BOOK REVIEW:

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Redesigning Human Systems

Enid Mumford, Manchester University
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Enid Mumford has been working and writing in the sociotechnical change management field for many years. This book is perhaps best regarded as a summary of best practices garnered from her practical experiences and is grounded in theory. As such, it may be considered to contain the highlights from her previous books gathered together and themed so as to make the central question and its answer clear.

The question that Mumford set out to answer is in her words, “Can greater employee participation and humanisation of work, help make industry more efficient, more people-friendly, and better able to deal with the challenges of the future?”

Mumford argues that one of the major challenges of the future lies in the necessity for companies to build and retain teams with vision, competence, and loyalty to navigate through “uncharted waters with no guaranteed safe haven on the far side.” Organisations, in order to succeed in the current commercial environment, need to establish mutually beneficial relationships with their employees. They also need to establish a work ethic so that the groups’ needs will be in harmony with individual needs through self-development and generally agreed values.

She discusses (Chapter 2) not only the history of sociotechnical design (STD), but also its possible future. Mumford argues that the most important thing sociotechnical design can contribute is its value system, which says that even though technology and organisational structures change, the rights and needs of the employee must be given as high a priority as any nonhuman element of the organisation.

The main part of the book (parts 2, 3, and 4) is a collection of case studies taken from Professor Mumford’s long and well-regarded experience of consulting and managing sociotechnical design projects. The core aspect of this work as a change facilitator has been establishing a participative structure through which the change process can be undertaken. Participation in these change initiatives ranged from consultative to representative to consensus approaches. Some organisations
used a combination of three participation methods. Whilst participation to design new technically aided work systems is particularly appropriate, it also does have associated problems, as Mumford acknowledges. Any manager considering ICT implementations for their organisation should consider not only the benefits of ST organisational design and participatory change mechanisms, but also the potential issues in order to be forewarned.

The major benefits discussed in the book and illustrated through the case studies include the following:

- Effective knowledge sharing. Knowledge in any work or process system is diffused throughout the system. Participation in the new design by all interested groups (of this work system) will thus enable better retrieval of available knowledge and understanding of the process.
- Organisational learning. Participation and knowledge sharing permits a learning process to take place and enables problem solving.
- Conflict resolution. Interest groups will have different values, needs, and objectives, and participation will permit these to become evident and issues can thus be attempted to be reconciled. Conflicts can then (hopefully) be resolved at an early stage of the design process.

Mumford’s identified issues relating to participation are also worth noting. She says that all is not rosy in the participation garden, and her wide experience of participatory design initiatives has led her to believe that participation also brings with it the following:

- A suspicion of the motives behind the participatory effort if this is not normal organisational practice. Trust in these cases is not easily established, and the case studies in this book, particularly chapter 8, illustrate this well.
- The method of selecting representatives is problematical. There are difficulties; for instance, when the management chooses who should represent the group, trust is then hard to build and full knowledge sharing may not occur.
- Members of a participatory design group may suffer stress as they try to continue with their “day jobs” and also participate in the new design initiative.
- The design group may also struggle with the need to develop, what might be unfamiliar, skills of communication and consultation.
- In such a design initiative, those who had previously been considered professional experts now take on the role of consultants, which might be considered a threat to their authority or status.
- The difficulties that managers face under participatory design relate to deciding the level of their involvement in the process. Too much involvement, and they run the risk of smothering discussion and innovation and constraining the participants from speaking out.

All these issues and ways in which Mumford has attempted to solve them are well illustrated in this collection of case studies. Whilst many of these cases are
“old” both in terms of having been well discussed before in her previous books and also in actual age (for instance, chapter 4 discusses the 1950s), the issues raised are still relevant to those involved in change initiatives. Current writing on knowledge management also emphasises the need to trust for full participation and knowledge sharing to take place. It should be noted that all technical implementations are organisational change situations, and we should always learn from the lessons of the past, taking them into our new (and different) context.

I would therefore strongly recommend this book to both those who have read Mumford before as a summative collection of her work, and to those who have not read her before. There are many lessons that can be learned from her varied experience about how to undertake change initiatives.

Elayne is a senior lecturer in business information management at the Westminster Business School, University of Westminster. Her research interests lie in the sociotechnical aspects of information systems, especially knowledge management systems. She is a member of the British Computer Society’s Sociotechnical Specialist Group and active in promoting this view of information systems strategy and development. She has coedited a number of books in this and in the knowledge management field, as well as written conference papers, articles in journals, and several chapters in books. Elayne is also an associate editor of OR Insight with special responsibility for knowledge management, and recently edited a special edition of the journal JORS on knowledge management and intellectual capital. Her PhD thesis relates to a sociotechnical view of the insufficiencies of boundaries and stakeholders in the strategic planning of information systems.