Barbara

An aspect of the “socio-technical thing” which has always puzzled me, is that to me a socio-technical approach seems only common sense, whereas to many of my computer science colleagues it appears to be a complete waste of time, and somehow related to “politics”. “Politics” in this context being a derogatory word applied to users and implying fractious, irrational behaviour. In the past I have ascribed this gulf between us as possibly something to do with youth and inexperience of the world, or with acutely rational minds not really understanding that while other people may appear irrational, they are in fact being perfectly reasonable when wider issues are taken into account, or just sheer bloody-mindedness when the computer scientists’ terribly clever systems are rejected by obvious idiots.

More recently I have come to the conclusion that some of the fault may actually lie with us, that is, the defenders of the socio-technical faith.

Broadly, we have failed to convince other people of the effectiveness of what we propose. Time after time, and the UK National Health Services National Programme for IT is just one example among many, systems fail in utterly predictable ways, predictable by us that is, and yet our voice is not heard amidst the clamour of technical enthusiasts, anxious financial managers and trigger-happy consultants. Is it that we do not shout loudly enough? Or that we seem to be offering nothing but delays and extra costs? Do we appear unrealistically unworldly? Not sufficiently macho?

Perhaps the way forward is to organise. If we are to be labelled “political” let us do it properly, lobbying and persuading those who make decisions about IT programmes, moving into positions of power in the relevant committees, grabbing the ear of government, making friends in the popular media so
that they begin to ask the right questions, blogging, social networking. How many of us really explain to our friends and families what we do? Yet advocacy and education are key. We have a considerable body of rigorous knowledge and experience. It needs to be made easily accessible both physically (in journals and magazines and newspapers and on the Web) and intellectually, with a coherent communications strategy tailored to a variety of audiences. We need money and energy - and we may need a new professional institution, with a strong public relations team.

One thought to spur us on. Whereas computer scientists often doubt the value of what we say, users generally recognise it immediately.

Intelligent people, users.

Frank responds:

I fear that this particular piece will not be read by a part of the target audience - the computer scientists and software engineers. You are right we need to find a way of getting heard.

Let me take the opportunity to add what I see to be another difficulty.

The non-listeners, and sometime supporters of the technology lobby, are senior management. They see the sociotechnical approach with its emphasis on values as being the enemy of the bottom line. And much of the academic community has accepted the ‘business school paradigm’ and rejected, or more often simply not been aware of alternative value systems, the ‘humanistic paradigm’. See for example the recent paper in JAIS by Kohli and Grover, (Kohli and Grover, 2008) on a new approach to the problem of evaluation.

I, too, keep coming across items which claim a sociotechnical association - indeed I thought of commenting that there seems to be some kind of resurgence of sociotechnical thinking. In many cases it is no more than a recognition that as techies we cannot afford to ignore the social element - in other words the common sense notion Barbara is looking for. A good example is Professor Brian Randell who recognises that what is wrong with NPfIT is the absence of sociotechnical concern, (Randell, 2007)

Some further thoughts on this discussion were triggered by the delivery recently of the BCS magazine *IT Now*, (IT Now, May 2008)

The issue is devoted to Ethics in IS. Ethics is currently a hot topic. It is featured as a track in the ECIS Conference in June 2008, is part of the theme of ICIS in Paris in December, and has had a CfP for a special edition of JAIS. Browsing through *IT Now* it is clear that for many of the contributors ethics comprises taking the ‘social’ or ‘human’ element into account and of ensuring ‘values’ to be considered in the design. In other words using a sociotechnical approach. Two examples exemplify this. One is the piece by Harold Thimbleby on the design of remote controls. He is in effect asking for a sociotechnical attitude to designing artifacts,
(Thimbleby, 2008). The other is from Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Corporation, where, reading between the lines, much of the success of Apple stems from a sociotechnical approach to design, (Wozniak, 2008).

Barbara responds:

You’re right about the ethical dimension. Also, you have made a very good point with respect to the severely (almost solely) profit-oriented attitude of many senior managers and the downgrading of humanitarian concerns as a consequence. It seems to me part of the zeitgeist, stemming as you say from the business schools of the late 80s, early 90s.

Incidentally, are the business schools still advocating this position or have they moved on?

REFERENCES


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Frank Land started his career in computers as a programmer and systems analyst in 1953 with LEO – Lyons Electric Office. In 1967 he was recruited by the London School of Economics to establish teaching and research in the new domain of Information Systems. He spent 5 years as professor of information management at the London Business School. He is currently Emeritus professor in the information systems and innovation group at the LSE. In 2003 he was given the LEO Award by the Association for Information Systems for his contribution to the discipline.