

Balancing Power and Participation: Ethical Contributions to Digital Strategy Development Based on a Case Study at a Public University

About

This study explores how ethical considerations can be effectively integrated into the digital strategy development process within organizations. Through a qualitative case study at a German public university, researchers interviewed sixteen employees across various hierarchical levels to understand how ethics are perceived and can contribute to a more effective strategy by balancing power and participation.

Problem

As organizations undergo digital transformation, ethical concerns are often treated as secondary or are not effectively embedded in the strategy development process itself. This creates a gap where decisions about technology and resource allocation are viewed as purely technical, overlooking their inherent ethical dimensions and the central tension between centralized power and broad employee participation.

Study Outcome

- Ethics are often perceived as an individual's personal concern rather than a formal, integral part of the digital strategy process.
- The core challenge in digital strategy development is the ethical tension of 'balancing power and participation,' particularly concerning resource allocation and decision-making authority.
- Seemingly technical or economic decisions, such as IT project prioritization, are inherently ethical because they involve the distribution of scarce resources and impact stakeholders differently.
- In the absence of a clear central digital strategy, employees and departments tend to act independently, pursuing their own priorities, which can lead to fragmented and inefficient outcomes.
- The study proposes a procedural, discourse-ethical approach using participatory and agile methods to negotiate interests and fairly allocate resources, making ethics a structural part of strategy development.

Keywords

Ethics in Digital Transformation • Digital Strategy • Open Strategy • Participatory IT Governance • Case Study • Power and Participation