

What is going on in your organization?

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What are the day to day activities of the staff in your organization, and how are they managed?

Surely the answers to such fundamental questions are readily available. The answers may be different from organization to organization, but executives will know what the answers are for their own organization. Won't they?

*To the contrary, we argue in this paper that not only do most organizations **not** have the answers, but that there is an underlying problem that runs very deep—the mechanisms of control are actually missing. For a variety of reasons, there is generally no consistent and complete means available to managers to ensure that their people are doing what they are charged with—or even a means for individuals to find out what it is that they are supposed to be charged with.*

*In this article we look at this problem, identify its causes, and propose a solution via the emerging discipline of **Human Interaction Management**.*

Talk to me, so you can see

Oh, what's going on

What's going on

—Marvin Gaye, 1971.

Suppose you work in a busy office, one that is home to hundreds of other people who also work for your organization. You report to a project manager, perhaps several at one time if you are working on more than one project, as well as to a line manager—moreover, you may also report in a more informal way to people taking a key part in particular work activities to which you contribute (designers, technicians, salespeople, and so on). It is likely that this latter form of reporting actually takes up more time than the more formal kind, and may well have at least as much impact on the business. Conversely, other people may report to you in similar ways—as line manager, as project manager, as key worker.

One day the chief executive comes in on a walking tour. She looks round at the sea of activity in evidence, and asks: “What, exactly, is going on in this office?” She would like a representation of who does what, who is working with whom, and how the work is managed. And she would like it now. What, exactly, are you all going to give her?

The chances are that the best you can do is to offer a huge stack of documents, which bear little or no direct connection to one another—organization charts, project plans, committee minutes, team membership lists, even email aliases. This, taken as a whole, will be almost impossible for a normal human being to comprehend. Moreover, even if the chief executive is gifted with eidetic memory, and can take in all the information in this stack by glancing through it, she will still not have the answer to her question. What is happening *right now*? How are you all getting on, in other words?

What she would like to know is, in essence, a few very simple things:

- The goals and responsibilities of each individual person
- The progress they are making towards the goals, and
- The degree to which they are satisfying the responsibilities.

However, these things are complicated by the fact that, by and large, people who work in offices are not what we call *independent workers*—people who base each task they carry out on a specific request from a specific source, without the expectation that the request will change while they carry it

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out. Rather, office workers are usually what we call *interaction workers*—people who have to adapt what they do *as they do it*, in response to information acquired from other people. By and large, the individual responsibilities and goals of an office worker are in flux from day to day, continually changing in minor or major ways, at the same time as the person responsible attempts to fulfill them—new tasks are added, the requirements are changed for existing deliverables, additional help is provided, previously available resources become unavailable, and so on.

Hence, if we are to understand what is going on at a specific time in an office environment, this flux must be taken into account—and that means taking into account the interactions between each worker and those around them, since it is the interactions which cause changes such as those described above. Moreover, the interactions must be understood not only in order to appreciate their impact, but also because a large part of an individual's work duties may simply be to *take an appropriate part in such interactions*—read and write emails, create other written materials for distribution, make phone calls, attend meetings, talk to people, and so on.

These interactions tend not to show up explicitly on the kinds of documents the chief executive will find in her stack—and even where they do, the description of the interactions is unlikely to provide much detail. Certainly, there will be little or no information on the *current state of affairs*.

Moreover, there are other vital dimensions of human working activity that may be even less apparent on the document stack handed to the chief executive. Apart from communicating with others, what does an interaction worker actually do all day? Some of their tasks are “real” work—constructing things, repairing things, removing things, transferring things—where the “things” may be *physical* objects such as computers and cars, or *virtual* objects such as documents and money. Such activities tend to appear on project plans, in meeting minutes, and so on. Other tasks carried out by an interaction worker, however, are not “real” work, but are “about” real work.

In order to get to the point where real work can be done, people use a variety of techniques to prepare for it and organize it beforehand—and while doing it, they carry on using these techniques in order to check it, deliver it, and maintain it. They research, think, decide, agree, reject, and so on—and these activities are not usually documented formally. In general, this kind of mental work falls below the corporate radar—sometimes being deliberately hidden by the person carrying it out, who may feel that they will not be rewarded for spending too much time “just thinking”. To the contrary, a worker who devotes a lot of time to such brain work may well be *penalized* for “not getting on with the job”—an unhealthy situation, when it is often their mental skills that won them their job in the first place.

What do we have when we take all these sorts of activity as a whole? A business process. What an interaction worker does all day, by definition, is *participate in business processes*. Often they will be active in several processes at any one time—for example, a team member in several projects, supplier to several clients, creator of several designs. The discussion above shows that conventional means of managing human work (for instance, project planning techniques) entirely fail to deal with many of the most important activities that people carry out within these processes. How about a process-oriented organization? Will it fare better, once everything is defined and managed in process terms?

Our natural expectation is that process modeling techniques help to define the diverse goals and responsibilities of each individual, as well as how they interact to fulfill them. Process modeling techniques should also, surely, capture important working activities based mostly or entirely on mental effort. Last but not least, such process modeling techniques should form the basis for effective management of that work—in particular, to separate the varied forms of control required. The theory of Human Interactions¹ distinguishes 3 separate forms of process control:

- *Management control*: the day-to-day facilitation of human activity—ongoing resourcing, monitoring and process re-design. This is part of operating the process, and comes from within.

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- *Executive control*: determining the primary Roles, interactions and deliverables of a process. This is about setting the framework for a process, and comes from above.
- *Strategic control*: a yet higher level of management activity, concerned with the general direction of the organization, as expressed in vision and mission statements, corporate policies, corporate roadmaps, and so on.

The first two forms of control—*management* and *executive*—are particularly important for the modeling of everyday human working activity.

Unfortunately, however, it is difficult if not impossible to capture goals, responsibilities, interactions, mental activities and these forms of control using mainstream approaches to process modeling. How could one even start to do this using BPEL or the UML, for example? Such techniques are designed specifically for the description of regulated, routine, largely automatable activity—they are particularly useful when attempting to capture processes driven by machines, with only occasional human involvement. But when it comes to the dynamic, collaborative, innovative processes driven by humans, such techniques fall down. This is not a weakness of the techniques—it is simply that they were developed with different ends in mind.

It is now recognized more and more widely that processes are what businesses in the networked future will compete on. At present, however, this competition is restricted to a certain, very limited type of business process—those processes that are *mechanistic*. How much competitive advantage is there to be gained by organizations that develop an understanding of the *humanistic* type of processes too? After all, take away the activities of the humans in an organization, and the organization will stop dead in its tracks—so the humans must be doing something important.

If we are to deal properly with human behaviour in the organization, we need a new approach to process modeling. That approach is *Human Interaction Management*—a synthesis of ideas drawn not only from process theory but also from fields including biology, psychology, social systems theory, and learning theory. The ideas are mature, and there is enterprise strength software ready to support them. A new playing field is opening up, and it is the early adopters of the **Human Interaction Management System (HIMS)** that will reap the greatest benefit, acquiring a competitive edge based on what all companies of all kinds regularly claim to be their greatest asset—their people.

Find out more about Human Interaction Management at <http://human-interaction-management.info>. Download free software to model and enact business processes defined using Human Interaction Management principles from <http://humanedj.com>.

ⁱ See "Human Interactions: The Heart and Soul of Business Process Management", Harrison-Broninski, K., 2005, Meghan-Kiffer Press, <http://www.mkpress.com/hi>