

Socialization of Practice in a Process World: Toward Participatory Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a model and our experience of a lateral, participatory approach to creating and sustaining new socio-technical practices within organizations. Working closely with a user-centered design and project team in a large (US) IT product company, we designed a socialization process as an alternative to institutionalization for new product development, design, and marketing practices. A socialization process accommodates current organizational structures and the agents typically involved as decision makers when introducing a new practice to be deployed as an organizational standard. Socialization promotes practices laterally across established organizational boundaries through a series of informal peer exchanges, which are encounters designed to facilitate participation in the developing practice. Socialization is inherently participatory, and follows an organic model opposing the popular management practice of importing “best practices” from industry leading firms and consultants.

Keywords

Socialization, Design practice, Organizational design, Transformation

INTRODUCTION

The socialization model establishes an organic process that spreads artifacts and activities throughout an organization, creating a web of personal connections that supports sustainable organizational practices. As an organic (internal) process, socialization embeds the disciplinary and social values of the participating teams or organizational units, creating deeply rooted processes that are highly resistant to arbitrary change by management fiat. We observe how a socialization approach lessens the perceived confrontation with established practices, and affords organizations a way to innovate new practices within the protection of an organizational laboratory setting.

PERSPECTIVES FRAMING THE TRANSFORMATION PROBLEM

Organizations are complex socio-technical systems, and large enterprises are so complex that no single individual can conceptually grasp the entirety of the system. Assuming contemporary business and non-profit enterprises are sincere when they plan and reconfigure their internal structures in pursuit of “transformation,” the opportunity is presented to adapt the new organizational routines to the deep learning that occurs in the front lines of knowledge practices. Given that most transformation projects are motivated by competitive or optimizing strategies, to assert a mediating influence from the perspective of reflective practice requires a valid, contesting perspective that resonates with strategy. While the scope of the exploratory paper does not allow full development of this perspective, prior work by the author (Jones, 2008) describes a participatory approach to socializing strategy, based on the Penrose (1959) resource-based view of firm effectiveness.

The Penrose view shows that organizational learning and strengthening knowledge practices establish sustainable competitive resources. Modern advocates of Penrose theory (Kogut and Zander 1996, Venkatraman and Tanriverdi, 2005) observe more inclusive, emergent models of strategy and business process, as opposed to the top-down control models popular in North American management. Since managers do not identify epistemological bases for strategy (because there usually is not such a basis), we have no way of assessing directly which organizations are managed or designed following a Penrose resource model. With the last decade’s interest in innovation as a business strategy, new organizational models have been promoted by Penrose advocates (Best and Humphries, 2003, Spender, 1994). Penrose offers a means of enabling humanistic organizational thinkers to align progressive management values to substantiated theories of organizational growth. Socialization offers a method and perspective for cultivating these values through the development of new practices when required for organizational innovation.

If we are interested in improving the everyday workplace routines for knowledge workers, a cohesive argument can be made from the perspectives of participatory design and organizational learning. These perspectives, backed with

experience in real cases, speak to the goals considered in transformation. Building on Ciborra's (2002) notion of the organization as a "platform" for practices that constantly adjust to an environment, we might locate new affordances for such a platform as a wicked design problem.

A systems view of organizations as "wicked problems," (Rittel and Webber, 1973) helps frame the innovation of new organizational practices as a knowledge-based design problem. Deeply interconnected problems require design thinking, as they are not collapsible into isolated fragments (as often formulated by management thinking). They can be designed-*to*, but not designed *by plan*. They cannot be "solved," at least not in the analytical approaches of so-called rational decision makers. Rittel and Webber state 10 characteristics of a wicked problem, most of which apply to the design of processes in large organizations. I have noted the most pertinent of these as follows:

- Wicked problems have no stopping rules (one cannot tell when the solving task is done).
- Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but better or worse.
- There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
- Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation;" because there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error, every attempt counts significantly.
- Wicked problems do not have an enumerable set of potential solutions.
- Every wicked problem is essentially unique. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another [wicked] problem.
- The causes of a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways.
- The planner has no right to be wrong.

Management thinking, planning, and expert analysis fail when faced with true wicked problems. Most managers are faced with the necessity of acting on behalf of their organizational demands. They have little ability to negotiate beyond short-term contingencies. When a firm recognizes the crisis of a "wicked problem" situation, improvisational, emergent, or values-centered management styles will not be considered in response (except in the rarer case of management by emergent strategy). We attempt to answer the question of how organizational stakeholders might progressively develop new work practices while satisfying short-term crisis demands and quickly establishing effective skills more effectively than institutionalization.

Over the last two decades we have heard many calls from organizational thinkers to re-envision management approaches aligned with changing demographics and marketplaces. These changes have generally not happened, in North America at least, and real world observations further reveal the "immovability of these institutions" as characterized by Lucy Suchman (2001). In the same interview, Suchman further describes the prospects for organizational change in today's settings:

"I've come to believe that change is always in process at the front lines. Not everyone, not uniformly, but there are invariably participants who have an interest in thinking about what they're doing, and whether it makes sense, and how it could be done differently. Often these people are first line supervisors. ... They are people who really know the work and are in a position to take something of an overview, to reflect on how things are being done." (Suchman, 2001).

Suchman and Penrose locate change agents and problem solvers at the front lines, not in management conference rooms. Penrose observed that direct learning and competency development at the front lines become strategic competencies that grow the firm and sustain its competitive position. But modern management thinking has valorized the perspectives of management, controlled management of knowledge, and work practices defined as abstracted structures. Socialization generates structures for new practices by the agency of a small group of engaged actors in the front lines, leading to organic competency development, competitive skills, and meaningful change.

Process socialization was developed as a faster, more productive alternative to top-down institutionalization, originally for the introduction of user experience (UX) practices in organizations introducing UX into an intact product development process. While there is strong theoretical support for this approach (from Argyris and Schön's (1978) organizational learning, Orlikowski's (1991, 2000) organizational structuration, and Weick's (1995) action driven processes, we present empirical support for a model of socialization. Institutionalization processes demand an organization establishes a formal set of roles, relationships, training, and management added to the hierarchy to coordinate the new practices. Socialization instead affirms that a longer-term, better understood, and organizationally resilient adoption of the UX process occurs when people in roles lateral to UX learn the practices through participation and gradual progression of sophistication. The practices employed in a socialization approach flow in nearly an opposite temporal order to an institutionalization approach. They also represent an opposing view and process to that of "importing" industry best practices into an intact organization.

SOCIALIZATION IN A MATURE ORGANIZATION

A brief case study presents a model of socialization deployed over a year period in a large (\$2 billion) US-based IT products company in the automotive industry (called Autoline in the case). Autoline was undergoing significant reorganization of upper management and all departments aligned with product development and marketing were being restructured. At the same time, a new product was failing in the marketplace due to usability problems, and a rapid deployment of a user interface enhancement was called for. With no existing internal design, usability, or user experience processes, and in the throes of the continuous chaos of reorganization, a traditional institutionaliza-

tion of a new practice area was considered unsustainable. Furthermore, the small team charged with producing a new product design and process did not share a common home department or manager hospitable to the practice. The closest “home” department was Product Development, which, during the same period, instituted the Rational Unified Process across the entire organization as a management-defined process. The RUP process requires licensing, toolkits, process integration, widespread training, and most significantly, the wholesale transition from current practices to a best-practice toolkit mandated by management but totally alien to employees.

We defined the practices and communications for the UX process as a socialization approach from the beginning of the mission-critical user interface redesign project. The approach was acceptable to managers because it met the project goals and required minimal social capital of leadership, since they were able to present the new practices as necessary to support a critical project.

Socialization is an entrepreneurial, grassroots model of leadership that promotes a sustainable level of new practice skills appropriate to the absorptive capacity (Zahra and George, 2002) of the organization. By sharing new practices informally across product and project boundaries, we (by strategic design) encouraged organic internal demand for the value of UX practices to other projects.

Over a 3 month period, a team of one line product manager, one interaction designer, and one consultant (the author) designed and conducted a set of activities that collected user data and generated prototypes that met the goals of the project. At the meta-project level, we had scheduled the encounters necessary to reflect on learning, creating a double-loop learning cycle for the process. With the prototypes being presented by senior managers as the next generation product, other product lines were naturally interested in the developing UX and product design “practice.” Additional participants were recruited by the organic demand within the organization inspired by the surprising level of attention. The spread of socialization grew by interpersonal interest, as people from other departments lent extra time to the project as a way of familiarizing themselves with the new practice and skills.

After a year of minimal resource expenditure, the project had produced a new product released to the marketplace, and the UX/design practices developed by this small team were highly in demand by the other product lines. The socialized practices achieve a type of competitive inimitability that is often defined as the goal of a competitive strategy; an internal process that cannot be exported to the competition. While the skills may be common, the unique configuration of skills and practices developed in socialization meets the criterion of “rareness, inimitability, non-substitutability” (Venkatraman and Tanriverdi, 2005), being repeatable, distributed, and accepted across the organization’s internal boundaries.

We derived 9 guidelines or principles of socialization:

- Find a significant UX need among projects and bring rapid, lightweight methods to solve obvious problems.
- Have management present the success and lessons learned.
- For any practice, determine need and applications across projects. Provide tactical services as an internal consulting function.
- Develop practices within the scope of product needs. Engage customers in the field and develop user and work domain models in participatory processes with other roles.
- Build an organic demand and interest in the practice. Provide consulting to other projects as capability expands.
- Collaborate with product managers and others to develop integrated approaches to practice.
- Integrate processes with Product Development. Determine development lifecycle decision points and user information required.
- Provide awareness sessions, discussion, and formal education as needed to fit resources to the process.
- Assessment and renewal, staffing, building competency

Socialization of the new practice was deepened by forging numerous weak ties throughout the organization, across all levels of management and between many other projects that were becoming interested in the user research and interface design improvements promised by the small UX team (4 employees and one consultant).

Improvisational design in an Organizational Laboratory

Socialization presents a meaningful alternative to formal management and institutionalization of knowledge based practices, to either establish or improve a core competency. Socialization as a method enable rapid creation of new business functions or processes requiring unique, often rare knowledge-based skills that require significant development time and investment. Socialization allows organizations to leverage their current capacities by scavenging available skills and extant practices in the organization. When externally developed processes are “imported” into established organizations, they are often likely to fail. However, *functionally similar* practices can be organically co-designed and accelerated within a significant project. Projects serve as a kind of temporary autonomous testbed in an organization, wherein agreements can be negotiated with participants from other disciplines and functions to embrace a new practice over the course of a planned effort.

Socialization enables a more resilient, adaptive approach to “strategic alignment,” a business concept similar to institutionalization, in assuming top-down reconfiguration. Large product firms treat alignment and innovation as significant organizational goals that can be managed with strategy development and execution. I find these two forces incompatible in practice, especially for firms that must actually innovate or compete on their knowledge practices (such as product design, UX and IA). Socialization buffers knowl-

edge practices from managerial demands of alignment to strategy, by allowing for new contributions supportive of strategic intent to emerge from the “laboratory” of core knowledge practices such as user research, user experience design, and product ideation. Such an approach has been recognized by Ciborra (1994) as “designing-in-action,” a mode of design that occurs in the opportunity presented as a “formative context” when such routines and skills emerge in the course of organizational necessity. In this view, the outcome of such a mode of practice development are systems and routines that actively help people in the organization self-reflect on skill requirements and continuous development of practice.

Throughout the lifecycle of any enterprise, market or environmental changes force the organization to evaluate and reconfigure core assumptions, operational processes, product lines, and even core values. In the complex network of any organization, knowledge is widely distributed and remains in flow. The traditional assumption of intelligence concentrated at the top (for strategic decision making) is antithetical to innovation, knowledge creation, and the generation of intelligent structures for inscribing organizational learning in everyday practice.

Socialization is a type of organizing that marshals the Shih of the situation, a type of agency described by Ciborra (2002) as an “exploitation of the contours (resources) of the configuration at hand” (p. 122). The recognition of Shih shows the organization as a platform of continuous, dynamic, even chaotic transformations within and between the organizational participants. Socialization accomplishes the participatory co-creation of practices within the dynamic organization, an instrument enabling further design of the firm itself as a platform of practices.

Acknowledgment: Claudio Ciborra’s contributions to progressive, humanistic management thinking extend well beyond the scope of “information systems research,” and epitomizes the current themes of learning from experience and addressing complex challenges. A wide chasm has traditionally spanned the views of organizational management research and the realm of participatory design. Professor Ciborra offered grounded innovations applicable to practice that were accessible and empirically based on authentic experience. Respecting his legacy, I maintain we must do more than cite and build upon this legacy, we must also *act* upon organizations and their transformation.

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