legitimacy is hence regarded along the lines of Suchman (1995: 574) as:

... a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.

With this definition of legitimacy follows the assumption that organizational actors such as CIOs need to relate their own actions to that of a ‘constructed system of norms’. This necessity has been extraneously addressed as one of the cornerstones (Scott, 2001) of institutional theory by e.g. Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Zilber (2006) and Leventis, Hasan and Dedoulis (forthcoming).

As noted by Miller (1998), what constitutes the norm system of a profession is constantly under duress from external sources. In a strive for legitimacy, organizations problematize and criticize existing practices, glancing into the environment for new additions or exchanges to existing norms (Rose and Miller, 1992). Despite this strong link between legitimacy, professions and the emergence of practice, there has so far been only a limited amount of research operationalizing legitimacy in the study of CIOs (see Hu, Hart and Cooke, 2007 for a notable exception).

### **2.3 The Study of Motive Talk: Excuses and Justifications**

In order to study CIOs’ relationship to IT Governance related norms we chose the concept of *motive talk*. Motive talk is about how an individual counter-act the social predicament of not complying with a norm.

Research within motive talk can be traced back to the work of Mills (1940) and his notion of *vocabularies of motive*. In these, Mills identified a means ahead for research into how individuals motivate their behavior through empirically focusing on what Schlenker and Darby (1982) later identified as ‘social predicaments’. When there is an imminent social predicament, the individual will utilize a selection of devices to avoid or counter-act the negative consequences of the predicament. Studies of impression management by Goffman (1971) identified apologies, requests and accounts as some of these devices, later to be expanded by Hewitt and Stokes (1975) through the introduction of disclaimers. As noted by Watkins Allen and Caillouet (1994) in their study of impression management practices within an organization in crisis, the devices introduced by Goffman (1971) can also be regarded as strategies for legitimation.

In parallel with this development of theories to understand motives and the presentation of self (Goffman, 1974), researchers such as Austin (1961) introduced

the notion of ‘Speech acts’ to highlight the performative aspects of language. Language is through speech acts not merely passive, but infused with direction and intent. This perspective created a surge in research activity that has been referred to as the ‘turn to language’ (Watten, 2002) within social studies. According to Austin (1961: 176f), the two main devices of motivation are *excuses* and *justifications* and the main approach towards studying these is through naturally occurring language. Austin offers an example of the differences between Excuse and Justification in the quote below.

...if the objection is to be the use of such a dyslogistic verb as ‘murdered’, this may be on the ground that the killing was done in battle (justification) or on the ground that it was only accidental if reckless (excuse).

In other words, excuse refers to a speech act accepting the norm (killing is wrong) and motivates the incongruence occurred (it was an accident). Justification refers to a speech act questioning the norm (killing is wrong) by motivating why the action was necessary in this particular situation (there was a battle). Hence, both excuse and justification are devices utilized by the individual to counter-act the social predicament of not complying with a norm. To make this distinction between excuse and justification more clear in the context as it is studied in this paper, we will paraphrase the previous quote by Austin (ibid) in an IT Governance setting:

... if the objection is to be the use of such a dyslogistic adjective as ‘non-formalized’, this may be on the ground that the lack of formalization is an affect of formalization *not being advisable* (justification), or on the ground that it is, *unfortunately, not possible* (excuse).

As seen in the paraphrasing above, both excuse and justification indicate that the respondent is not in full compliance with the norm, hence in need of motivating the incompliance in the social predicament (being asked to motivate incompliance). The social predicament hence initiates the necessity for motive talk, designed to allow the person out of the predicament.

To summarize, this study regards IT Governance as holding dual functions through both offering standards for practice, and, constituting a vehicle for legitimacy. In terms of the latter of these functions, legitimacy is achieved through signaling being in tune with external norms. This ‘signaling’ has previously been studied as strategies of legitimation within the study of motive talk.

### 3 Method

The overall approach was an interpretive qualitative study consisting of field interviews with CIOs from 18 of Sweden’s largest organizations.

The research steps are described in Table 1.

Step	Description	Output
Instrumentation	Reviewing the IT Governance literature and industry analyst reports, in order to identify key norms.	Ten norms as a basis for questions to the CIOs (Table 2). Ten questions based on these norms.
Collection	Interviewing 18 CIOs, constructing the authority of the norms during the interview.	180 observations.
Categorization	Coding and categorizing of interviews.	Distributions of accounts per norm (Table 3).

Analysis	Analyzing two strategies of legitimation, with associated sub-strategies.	Process model of CIO motive talk (Figure 1) and sub-strategies within Excuse and Justification (Table 4).
Conclusion	Identifying patterns of legitimation.	Patterns of legitimation (Figure 2).

Table 1. Research steps

The instrumentation step consisted of a triangulation study where three parties' (consultants, industry analysts and academics) perceptions of central IT Governance related norms were triangulated. This study involved structured literature reviews of consulting reports, industry analyst reports and top-tier academic publications. The results of this study was a list of validated IT Governance related norms and correlating interview questions (Table 2), previously communicated to the academic community through Ask et al (2007) and Magnusson (2010). This was followed by the collection of data, where 18 large organizations were selected in collaboration with a major consulting firm. The premise for selecting these organizations was that they were deemed as having 'excellent IT Governance', i.e. having in some sense succeeded in legitimating IT Governance. The selection contained an even distribution of large organizations from the public, health-care, financial, telecommunications, consumer staples and consumer discretionary sectors. The mean annual revenue of the organizations was €2.000-10.000 Million and the mean IT expenditure was €100-300 Million.

#	Norm	Question
1	IT should be regarded as a strategic asset by Top management.	What is the perception of top management on IT?
2	Investments should be linked to business.	How are IT investments linked to corporate strategic directions and priorities?
3	Top management should be responsible for realizing the value of IT.	Who has the responsibility of realizing added value from IT organized within the company?
4	The IT agenda should be established top-down.	Who determines the IT agenda within the company?
5	The decision process for IT investments should be formalized.	What processes exist for making IT decisions?
6	Performance management should be formalized.	To what extent is performance measurement implemented in your company?
7	There should be a focus on value added of IT within performance management.	Which statement best describes the focus of performance management reports?
8	Resources should be utilized ad-hoc.	Which statement best describes the resource management process for IT in your company?
9	There should be corporate insight into the benefits of IT.	What is the level of insight in both costs of IT and resulting benefits?
10	Costs should be allocated with business unit autonomy.	How is IT cost allocated within your company?

Table 2. Overview of IT Governance related norms and corresponding questions.

Each of the norms was covered by one question in the interview, resulting a total of 180 observations (10 questions in 18 interviews). A key aspect of the research strategy is that the authority of the identified norms is constructed in the interview setting, i.e. not something that is regarded as *a priori* established. In practice this meant that the respondents were put in the awkward position where they were asked to relate their own actions to an external authority (the interviewer), i.e. a social predicament. This type of setup for the interviews utilized inspiration from ethnomethodological breaching experiments (Garfinkel, 1967) where respondents are

placed in situations where they are unable to be fully compliant with a set of norms. Since total compliance with IT Governance is assumed to be almost impossible to achieve, the setting creates a situation well suited for studying motive talk. Building on Austin's theory of speech acts (1961) and the taxonomy of motive talk developed by Semin and Manstead (1983) and Schönbach (1980), a rudimentary framework for analyzing strategies for legitimation was developed.

Following this, the responses were transcribed, read and codified iteratively, first going through the basic categorization of 'Excuse' and 'Justification', then further categorized into sub-categories found within Schönbach's taxonomy of motive talk (1983). In some cases, the sub-categories within the taxonomy did not provide an ample fit, which resulted in new sub-categories being added in a deductive fashion. Based on Austin (1961), responses were categorized as Excuses if the respondent focused on explaining norm compliance through focusing on his or her organization, and not the norm itself. Responses were coded as Justifications if the respondent focused on the norm and not his or her organization. In this tradition, Excuse entails that the respondent accepts the authority claim of the norm, as well as the responsibility for potential norm incompliance. The Justification, on the other hand may acknowledge the norm, but justifies the potential norm incompliance through stating that the norm may not be applicable to the specific situation. Accounts without ample motive talk offered by the respondent were categorized as 'Direct response' and hence omitted from further analysis. After the categorization and re-categorization of the accounts, a comprehensive analysis was performed looking for patterns of legitimation and potential explanations to these patterns.

#### 4 Results: Strategies of Legitimation

Figure 1 illustrates the micro-processes of motive talk that occurred throughout the interviews. The distribution of responses has been added to show the patterns of legitimation observed.

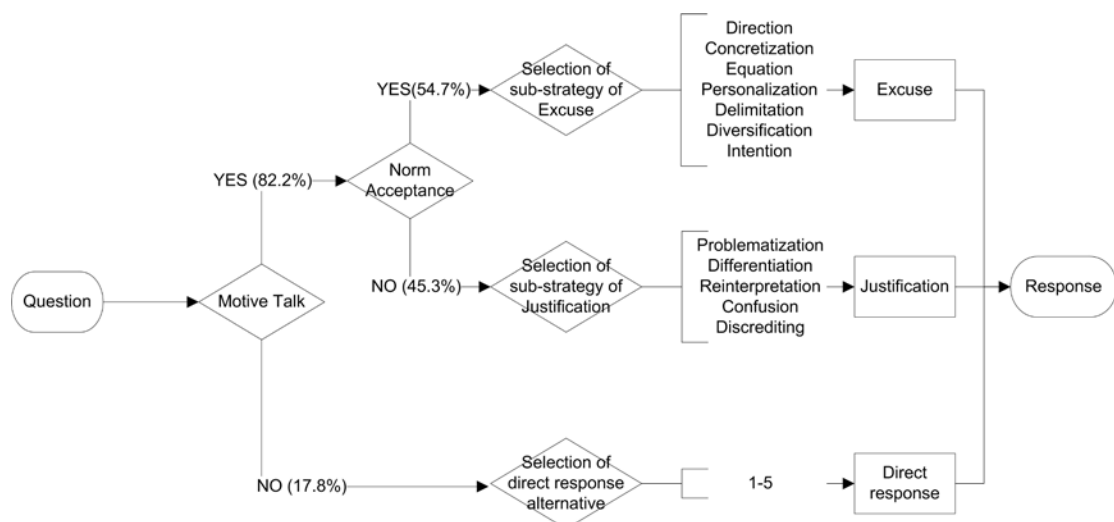


Figure 1. Process model of CIO motive talk in an interview setting.



#### 4.1 An Overview of Identified Strategies

The results of the categorization of accounts into Excuse, Justification or Direct response can be seen in table 3 (n=180). The results are presented in relation to the two strategies for legitimation (excuse and justification) following Austin (1961).

Norm	Excuse	Justification	Direct response
1. IT should be regarded as a strategic asset by Top management.	33.3%	38.9%	27.8%
2. Investments should be linked to business.	61.1%	33.3%	5.6%
3. Top management should be responsible for realizing the value of IT.	44.4%	44.4%	11.1%
4. The IT agenda should be established top-down.	44.4%	44.4%	11.1%
5. The decision process for IT investments should be formalized.	44.4%	33.3%	22.2%
6. Performance management should be formalized.	50.0%	38.9%	11.1%
7. There should be a focus on value added of IT within performance management.	27.8%	44.4%	27.8%
8. Resources should be utilized ad-hoc.	50.0%	38.9%	11.1%
9. There should be corporate insight into the benefits of IT.	44.4%	33.3%	22.2%
10. Costs should be allocated with business unit autonomy.	50.0%	22.2%	27.8%
<i>Total</i>	<i>45.0%</i> <i>(54.7%)</i>	<i>37.2%</i> <i>(45.3%)</i>	<i>17.8%</i>

Table 3. Distributions of accounts per norm (distribution of accounts per norms after omitting direct responses shown within parenthesis).

The responses categorized as Direct response (17.8%) were omitted from the final empirical material, due to these responses not containing any evidence (motive talk) of legitimation, i.e. not having any explanatory value for the purpose of this research. This does not imply that a direct response was either fully compliant or non-compliant with the norm, but simply that without a motivation of the response by the respondent, we were unable to categorize the motive talk. We present further descriptions of the strategies of Excuse and Justification below, together with examples of the found sub-strategies within each category. The presentation will focus on highlighting the different sub-strategies found in the material, and to offer examples of how these sub-strategies appeared in the interviews. The names of the organizations and individual CIOs have been omitted from the material, and references are solely made to which industry the CIO is active in, and which norm the quote is related to.

#### 4.2 Strategies of Excuse

Within the strategy of excuse, seven sub-strategies were identified. These are summarized in Table 4.

Excuse	Description	Distribution
Direction	Respondent focuses on current level of development rather than the current level of compliance.	25.0%
Concretization	Respondent focuses on sub-level examples of compliance and avoids the general level.	16.7%
Equation	Respondent simplifies the level of analysis through equating certain terms in the question with terms that alter the difficulty of achieving compliance.	16.7%
Personalization	Respondent displays full compliance on a personal level, but incompliance on an organizational level.	16.7%
Delimitation	Respondent attributes incompliance to diverse nature of the	8.3%

	organization, and gives example of sub-level compliances.	
Diversification	Respondent attributes incompliance to diverse nature of the organization, without offering examples of compliances.	8.3%
Intention	Respondent focuses on the intentions of the organization for compliance as a measure for compliance.	8.3%
<i>Total</i>		<i>100%</i>

Table 4. Summary of sub-strategies within Excuse along with distributions of accounts.

In the sub-strategy of *Direction* (25%), the respondent chose to excuse his or her organization's lack of norm conformity through focusing on the current level of development rather than the current level of compliance.

This is at least what we strive for, but I would say that if you wanted a snapshot then it would not be accurate, but almost... In the fall. *CIO, Public Sector, in relation to Norm 4.*

Another type of sub-strategy was that of *Concretization* (16.7%). In this type of response, the respondent used analytical means to make the response more concrete, thereby avoiding answering the question on a general level.

But I would stress that the business managers are responsible for realizing the value of a certain investment. So typically we do it like this, particularly when it is a little larger investment. If we change the system for customers, that is a substantial investment, and then the sponsors are the people responsible. Really the business unit managers are responsible for the different businesses because they own the business case that is being calculated. They take this calculation to their organizations and the business manager signs off on it. *CIO, Utility Sector, in relation to Norm 3.*

In the sub-strategy of *Equation* (16.7%), the respondent chose to answer the question through simplifying the level of analysis. This could, for instance be in the form of equating the Top Management cadre of the organization to the CEO, so that his viewpoints were seen as symbolic for those of Top Management.

Well... I would like to say that... not so much the board, not that many IT projects reach this far up to them. But the CEO, our new CEO, is conscious of this, absolutely. [name of the CEO] comes from sales in the US. He comes from the market side, and there the efficiency of field operatives is to a large extent IT. *CIO, HealthCare, in relation to Norm 2.*

In the sub-strategy of *Personalization* (16.7%), the respondent was clear in stating that his or her own perception was in direct relation to the norm, yet that the organization as such did not fulfill the norm.

Well I wish we were there, but we are not. *CIO, HealthCare Sector, in relation to Norm 9.*

*Delimitation* (8.3%) was another of the sub-strategies of excuse found among the accounts. This pattern reflected a response where the respondent attribution of a lack of norm congruence with the diverse nature of the organization. Through focusing on a separate organizational entity within the overall organization and answering from this standpoint, the respondent could excuse not complying with the norm on the general organizational level.

I only see to it that our framework functions well. The business manager provides the contents of the applications and finances them. And we, off course, support them with the IS IT competence that is needed, but the design and requirements, that is their responsibility. This is something that the IT dimension

can't take responsibility for. Instead, the business areas are responsible for clarifying and communicating their needs, wishes, and subsequent requirements.  
*CIO, Public Sector, in relation to Norm 5*

*Diversification* (8.3%) was also found to be one of the sub-strategies present among the accounts categorized as excuses. In this sub-strategy, the respondent focuses on the diverse nature of his or her organization, making it impossible to reach a high level of norm compliance on the organizational level. This type of account was closely associated to the previously described sub-strategy of *delimitation*, yet with the difference that the response categorized as diversification did not result in the respondent singling out one organizational element as a reference, but instead simply stated that the low level of norm compliance was attributable to organizational contingencies.

We are in the middle of a change. I am talking about internationalization. We are not really there yet, but in the Swedish area, where the main part of our business is, it is like this. *CIO, Financial Sector, in relation to Norm 8.*

In the sub-strategy of *Intention* (8.3%), the focus on the answer from the respondent was not on the organizational level of norm compliance but rather on the intentions of the organization. In other words, the CIO was answering the question not with a description of how the current situation or the development (such as in *Direction*) but with a clear statement that the organization understood the overall necessity to fulfill the norm.

We are working with implementing a portfolio model... that is something that we have not completely implemented, but we are working in that direction... It is rather complex and takes time, but it is decently on the way... *CIO, Telecommunications, in relation to Norm 5.*

### 4.3 Strategies of Justification

Within the strategy of justification, five sub-strategies were identified. These are summarized in Table 5.

Justification	Description	Distribution
Problematization	Respondent identifies difficulties and contradictions within the norm, as well as linking the specific norm to other norms with higher precedence within the norm system.	40.0%
Differentiation	Respondent focuses on difficulties in defining the basic concepts within the norm.	20.0%
Reinterpretation	Respondent re-interprets the norm into a form less cumbersome to comply with.	16.0%
Confusion	Respondent utilizes technical jargon to illustrate the complexity of the norm.	12.0%
Discrediting of norm	Respondent signals that the norm is fundamentally not achievable or irrelevant for the organization in question.	12.0%
		100

Table 5. Summary of sub-strategies within Justification, along with distributions of accounts.

The first sub-strategy found was that of *Problematization* (40%). In this pattern, the respondent started out through a critical reflection over the norm as such, trying to identify difficulties and contradictions. This was in many cases through focusing on the inter-related nature of the norm system, where other norms were discussed as having precedence over the norm in the question.

Yes, that is a pretty hard question to answer, I think. The question is: Are they communicating vessels? If I were sitting here together with the Chief, we would agree that they are linked. If you ask the county chief's then you will probably get a different answer. Many county chiefs have a background in Law, and they have, for natural reasons, a little bit of a different perspective. *CIO, Public Sector, In relation to Norm 1.*

*Differentiation* (20%) was another sub-strategy found among the accounts. Here, the respondent focused on the innate difficulties in defining the basic concepts involved in the question. This could for instance be in the form of differentiating between IT as a means for driving rationalization versus revenue maximization.

We are not that much into rationalization projects, but we do more business development. Sure, we do the other type as well, but that is hard to fit into our plan for projects driven purely by cost efficiency ... If we say the following... [respondent shows the project management portfolio system]... 16 of 100 projects. That is pretty much related to the total amount of money as well... No, it is less – it is 10%. *CIO, Financial Sector, in relation to Norm 2.*

The sub-strategy of *Re-interpretation* (16%) was also found among the accounts. Here the respondent chose to explicitly re-interpret the question, often through asking for acceptance from the interviewer as he or she went along with the re-interpretation.

Really, the decision mandate lies down at the work units, but my role is really to see to it that we deliver, that we have a coordinated delivery. They look at their areas of responsibility. My role is to see to it that there is an umbrella over this. I would prefer to see it as a portfolio, right? *CIO, Public Sector, in relation to Norm 8*

Another type of sub-strategy was found in the introduction of *Confusion* (12%). In this pattern, the respondent used technical jargon in showing the often-extreme complexity involved in the question and hence making it impossible to reach norm compliance.

*Discrediting of norm* (12%) is the last of the sub-strategies found among the accounts. Here, the respondent signaled that the norm was either not reachable for their particular organization, or, basically a separate phenomenon without relevance for the organization. This could for instance be through stating that the norm is an American phenomenon and not directly applicable to the Nordic region.

We kind of allocate, not the IT costs – that is a typically American phenomenon. I would like to say that there is a... No, that is not how we do it here. IT is more like business and IT is free... that is one side of it ... Yes, they are free to buy everything but infrastructure externally, so it is infrastructure that is set by a skeleton agreement that we have set up with different suppliers, particularly our outsourcing suppliers. *CIO, Consumer Discretionary Sector, in relation to Norm 10.*

## 5 Discussion

Returning to our research question, *which patterns of legitimation can be observed among CIOs in large organizations when IT Governance norms are not respected*, we discuss our key findings and their implications. Figure 2 illustrates the patterns of legitimation as found in the study.

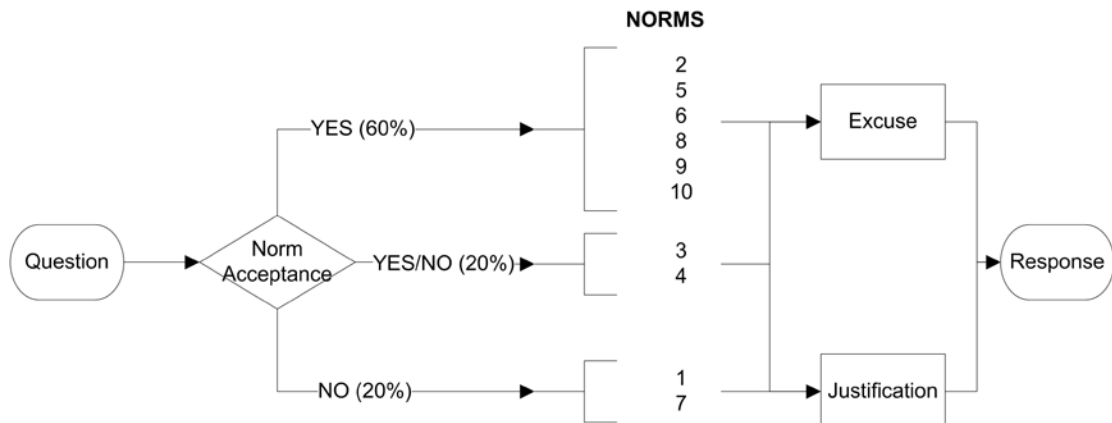


Figure 2. Patterns of legitimation as seen in the preferred strategies of legitimation per norm.

### 5.1 Patterns of Legitimation

Using Austin's (1961) definition of Excuse and Justification, together with the findings as presented in Figure 2, this study has showed that CIOs avoid going into conflict with the norms. Instead, they show a tendency to accept the authority of the norms, and explain potential norm incompliance with specific characteristics about their organization and specific situation (e.g. a tendency towards Excuse rather than Justification). With shared norms being a clear indicator of a profession (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), this is regarded as an empirical indication that CIOs have become part of a profession in the functional sociological meaning (Raelin, 1989).

There are two exceptions from this broad picture. The two norms that were contested were related to the necessity for Top Management to regard IT as a strategic resource (norm 1) and the necessity to focus on value added of IT when it comes to performance management. Our interpretation of this is that the first norm puts a strong focus on the responsibility for Top Management. Hence, it transcends the scope of control of the CIO, and becomes a norm that if accepted could be detrimental for the CIOs relationship with his or her superiors. If accepted, it could come back to haunt the CIO. Applying this interpretation to the second norm where a majority of the CIOs questioned the norm (norm 7), it can be argued that the CIO interprets performance management as lying outside his or her scope of control. Looking more closely at these situations, we see that the dominating sub-strategy of Justification is that of Problematization. Instead of accepting the norms, the CIOs fall into a discussion-mode, trying to discard the norm as being incoherent or impossible to achieve. Since the norm was expressed through the response alternative of full maturity, the motive talk focused around questioning if this really was preferable to less 'mature' alternatives, or how the norm was faulty i.e. not a norm at all. Following Miller (1998), this problematization could be the first indication that the norm system is under re-construction, subject to criticism and in need of alternative legitimation. Hence, the two identified norms would be an identification of where the 'margins' of the practice of IT Governance is currently situated. The identification of these two norms could hence be an important contribution in terms of where future studies of IT Governance should focus.

In relation to the types of justification expressed through the accounts, only minor examples of scapegoating were found. Scapegoating has previously been shown to be a means for respondents to motivate not fully following a norm (Schönbach, 1980), and the almost complete lack of this sub-strategy in the material is necessary to

highlight. As in the case of the CIOs tendency to avoid accepting the authority of norms where compliance transgressed their scope of control or mandate, the tendency to avoid scapegoating is illustrative of how the CIOs work with legitimating IT Governance. Set in a context of high inter-dependence and political tension between other managers (Menz, 2012), the CIO avoids playing the blame-game or stepping on neighboring managers' toes.

Related back to the view of professionalization through inter-professional conflicts of jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988), this finding illustrates a conflict-averse pattern in CIO professionalization. IT Governance is in many respects endowed with a set of norms, yet when the norms clash with neighboring professions norms and practices, the CIO avoids standing his ground. Instead, he only confirms to the norms that are not in conflict with other professions.

## **5.2 Understanding a Profession Through Motive Talk**

This study opens up for contributions to IS through the study of motive talk. As the first study that we are aware of specifically targeting patterns of legitimation, findings related to the tendency of CIOs to avoid scapegoating, being more prone towards accepting the norms (excuse) than not (justification), and avoiding the acceptance of norms that infringes on a neighboring profession, add to previous studies of CIO behavior (Banker et al, 2011; Chun and Mooney, 2009; Grover et al, 1993).

The patterns of CIO legitimation identified in this study also lead to an expansion of previously existing taxonomies for motive talk (Schönbach, 1980). As seen in the typology of excuses (ibid), there are a number of sub-categories with clear bearings to the findings. Most of these sub-categories relate to the CIOs own shortcomings in the form of Duress of powerful agents, Loyalties and Specific certainties. In particular, the appeal to specific external circumstances of the situation was found to be an often-used sub-strategy of excuse. The appeals to own effort and care was also present among the accounts, where the CIO was clear in stating that he was surely aware of the necessity of norm compliance and thus fully in line with it. These accounts then went on to push the responsibility over to an organization left wanting in understanding, without moving to full-fledged scapegoating.

Further research may build on our insights of how CIOs offer a means for researchers interested in speech acts and motive talk to further develop the available theoretical models. The homing in on norms as a method for addressing motive talk proved to be a viable approach that we hope to see more of in the future, perhaps even in neighboring fields with alternative managers such as the Chief Financial Officer as the empirical focus.

## **5.3 Implications for Practice**

What can CIOs learn from this study? First, there is the issue of which norms to accept and which to reject for successfully achieving legitimacy. Since the norms themselves can be regarded as corresponding to elements of IT Governance, this also brings with it implications for the customization of IT Governance. In this respect, the study adds insights to the CIOs through identifying two norms ('IT should be regarded as a strategic asset by top management', and, 'There should be a focus on value added of IT within performance management') where the CIO does best in not striving for compliance with these norms. This may seem counter-intuitive, with the long tradition of striving for an increased status for IT. Yet, as noted by Banker et al (2011), there is a need for nuancing what constitutes the prerequisites for successful IT Governance. In relation to this study, the reason for successful CIOs (successful in

regards to having achieved legitimacy) incompliance with these norms lies in them being potential areas of inter-professional conflict. With the CIO being highly dependent on neighboring professional jurisdictions (Abbott, 1988; Grover et al, 1993) and traditionally being associated with short tenure (Markus and Benjamin, 1996), an avoidance of professional intrusion seems to be one key to success.

Second, as highlighted in the results of this study, successful CIOs have a tendency to curve towards accepting rather than questioning norms as they are presented by an external party. With this study being focused on motive talk, this is not equated with isomorphic practice. Instead, this implies that despite accepting norms on a general level, the actual adoption of these norms is always superseded by an adaptation. Hence, if faced with a situation where a new norm is presented, the natural tendency for a successful CIO should be to accept this norm, with the full intent of adapting it to the organization before adopting it.

#### **5.4 Limitations**

We will briefly discuss some limitations to the study. First, through focusing on CIOs that have been successful in establishing the legitimacy of IT Governance in their own organizations, the patterns found can be seen as an example of best-practice. We certainly may have found other patterns in less mature organizations. The second limitation is related to the gender bias found in the empirical material. No female CIOs were represented in the material, which in light of previously identified gender differences between IT professionals (Trauth, 2002) leads to a limitation of this study. In addition to this, the lineage and tenure of the respondents was not taken into account when analyzing the results. This might have opened up additional avenues of insight.

In addition to this, the organizations differed demographically in terms of industry, overall governance and also in some manner size (even though they were all considered large enterprises). This creates a potential problem with cross-firm variability as noted by Bowen and Wiersema (1999). Lastly, there is a limitation in generalizability with the selection of solely Swedish organizations. With this study's strong focus on norms and norm compliance, replicating the study in countries with different cultures in respect to e.g. authority might render different results.

#### **5.5 Conclusion**

In this study we asked, which patterns of legitimation can be observed among CIOs in large organizations when IT Governance norms are not respected?

This study is to the best of our knowledge the first of its kind in that it addresses the issues of how CIOs legitimate IT Governance. In answering the research question, we have identified patterns of legitimation prevalent among CIOs through their use of motive talk. As the findings show, CIOs use a combination of Excuse and Justification, with a clear preference for Excuse (i.e. accepting the norm).

While this is argued to be an indication of that the CIO is starting to achieve professional status (through having an accepted, common norm system), the identification of two norms where the preferred strategy for legitimation among the CIOs was that of Justification (i.e. not accepting the norm) is equally important. Both of these norms involved areas that could be regarded as falling outside the professional jurisdiction of the CIO (and therefore infringing on neighboring professions), and we argue that this is an identification of what Miller (1998) would refer to as the 'margins' of the field (IT Governance).

Lastly, we believe that our research strategy, i.e. combining motive talk and speech act theory, opens up a new venue for IS profession research.

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