Preface

This book is about managing change, one of the most difficult, and sometimes dangerous, activities that most of us have to handle occasionally and some of us most of the time. The objective of the book is twofold. First, to try to provide all readers with an understanding of the complexity of the change process and second to provide some practical guidance to those who are trying to mould change so that it can offer a route to a better quality of life. In order to do this, the book will draw on the experiences of the past and the present and see how these can provide lessons for the future. It will examine and describe what has been called the socio-technical philosophy of always taking account of the needs of people when new work systems are being introduced. It will use as guiding case studies some of the firms with which I have personally been involved over the years. These will describe and discuss participative and humanistic change projects in different companies and industries in the UK, Scandinavia and the Netherlands. Most of these have had the introduction of new technology as part of the change process. I believe that the methods and approaches that assisted their implementation and use will be even more relevant to industry in the years ahead.

I hope that this book will be read and found useful by many different groups of readers. A first, and very important group, is those who are responsible for introducing change and seeing that it is used effectively and has beneficial consequences. These will be the managers and specialists who design and introduce it. Just as important will be the groups who are affected by the change and have to alter their normal practices to cope. We need to find out if the change has brought them major advantages both in their personal lives and in the environment in which they live and work. If this is not the case what are the reasons for failing to do so. Two other important groups will be those who wish to learn about change and its management although they do not yet have the responsibility to practice this knowledge. These include students taking technical and management courses at universities and colleges. The general public is also very interested in change as most people are on its receiving end, although often without the power and influence to affect its consequences.

For many people change that involves technological and economic developments will be most acceptable when it is seen to have a firm, and generally supported, ethical base. One important aspect of this ethical base may be the ability to influence the change consequences. We are reluctant to become the slaves of developments we have no influence over, even though we may see many of these as nonthreatening. We strive to be in a position to regulate important aspects of our own lives and to be able to mould our own futures and destinies. The democratic principles and approaches that are described in this book can provide guidelines for increasing our personal control of the future.

A second important need for both individuals and organizations is that of efficiency—the need to create innovation that produces the intended and desired results. Things must work well if we are to enjoy using them. Yet recent history is dogged by example after example of vastly expensive large-scale projects either failing to be introduced at all or not working successfully once they are installed. Here, I shall argue that the democratic involvement of future users in the design and implementation of new systems can help these kinds of problems to be avoided.

It must be stressed that although some of the technical applications described in the pages that follow may seem dated in today's fast-moving world, the participative processes used to introduce them have not aged in any way. In fact they are more relevant now than in the past as the consequences of poorly managed change become ever more expensive with whole industries, even countries, likely to be affected by unsuccessful projects. Also, we have now moved out of the macho nineties with their focus on financial success at any price, even if this required the drastic reduction of staff numbers as a means to raise a company's share price. Today, especially after the September 11 disaster, we are in a situation where cooperative personal relationships and mutual support are seen by very many people as necessary and important. We also seek more opportunities for self-development and creativity and an absence of work stress. All of these are assisted by some personal control over what happens in our work and life situations. This book will describe an approach for assisting the achievement of these things.

It also seems that many large companies are now thinking carefully about how they want the world to see them in ethical and human terms. As a result they are publicising carefully thought-out strategies for taking care of social, organizational and environmental problems. They have perhaps been shocked into doing this by the criticism industry has received for its concentration on short-term financial gains and its reluctance to take account of human costs such as atmospheric pollution and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Nevertheless the result is a welcome new focus on issues other than those of the balance sheet. This means that approaches and methods for improving the quality of life for employees, customers and society as a whole are likely to be welcomed and adopted.

The chapters that follow will provide a practical approach for handling change effectively, ethically and participatively. The case studies will attempt to show how participative strategies for meeting human needs at work can achieve higher morale, more job satisfaction, greater efficiency and an improved quality of life, even though there may be difficulties along the route to success. Each chapter will describe a problem associated with the management of change. This will be described by an employee who was a part of the change process. My role will be to describe the methods and tools that helped the realisation of the change objectives. The early case studies are related to work in blue-collar environments and show some of the attempts to solve the problems associated with this. Computers were not involved as few existed at the time. The later ones all incorporate the introduction of new technology into different white-collar environments. The last two examine current change as a company-wide or environmental problem.

Chapter 1 looks at the past, the present and the future and argues that in the future quality of working life issues will be even more important than in the past. Chapter 2 looks at the history of socio-technical design and describes its popularity and use in many different countries in the seventies and eighties. Chapter 3 describes different ways of organizing participation and discusses roles and relationships in participative design groups. Chapter 4 stresses the importance of understanding the "big picture"—the total problem situation—when introducing change into complex industries. Chapter 5 shows how good organizational design is a critical factor in success. Chapter 6 looks at alternative designs and weighs up their advantages and disadvantages.

The book next considers computer technology and information systems—how these impact on white-collar work and how employees can play a major role in good systems design by deciding on efficient yet people-friendly forms of work organization to associate with them. Chapter 7 describes the impact of early computer systems on banks. Chapter 8 shows how a group of employees can create an efficient, multiskilled work system for an office environment. Chapter 9 moves from small to large projects and describes an important participative project to assist the sales force of a large corporation in the United States. Chapter 10 covers the nineties and shows how the humanisation of work took a step backwards through a corrupted form of business process reengineering and the introduction of call centres. At this time my own area of interest changed from shop floor, clerical and sales groups to managers and I became associated with a Dutch software company developing management information systems. The objective of the research now became how to help managers gain a thorough understanding of their own roles and responsibilities as a preliminary to specifying their information needs.

We now come to the present and in Chapter 11 describe the large-group-intervention programmes of an American multinational that in 2000 received an award for Excellence in Practice from the American Society for Training and Development. Chapter 12 examines how Shell, one of the pioneers of participative design, is applying the same ideas both to its internal management and to environmental issues. Chapters 13 and 14 discuss how effective problem solving and design must today take account of negative as well as positive environmental factors. Chapter 14 brings the book to a close by examining the advantages and challenges of managing change participatively. My conclusion is that we now live in a very uncertain and dangerous world, which greatly complicates problem solving and which makes forecasts about the future both difficult and suspect. Projections from the present may be nothing better then doubtful hypotheses or overoptimistic best-case scenarios. Nevertheless change goes on and has to be encouraged. The Appendix shows some of the tools I and others have developed to assist problem solving and the management of change process.

The key question the book asks and tries to answer is, 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?

Acknowledgments