

"EXECUTIVE INFORMATION SYSTEMS  
DEVELOPING AN APPROACH TO OPEN THE  
POSSIBLES"

by

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EXECUTIVE INFORMATION SYSTEMS: DEVELOPING  
AN APPROACH TO OPEN THE POSSIBLES

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EXECUTIVE INFORMATION SYSTEMS: DEVELOPING  
A DESIGN APPROACH TO OPEN THE POSSIBLES

ABSTRACT

This article asks how come, after 20 years of complaining about the shortcomings of information systems, executives continue to be dissatisfied with the support they get and continue to ask whether the investment on information technology is worth it. The answer, we believe, is that the traditional paradigm of information systems is not appropriate. Indeed, the literature on information systems design is still permeated by a model that assumes: organizations to be rational entities directed by rational executives who require more and more information; decision making to be the main role of executives; information to be objective and a reflection the reality (realist epistemology); design to be the fulfillment of the expressed information needs; good decision to be the logical consequence of good information; information systems to be basically technical systems; and, information systems to be formal and shared and thus constituting the only valid language of the organization.

We suggest a perspective and paradigm integrating our experiences, research, and European and American works on organizational and individual decision making, psychology and neurobiology. The paradigm can be characterized by three descriptors: political, strategic, and constructivist. The organization is defined as a set of loosely coupled, temporary coalitions with shifting goals and values, some of which are non-expressible. Executives are seen as sense-makers, i.e., they create a reality for the organization (Weick, 1979). The decision process is defined as political and the decision makers not as rational but as rationalizers (Aronson, 1968): executives collect and diffuse information primarily to convince others and rationalize previously made decisions. The relationship information-decision is not linear and deterministic but circular and depends on the strategy of the executive to protect his stakes and advance his interests (Crozier, 1977). The descriptor "constructivist" refers to the relation between information and reality: information is not a mirror of reality but creates a reality (Piaget, 1981; Varela, 1980). Within this paradigm, the major focus of an information system is not providing more information but supporting executives in the key process of deciding what is possible and impossible.

After comparing the traditional paradigm -- referred here as "techno-rational-realist" (TRR) -- and what we call the "politico-strategic-constructivist" (PSC) approach, we discuss the implications for executive information systems design of the latter. Our view of information systems design is based upon the idea that executives should not be prisoners of one view of reality, certainly not in a turbulent and ever changing

environment; he needs to have as many views of reality as possible. Therefore, we suggest that the process of design be an effort to open the "possibles" of the executive, i.e., to increase the number of interpretations, visions, and possibilities concerning the critical success factors of the business. In this article, we propose to consider two approaches to encourage executives to open the possibles by questioning their basic assumptions about what is possible and necessary. Both approaches address the essential dimensions of intimacy, privacy, and personalization of this process. One is a face-to-face, external expert driven approach. The other is an approach based on an interactive system. In this context, the role of the information system analyst must be reviewed: The analyst is seen not as the "clarifier" of information needs but rather as a potential interference to the development of successful executive information systems. The responsibility for designing the information system falls squarely on the shoulders of the executive.

The article concludes with a proposal for a program of research.

Keywords: Executive Information Systems; Information Systems Design; Information Requirement Determination

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EXECUTIVE INFORMATION SYSTEMS: DEVELOPING  
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"Wir machen uns Bilder der Tatsachen."

Ludwig Wittgenstein

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is the result of a series of discussions between two Information Systems researchers coming from two different backgrounds and formations but sharing the same disillusionment and frustration with the mainstream information systems development paradigm. The discussion started by asking each other why there is such a widespread dissatisfaction with information systems. Why do executives -- 20 years after Ackoff's (1967) seminal work -- keep on complaining of inadequate support, overload, and mistrust of the institutional information systems? Why, while vast amounts of literature discuss the strategic importance of information technology, others ask whether the information technology department will disappear in the near future (Dearden, 1988)?

The paper consists of three parts. In the first part, the article examines the explicit and implicit assumptions underlying the traditional approaches to information systems design. These approaches all assume a specific view of the organization, of

managerial decision making, of information and of what a successful information system is all about. To the traditional model -- which we call the techno-rational-realist (TRR) model-- we oppose a politico-strategic-constructivist (PSC) paradigm. These two paradigms are compared through the answers they give to the following five questions: 1) what is a useful representation of the organization?, 2) what is a useful representation of the decision maker to be supported by the information system being designed?, 3) what is a useful definition of information?, and 4) what is a useful definition of information systems design? In all these questions the qualifier useful implies both a practical and an enabling quality, e.g., a useful representation of the organization means a representation of the organization in terms that allow a deep understanding and an effective intervention. Finally, the first part of the paper asks: 5) what is a good information system?

The second part of the article deals with the implications of the PSC model for information systems design. The basic argument is that since upper-level managers are political individuals who create their reality, as well as the organization's, they should be responsible for the design of their own information systems. We propose a different role for the analyst in designing information systems to support top-level managers and suggest some specific tasks. The article concludes by suggesting a program of research to test the proposed model.

## 2. THE PSC PARADIGM VERSUS THE TRR PARADIGM

The comparison between the Politico-Strategic-Constructivist paradigm and the Techno-Rational-Realist paradigm is shown in Table 1 and discussed below.

Our observations are that the traditional models of information requirement analysis are highly idealized and "clean", reflecting a belief that organizations behave coherently and follow a set of homogeneous goals and objectives and that organizations are highly sanitized entities where harmony is paramount (the biological analogy of organizations being like the human body where all units work in unison is still pervasive). This assumption of harmony leads to a notion that executives don't have anything to hide and thus should be perfectly able and willing to make their information needs and sources, explicit and known.

The traditional models also seem to imply that managers have only one role -- a decision maker's role -- and use information systems only to inform themselves. Our interviews of executives show that upper-level managers seldomly use information systems to make a decision in the formal sense, i.e., commitment to action in a finite, identifiable moment in time, and that upper-level managers want data and models both to inform themselves and

to convince others.

Still, the traditional models work relatively well when the task at hand is to develop information systems for structured problems faced by low to middle management. However, as the problems become more ill-structured and the users are at a higher organizational level, the traditional models come unglued. While systems that are model-intensive (e.g., DSS) work well at the lower and middle levels of the hierarchy, these systems are not appropriate for the top. Indeed, to develop a vision, a strategy, a reality, top-level executives need data, intuition and discussion. They don't need models.

The higher one goes in the organizational structure and the more political, "messier", personal and hidden the information needs of managers are. Also, the higher the level and the greater the need for the manager to make sense of the environment and the discretion in constructing the reality of the organization. In this context, one needs, based on our experience, a different model to design successful (i.e., utilized) information systems. A model that redefines not only the content of the information system, the type of support to be provided but the relationship between the top-level manager, as user of information systems, and the analyst.

The paradigm described in this paper is an integration of both American and European works. The ideas in this paper have

been borrowed from Aronson (1968), Bateson (1972), Crozier (1989), Piaget (1981), Varela (1989), and Weick (1979). We have adapted the thinking of these psychologists, sociologist, organizational theorist, and biologist to the design of information systems. We have used their views to formalize our experiences in designing actual information systems to support top-level management. In integrating and extrapolating the views of these scientists, we have come upon a set of criteria for the successful design of information systems that questions the need for an information systems analyst and the concept of information in the traditional sense.

### 3. THE PROPOSAL: INFORMATION SYSTEMS DESIGN SHOULD BE THE EXECUTIVE'S RESPONSIBILITY

The ultimate goal of the proposed design process is for the executive to open his possibles, i.e., to expand what he considers (economically, technically, socially) possible. This means to escape the infantilism which by definition is a narrowing of what is possible and which is a result comes from a overlapping of reality, possibility and necessity (Piaget, 1981). The manager needs to be able to create a variety of possibilities from which to create his reality and eventually the reality of others in the organization, and understand that his reality is not necessarily the only one. Necessities are constraints; most of them are artificial. The information system needs to help the executive in deciding which constraints he wants himself and

others to consider as real.

There are two basic reasons for the executive to be responsible for the design of his information system. One is that information creates reality. The other is that, given the political nature of his world, the executive cannot make explicit some of the more important but private objectives, stakes, and preferences. Therefore, the executive cannot delegate the design of his information system.

If we use the analogy of the "black box" to describe managerial decision making -- i.e., a series of (information) inputs to the decision maker are processed in his mind to produce a series of outputs (decisions, instructions, etc.) but the actual processing is opaque to external observers -- then one can say that the traditional approach to information systems design has concentrated on providing the right inputs. This focus is a direct result of the assumption behind the traditional approach that good inputs create good outputs, that there is, in other words, a strong deterministic relationship between inputs and outputs.

By emphasizing the inputs to the "black box", the traditional approach "infantilizes" the executive by limiting what he can consider as possible. The traditional approach constrains the reality of the organization to that one described

by the standardized, formal and official information only. In so doing, it indirectly defines what the executive will consider as a given and as a constraint. The approach tends to narrow, to limit the possibles.

In the context of a constructivist approach, we suggest that it is the content of the managerial "black box" -- the mental models, cognitive heuristics, and perceptual barriers; and what Varela (1989) describes as the operational enclosure of the nervous system -- and not the inputs that should be the focus in the design of executive information systems. In other words, the focus should be the more or less conscious process followed by the executive to create his reality, his vision, and his strategy for the organization. And the key to support that process is to ask the executive what is possible (socially, economically, and organizationally) in his world and to help him expand and refine the set of possibilities.

We see the process of designing an executive information system as being driven by the persistent questioning of the executive as to what the possibles and "impossibles" of his world are. The process of "informing" the executive is a process that starts by focusing on opening the possibles, on expanding and questioning his view of organizational reality and is based on asking "why isn't it possible to do X?", "what is the threshold of impossibility (when does an action, a vision become

impossible) of Y?". This questioning can then trigger requests for formal information items.

What could this design process be like? What could the role of analyst in that process be? Since the process of opening the "black box" is an intimate, very private, and political one, the executive must be responsible for that process. The traditional role of the analyst as a clarifier of needs is not realistic in this context. More likely, the analyst will be seen as an interference in the development of the system since the executive may not want to verbalize his true needs.

We can imagine two approaches to carry out such a process. The first one, is a process driven by an external expert. The second, is a process guided by a computerized-interactive system. In both instances, the process is based on encouraging the executive to reconstruct his world by expanding his views of the possible, by questioning constraints, by avoiding copy-cat thinking, etc.

In the external expert driven process, the questioning is done face-to-face. The expert needs to be external to the organization to appear neutral -- not politically aligned -- to and be trusted by the executive. The role of this "expert" is like the role of the jester (le fou du roi) in medieval times: someone whose has no stakes in the political game and can tell

the emperor he has no clothes, someone that can use analogies to question, to push the limits of the assumed reality of the executive.

In the computerized-interactive process, the questioning is done through the decision aids addressing the assumptions of the executive. This process is based on introspection and is dependent on the willingness and ability of the executive to question his long held beliefs and inner values. There are some doubts that executives would do it on their own. The advantage of this process over the external expert one is its total confidentiality.

Whether through an external expert or a computerized-interactive systems, the executive is responsible for defining his information needs after determining what his key concerns are. The analyst should not be involved in the process of assessing information needs. The role of the analyst is one of providing the necessary support and access to data bases implied by the requests from the executive.

We are initiating a program of research to compare the effectiveness of these two methods. We are interested in finding what are the determinant organizational, personal, and cultural variables that make one method preferable to another in a given context.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This article suggests that executives complain about the quality of their information systems support because the traditional approach to the design of information systems does not address their role as sense makers, as reality creators, as political individuals trying to convince others to implement their strategies. This lack of support has led to the de facto existence of two information systems: the official, formal, acknowledged information system and the unofficial, informal, private one. Because of the political sensitivity of the latter one, the traditional role of the analyst is seen as intrusive.

We have proposed a design process, based on a politico-strategic-constructivist view of organizational decision making, that begins with an expansion of what the executive assumes to be possible and impossible and uses that expansion to derive the information needs of the executive. We have suggested that the responsibility for the definition of the information needs is the executive's.

The article has put forth the philosophical underpinnings of a different approach to designing executive information systems. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating... We hope to

report at a latter stages the results of our on-going efforts to implement such an approach.

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TABLE 1 : COMPARISON BETWEEN THE TECHNO-RATIONAL-REALIST  
AND THE POLITICO-STRATEGIC-CONSTRUCTIVIST PARADIGM

	Techno-Rational-Realist Paradigm	Politico-Strategic-Constructivist Paradigm
WHAT IS AN ORGANIZATION?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) An entity which is (must be) coherent, homogenous, harmonious, rational</li> <li>b) There is one company strategy</li> <li>c) Formal and official structures and organisation roles.</li> <li>d) Biological Analogy</li> <li>e) The need to rationalise the company through technology.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) A set of coalitions having different, even opposed, points of view and interests</li> <li>b) There are individual strategies and coalition ones (the objectives are often hidden and undisclosable)</li> <li>c) One is interested essentially in the informal structures, and unofficial roles in the organisation</li> <li>d) Analogy with the Florentine society of MACHIAVELLI: it is above all a political game.</li> <li>e) Acceptance and understanding of the lack of overall rationality in the organisation.</li> </ul>

TABLE 1 (Continued)

<p>HOW DO EXECUTIVES DECIDE?</p>	<p>a) The executive is a rational human being.</p> <p>b) A sequential and deterministic relationship: information --&gt; decision</p> <p>c) A sequential and deterministic relationship: problem --&gt; solution</p> <p>d) The executive decides according to the organisation's stakes.</p> <p>e) Executive as decision-maker</p>	<p>a) The executive is a human being who rationalises (a posteriori justification of decisions)</p> <p>b) A circular and non-deterministic relationship: information &lt;==&gt; decision</p> <p>c) A circular and non-deterministic relationship: problem &lt;==&gt; solution</p> <p>d) The executive decides according to his own stakes.</p> <p>e) Executive as "sense-maker"</p>
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TABLE 1 (Continued)

<p>WHAT IS INFORMATION?</p>	<p>a) Information = computerized information (communication/telecommunications)</p> <p>b) One is interested in formal information</p> <p>c) One distinguishes between information and data</p> <p>d) A "realist" position concerning the relationships between information-reality-language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. information is, must be, the reflection of reality (the mirror theory)</li> <li>. information is knowledge of reality (objective information)</li> <li>. information is the reduction of uncertainty</li> <li>. Language, support and vehicle of information, reflects reality</li> </ul> <p>e) Information is a thing (which one stores and hands over)</p>	<p>a) Information = computerized information (communication/telecommunications)</p> <p>b) The more one rises in the hierarchy, the more informal information counts</p> <p>c) Refusal of the distinction information/data: there is no objective data</p> <p>d) A "constructivist" position:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. the "operational enclosure" of the nervous system cripples the mirror theory (VARELA)</li> <li>. information creates reality: there is no objective information</li> <li>. "Information is the difference which creates a difference" (BATESON)</li> <li>. Language does not reflect reality, it creates it</li> </ul> <p>e) Information is a relationship (of power in particular)</p>
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TABLE 1 (Continued)

<p>HOW IS AN INFORMATION SYSTEM DESIGNED?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Make technical choices, conceive a technical system</li> <li>b) Conceive a formal and official information system</li> <li>c) Take a note of and satisfy the information needs of users</li> <li>d) Separation conception/utilisation of the information system</li> <li>e) Systems are considered as permanent</li> <li>f) Create one reality and therefore close the "possibles"</li> <li>g) Analyst as "bridge", "clarifier"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Make politico-technical choices, conceive a politico-technical system</li> <li>b) Take into account the importance of the informal and private information system</li> <li>c) Identify the information which one does not need</li> <li>d) The manager designs his information system by himself</li> <li>e) Systems are temporary</li> <li>f) Support the generation of realities, open the "possibles"</li> <li>g) Analyst as "intruder"</li> </ul>
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TABLE 1 (Continued)

<p>WHAT IS A "GOOD" INFORMATION SYSTEM?</p>	<p>For the company, it is a system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- profitable</li> <li>- utilised</li> <li>- easy to use (user friendliness)</li> <li>- which gives "the right information at the right moment"</li> <li>- coherent (non-redundancy of information)</li> <li>- which allows the sharing and transparency of information</li> <li>- etc.</li> </ul>	<p>For the executive concerned, it is a system which allows him to convince, to persuade, to get his ideas, his stakes, his choices, his decisions, accepted , i.e., his strategy implemented.</p>
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