Chapter XVI

Fables of the Reconstruction: Characterizing Business Structures with Online Data Collection

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INTRODUCTION

The '60s and '70s of the last century were effervescent with visions of a radical break between the past and the future. In their manifestos, Marshall McLuhan and the Situationist International (among others) foresaw a Global Village, a Society of Spectacle, post-literacy and nonlinear modes of consciousness evolving from mass media (e.g., Debord, 1977; McLuhan, 1964). More recently much of this rhetoric has been recycled, with similar claims made that contemporary communications and broadcast media (e-mail and the WWW) will lead to new paradigms, new business models, new economies. It remains to be seen whether current information technology will live up to these promises, or stay in a niche role, like shortwave radio or the Parisian pneumatic post. Examples of truly dead media are hard to find (Sterling, n.d.); even CB radio may retain a few adherents somewhere.

The authors’ coffee tables are not graced by copies of Wired. But despite our reservations, we grudgingly admit that more people than ever before have access to communication that rivals the speed and reliability of Victorian penny post. The faster movement of information presents management with new challenges and demands. Nichemarkets develop with unprecedented speed. Geographical horizons
are broader: not just globalized multinationals, but small, non-listed businesses may need to monitor conditions and consumer whims on the other side of the world.

At the same time, a company may be physically distributed, with its head office in one city and production staff in another and the call center God-knows-where. Here the WWW comes into its own. As a tool of consultation, it allows performance to be monitored with insights and feedback gathered from throughout an organization (especially convenient if multiple sites are involved). It lends itself as well to surveying the public at large, for consumer perceptions of an organization’s public profile. Another area of interest (not pursued here) is the online assessment of job applicants (Stanton, 1998). The opportunities of the Web are well-documented, as are its limitations, though less so. Below we return to the latter.

The focus of this chapter is on issues of organizational structure. Not many corporate entities in the public or private sector have the advantage of a structure that was carefully mapped out at the time they were established. Typically they evolve in an ad-hoc way as they grow. One may speak of an organizational lifecycle, in which the criteria for assessing an institution’s performance depends on its developmental phase. Quinn and Cameron (1983) summarized nine models for organizational lifecycles and integrated them into their own framework (the Quinn-Cameron literature review is incomplete, omitting Lievegoed’s (1973) ‘developing organization’ model). The time eventually comes when a corporate entity must take stock, must consider whether its internal divisions into sections and the interactions among these sections are optimal, and if not, how they can be improved.

Such considerations apply to government and local-body agencies as well as to private companies. For the most spectacular examples of mismanagement and organizational dysfunction, one looks to military history (Dixon, 1976). As a more recent case illustration, New Zealand has been somewhat of a laboratory for experiments in public-sector reform. When government bureaucracies were seen as sluggish and inefficient, often the response was to import business models and corporate cultures (thus, the health system, Social Welfare and Labor Departments). Contemporary New Zealand schools have adopted business models, with teachers organized into management teams. The transplants were not always successful, and the phrase ‘systems failure’ has recurred in media reports ever since.

All this is leading up to the point that one cannot rely on a top-down, dirigiste approach to matching an organization’s structure to its goals; to do so assumes that an elite echelon holds a monopoly of wisdom, observational acuity and decision-making ability. The same top-down approach is present if consultants are called in to restructure, or downsize, or identify core business activities. An old joke defines “consultant” as “someone who borrows your watch to tell you the time, then charges you for the privilege.” We accept the definition and argue that consultants should be equipped with suitable tools for horoscope.

Note that we are not advocating a non-hierarchical structure for corporate entities, nor any other normative model, but rather a non-hierarchical process for monitoring structure and facilitating feedback. In what follows, our goal is an instrument for tapping the observations of staff, to assess a given organization’s...
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