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Seeking the Goal in the Process, the Process for the Goal: Organizational Learning in a Public Sector Change Project

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Abstract

This paper describes how a combination of process modelling and goal modelling techniques has been used to facilitate organizational learning. The case study comes from the public sector in the UK. The modelling techniques have helped users to rationalise about the existing processes and then to design how they would like the process to work. The paper describes how the users have been able to confront the complex issues involved. The experience suggests that the combination of the modelling techniques is important to the learning experience of the users involved.

Introduction: The Change Agenda

This paper is concerned with the combination of process modelling and goal modelling. It describes how these techniques are used to assist organizational learning in the context of major process redesign. Our case study comes from the public sector. It concerns a city council in a major urban conurbation in the UK. Confronted by an ever more turbulent operational environment, this city council has responded by seeking to redevelop processes throughout its operational divisions. The aim is to use ICT to dramatically improve service delivery.

The rhetoric of change flows easily. Case history teaches that actually effecting organizational change is far more difficult than preaching that it should happen. The systemic complexity of the task can quickly become a quagmire. Faced with the need to synthesise change across cultural, human resource and technological factors, many an organizational change programme has wilted, or simply got lost.

This paper will describe a simple modelling approach designed to help people to communicate easily and to make the ‘leap’ from thinking about processes now, to redesigning processes for the future. It is informed by the psychodynamic notion of a ‘transitional object’ proposed for use in the IS context by Wastell (2000). Transitional objects facilitate learning. A classic example comes from child psychology. A teddy bear comforts the child and, by helping it to lessen its dependence on the mother, facilitates learning about independence. It therefore serves as a transitional object. In an organizational context, models can be understood to be transitional objects that facilitate learning in complex and anxiety provoking situations. Thus, it was imperative that the modelling approach utilised in the city council should not become an end in itself. Models should be sufficiently simple to develop and read, so that they help stakeholders to focus upon the problem in hand i.e. innovative ways of delivering services.

The title of this paper is chosen to reflect the fact that organizational goals can be understood to be embedded in the design of processes. By recognising this, we are able to work across four stepping stones in an organizational change programme. First, stakeholders use modelling techniques to facilitate some scrutiny of current processes. Secondly, the stakeholders explore goals of the organization by asking what these processes actually achieve. Thirdly, the stakeholders propose new goals. Finally, they devise new models of processes that they believe will bring these new goals to fruition.

We are not arguing that the relationship between goals and processes is simple, and are not necessarily saying that there is a one-way causality. Instead, what we are doing is drawing upon a rich vein of thinking about systemic structures and the goals that they achieve (e.g. Beer, 1979; Checkland, 1981) as well as making reference to the exhortations to take a radical perspective upon the redesign of business processes (specifically Hammer, 1990).

The Case Study

The City of Salford is a major city in the North West of England. Like much of the UK public sector the City Council has a long history of rationalisation i.e. cost-cutting and retrenchment of functionality through outsourcing. Recently, it has instituted an Information Society Strategy (Salford, 1999). This differs from many prior change programmes in that it affords the council with the authority to shape its own future. It is designed to promote ambitious service quality and efficiency improvements through harnessing the creative potential of the staff of the council. In broad terms, the aim is to
exploit the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in order to improve the social and economic well-being of the people of Salford.

The development of the Information Society Strategy posed the senior officers of the council with a problem. How do they engage the creativity of staff in the redesign of service delivery in Salford? Many obstacles stood in their way. Amongst the most serious issues were the weariness of some council employees to change initiatives and the expectation that any change would have a negative ramification for staff (e.g. loss of control).

An initial step was taken with the creation of a BPR method in collaboration with the University of Manchester and the University of Warwick. This method is known as SPRINT (Salford Process Reengineering method Involving New Technology). Although influenced by the classical BPR theorists (e.g. Hammer, 1990; Davenport, 1993), SPRINT has a distinctive tone as it draws additionally upon systems (e.g. Checkland, 1981) and modelling approaches (Warboys et al., 1999). Amongst the important precepts of SPRINT is that stakeholders take key positions in all change programmes. Stakeholders in this context are staff of the council, although in principle there is no reason why the net should not be cast much wider.

The Challenge

The challenge is to engage staff members in a way that allows them to take key positions in a change programme that is as radical as any in the history of the council. Many of these staff members are steeped in knowledge of existing processes, but have little external experience to provide contrast and no experience of directly influencing change programmes. How can SPRINT facilitate their learning? How can they begin to scrutinise existing processes and use their knowledge to shape a new set of processes?

Essentially, SPRINT proposes that the stakeholders follow a simple series of four steps. This involves them working at two related levels. They describe the processes that they know well and scrutinise the goals that are embedded in them (the first two steps). They then describe the goals that they would like to achieve and design processes to realise them (the second pair of steps). This journey takes the users through the design of new processes and leaves them with the task of implementing the new process – a subject for an implementation phase of SPRINT (not discussed here).

The modelling phase of SPRINT constitutes what Wastell (2000) has called a transitional space, i.e. a supportive learning environment in which users reflect critically on current processes and experiment with potential new process designs. In this environment, models function as transitional objects. They allow complexity to be grasped and provide users with a sense of confidence and control, enabling them to step outside the messy imperatives of current realities and to envisage new business visions.

The modelling techniques chosen to support this learning activity are Role Activity Diagrams (e.g. Ould, 1995; Warboys et al., 1999), and a simple goal schema devised in-house.

Council Tax Collection

Council Tax is levied by local government throughout the UK. It is a property tax, charged to home owners and tenants on the basis of the value of the house in which they are living. There are several discounts available, including one that is applied where only one person of working age lives in a property. This is known as the single person’s discount. Our case example will focus upon this fragment of the process although it is only a small part of the whole process modelled by the staff of the Council Tax team.

Eight operational staff from the Council Tax team took part in the modelling exercise. Over a period of two weeks, they used Role Activity Diagrams to describe the entire operations of the Council Tax operation. This process involved them in learning about the notation, learning to use a diagramming tool and debating and discussing the diagrams. The users were very knowledgeable about the process, and so were not reliant upon information gathering activities. Nonetheless, the process was useful to them – they reported that the task of creating the diagrams forced them to reflect on the processes that were used. This began to spark a critical debate and the staff members started to assemble a list of
issues for the development of the service. Overall, a total of twenty person days was expended on this modelling activity.

The next step was to further develop the critical thinking that had been engendered by the development of the Role Activity Diagrams. The staff members were encouraged to scrutinise the models by asking what goals the processes actually achieve. This activity was inspired by Beer’s aphorism “The purpose of a system is what it does” (Beer, 1979). The users responded by informally describing the goals that the existing processes achieved. For each goal description, a simple set of subjective observations can be developed e.g.

- The process confuses the Council Tax payer.
- Confused Council Tax payers call our offices.
- Calls to our offices keep us busy.
- The process keeps us busy!

The third step is to devise an alternative set of goals that the users would like to achieve. This is a little more formal, but is again based solely upon subjective viewpoints expressed by the staff members. A simple diagrammatic convention is prescribed within SPRINT for the recording of these goals. This is set out below.

![Figure 2. Goal Diagram Convention](image)

The diagram created for the processing of the single person’s discount is shown below. There are two primary goals, ‘High Efficiency’ and ‘Low Fraud Rates.’ Although there is some potential for conflict between these two, they are related through a number of further goals.

Two goals need some further elaboration. First, the goal of having the applicant carry the onus of proof, reflects the intention to reject all unproven applications for discount. In the past, where an application was unproven, the staff at Salford might sometimes exercise their discretion in assisting with the gathering of information, granting a temporary discount or giving the applicant the benefit of the doubt and allowing the application. As well as being costly, this arrangement was vulnerable to fraudulent claims. Secondly, the goal of having an internet and telephone based operation also implies that personal calls and letter correspondence will be excluded (staff employed in local offices will assist those who find the new arrangements difficult).

The fourth step for the staff was to create a process model in the Role Activity Diagram format that they believe will achieve the goals described in the diagram. A top level model is shown at Figure 5. It is designed to achieve all of the goals set out above (e.g. an internet/telephone based basis for communication, onus of proof carried by applicant).

The staff maintain their crucial role in the development of the new process design by developing other, more detailed models. They are now involved in the creation of scripts for call-centre staff to use and UI dialogues for internet transactions. Thus, through a process of four steps, staff have made a break with established practice and developed a new design for the achievement of new goals in the organization. The validity of the transition that they have made remains open to question. The process of learning requires that the assumptions underpinning the new model are repeatedly scrutinised as

![Figure 3. Example Goal Diagram](image)
the design activity proceeds. Consensus may yet break down, and new models may be proposed.

**Conclusions**

Work goes on at Salford. The staff are elaborating designs and putting in place the new processes that they have defined for the organization. They are assisted by IT and HR experts who will manage the specialist parts of the change programme.

Looking ahead, we foresee that this kind of study will have the added value of assisting Salford to establish performance indicators from the local criteria proposed by staff. This can be done in the manner proposed by Kueng (2000). This is important in a public sector body such as Salford City Council. Increasingly in the UK, the public sector is not only required to be efficient, but is required to prove that it is efficient.

The messages of the work described here are as follows:

- It is difficult for staff steeped in the traditional practices of an organization to propose and consider alternate ways of working.
- Staff can be helped to reflect upon their ways of working by requiring them to follow a process of learning. This is encapsulated in the following four steps:
  - Modelling the extant processes (process modelling).
  - Scrutinising the effects of these processes (informal goal analysis).
  - Proposing goals that they would wish a new process to fulfil (goal modelling).
  - Designing a process to realise the goals (process modelling).
- The combination of process modelling and goal modelling is essential. Without either component, the value of the other would be dramatically reduced.
- The models themselves serve as transitional objects – their value is derived from their usefulness in the process of learning that the users undergo. Thus, in Wastell’s words: “Constructing models provides the opportunity for users and developers to articulate a shared understanding of the application domain in which its complexity is reduced to cognitively tractable proportions. … By reducing complexity, they facilitate learning by instilling confidence and a sense of control” (Wastell, 2000).

**References**


The applicant is required to furnish sufficient information to the assessor. If sufficient information is available, a security check is carried out on existing database information. If clearance is obtained, the discount is awarded. In all other circumstances, the assessor informs the applicant of the problem and asks him/her to reapply.