



Why trustworthiness in an IT vendor is important even after the vendor left: IT is accepting the message and not just the messenger that is important



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 October 2012

Accepted 5 November 2013

Available online 15 November 2013

Keywords:

Trustworthiness

Trust theory

Informational justice

Interpersonal justice

IT implementation success

Social exchange theory

ABSTRACT

Trustworthiness is the assessment that another person or others can be trusted because in the past they had shown adequate ability, integrity, and benevolence. Trust is the actual willingness to depend on the trusted party to fulfill its *future* obligations when there is risk that this trusted party might take undue advantage of the situation. In the current conceptualization of trust theory, trustworthiness is important because it leads to trust. Applied to the management of IT adoption and assessment, research has indeed shown that both trustworthiness and trust, often combined statistically, have a *direct* effect on IT adoption and assessment. There are circumstances, however, such as in this study, when the trusted party has left the scene, making its future actions and the risk of dependence on these actions irrelevant to the trusting party. The question arises whether trustworthiness still plays a role in such cases. Seemingly, at least based on the current conceptualization, this should make the trustworthiness of the trusted party an insignificant consideration. Logic is advanced why even in such a case trustworthiness may still be important, but should play an *indirect* role. The proposition suggested is that the trustworthiness of the messenger is important, as previously suggested, but what really counts is accepting the message this messenger conveyed. An argument is raised why in this case interpersonal justice increases trustworthiness and user acceptance of the message. The data support these propositions. Theory and managerial implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

According to the commonly used theory of trust, trust is a willingness to depend on the trusted party to fulfill its *future* obligations when there is risk that this trusted party might take undue advantage of the situation. This future oriented trust is based on a current assessment that the trusting party makes about the past trustworthiness of the trusted party: its ability, integrity, and benevolence. Trustworthiness is typically understood as an antecedent of trust. Trustworthiness in this view is important because based on the assessed trustworthiness of another party people decide to trust that party concerning its future intentions [1]. This future orientation of trustworthiness-based trust has been related in theory and supported by data to perceived risk about the future actions of the trusted party [2], to reducing social complexity about the future as felt by the trusting party [3],

as well as to the direct future expected benefits that having a trusted partner brings to the relationship [4,5].

Presenting an alternative conceptualization of trustworthiness, partly based on social exchange theory [6,7], the primary objective of this study is to argue that trustworthiness should be important even in the absence of reliance on any future obligations of the trusted party. This may happen, for example, when an IT implementation vendor (the trusted party) is no longer on the scene and therefore the users are no longer dependent on it, are exposed to no new risk from it, and gain no new value from the relationship. This lack of a future orientation would seem to render irrelevant the reason why trust should be important in the commonly used theory of trust [1,8–10]. Even in such cases, this paper argues, user assessments of the trustworthiness of the vendor representatives are important. The logic presented is that the trustworthiness of a messenger is important, but it is accepting the actual message this messenger is conveying that really counts in people's assessments.

As such, the trustworthiness of IT implementation vendors' representatives will still influence user assessments about the IT even after the vendor left the scene because based on this

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trustworthiness the users will accept or not the message the vendor had broadcasted about the IT meeting its objectives, and therefore being a success. However, according to this logic the effect of trustworthiness should only be indirect. Additionally, tying trustworthiness to justice theory, the study argues that trustworthiness in this case is related to the assessed informational justice of the representatives. This connection is suggested based on extrapolating from one of the reasons why assessments of justice are important, expanding on social exchange theory [6,7]. These propositions were tested and supported in the context of a recently implemented large IT at The National Insurance Institute of Israel (TNII). TNII serves an equivalent but expanded role as the Social Security Administration does in the USA.

The contributions of the study are in (1) presenting and supporting an alternative view of trustworthiness in which trustworthiness is important even if it is not related to any future dependence on a trusted party, where according to the currently applied theory of trust there is no reason for such assessments of trustworthiness to be important. This happens because as important as the trustworthiness of a messenger is, it is accepting the actual message that counts in people's assessments. This may be the reason why (2) there are cases where trustworthiness may only indirectly increase assessments of a new IT. These results are important also because they (3) may shed light on new aspects of trustworthiness and its management in IT adoption, specifically that trustworthiness may be important in that it supports a rational assessment of outcomes even when there is no actual need to trust anymore in the vendor. And, in showing that (4) in such cases, trustworthiness may be related to previously exhibited informational justice.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The commonly accepted future oriented view of trust and trustworthiness

The theoretical presentation of trust and trustworthiness presented by Mayer et al. [1] and empirical models based on their work (e.g. [11,12]) are the broadly accepted model of trust in Management, Marketing, and in Management Information Systems (MIS). Trust in this view is a future oriented willingness to depend on another person or people in situations where there is a risk that the trusted party may take undue advantage of the situation, a willingness that is based on the assumption that this trusted party has shown itself to be trustworthy in the past by showing integrity, benevolence, and ability. As a side note, although Mayer et al. differentiated between trust, as willingness by the trusting party to depend on the trusted party, and trustworthiness, as assessments about the trusted party, most empirical research did not make this distinction, often mixing items of the two constructs or treating and calling trustworthiness outright as trust [13]. The same mixing of terms and the same use of a future tense reference to trust are true also of Marketing research (e.g. [4,5,14,15]) and other theoretical approaches to trust are discussed next. Importantly, this conceptualization of trust centers on the nature of the trusted party, not on the message this party is conveying.

A related explanation why trust is essential was proposed by Luhmann [3]. Luhmann argued that trust is necessary because people need to simplify their social environment enough to be able to understand the *future* behavior of others. In his conceptualization, the social environment in which people live is cognitively overwhelming considering that each person is a free agent whose behavior cannot be controlled and in many cases may not

even be rational. If one were to try to understand other people as is, the task would be too cognitively daunting. Since people nonetheless have a psychological need to understand the behavior of others, people try to simplify this social environment so they can understand what to expect of others. Trust serves this purpose of simplifying the social environment by allowing people to assume away many unwanted potential disruptive future behaviors of trusted others on account of these others having been trustworthy. Trusting in this conceptualization therefore means assuming the other person or persons will behave in a socially acceptable manner, which simplifies the interaction enough for people to be able to understand what to expect of the trusted party. As Sztompka puts it “trust is a bet about the future contingent of others” [9, p. 25]. This conceptualization is about the nature of the relationship with the trusted person. It is not about the message the trusted party conveyed.

Another approach why trust is important argues that trust itself is a direct potential benefit to the relationship. A business relationship is just worth more even financially when the other party can be relied upon [5,16]. Presumably, this is because having a business partner that can be trusted means one can be more certain about relying on this partner do the right thing; being able to rely on the other party to do the right thing means a lesser need to take a larger and more expensive safety margin when making decisions. Indeed, examining the clients of an ERP customization vendor, Gefen [17] showed that clients thought their business relationship with the vendor was more worthwhile the more they thought this vendor was trustworthy, presumably because this trustworthiness translates into actual trust. And, supporting this perceived value monetarily, buyers in online marketplaces have been shown to be willing to pay more when they perceived the seller as trustworthy [18]¹, or thought the community of sellers was more trustworthy [19]. Viewed this way, trust in a business context is of direct benefit in its own right, whether between companies [4,5] or within a company [20]. It is crucial within companies because the perceived trustworthiness of management enables open dialog and empowerment, and the lack of it often results in organizational descent into a spiral of secrecy, blame, isolation, avoidance, passivity, helplessness, and employees doing just what is needed by the book without taking any initiative [20]. It is important between companies because it is impossible to fully regulate a contract or verify that the other party is not taking unfair advantage or engaging in opportunistic behavior [21]. This conceptualization too is about the nature of the relationship with the trusted person. It is not about the message the trusted party conveyed.

Taking such a future oriented approach to trust, and often treating trustworthiness and trust as one construct, extensive empirical research has supported this future orientation by showing that trust and trustworthiness *directly* affected intended or actual behavior or resulted in more positive assessments of the trusted party and its actions. This has been shown regarding ecommerce [18,22–25], online auctions [2,18,19,22,26,27], online software markets [28], Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems [17], supply chain alliances [29], buyer–supplier performance [30] healthcare systems [31,32], outsourcing of information systems development [33–36], online recommendation agents [37–40], Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) use [41,42], virtual teams [43–45], virtual communities [46,47], open source software [48,49], electronic government [50,51], and Knowledge Management Systems (KMS) [52,53]. Marketing research, calling trustworthiness trust, has reached equivalent conclusions about the effects of trustworthiness being future oriented and having a

¹ The authors labeled the construct trust but the items deal with trustworthiness.

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