

Number	T - 30		
Name	A Sociotechnical Approach to Organizational Transformation		
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Descriptor	<p>The theme of IS as a global gateway reflects a contemporary business and political environment in which traditional organizational forms and boundaries have broken down in favour of social networks, joint ventures and virtual organizations. National boundaries have also lost their relevance in the context of multinational corporations with turnovers in excess of the GDPs of many nation states. Nevertheless, to every individual, day-to-day life remains local. It is one thing to offer a gateway to the World, but quite another to encourage real people to want to pass through it. It has been suggested that the primary source of sustainable competitive advantage for any business is the 'know-how' of its employees. However, it is their willingness to engage in co-creating work systems that will facilitate success.</p> <p>Sociotechnical (ST) approaches originated after the Second World War, in the context of post-war reconstruction and democratization of the workplace. In every field of endeavour, approaches wax and wane in popularity and IS is no exception. The ST approach to work design is now decades old, and many current IS professionals are either unfamiliar with ST, or have rejected it as old-fashioned and outdated. Certainly, it is possible to look back on the original forms of ST practice as rather patronising, focused as they were on improving the lot of 'downtrodden' industrial and clerical workers. It is not the purpose of this track to turn back the clock, but to invite participants to take the (very sound) original principles of the ST movement and revitalise them for a 21st century context.</p> <p>If IS are to provide a global gateway for contemporary organizations and individuals, one key question will be how to promote engagement of real-world actors, and the IS professionals who support them, with beneficial change initiatives. Analysts and other experts can inform a change process, but only interested stakeholders can make it 'successful' as it is they who must live with it. Only they have the necessary contextual knowledge to be able to define desired benefits or determine when (or whether) they have been achieved. Classic ST work design (and also later participatory approaches) have tended to put forward a rather simplistic argument that 'everyone' should be involved in change projects. However, in practice, involvement was almost always circumscribed; Mumford herself admitted that political context often required compromise over the extent of genuine participation by the involved workforce. Boundary setting is therefore a crucial aspect of contemporary ST approaches, ensuring that those whose views are most crucial are empowered and motivated to engage in a change process. The work of Ulrich (2005) is relevant here in relation to activities of boundary critique. We can also look to work by, e.g. Claudio Ciborra to inform a revitalised, critical application of ST principles.</p> <p>The role of an IS professional as a 'change magician' is to support engaged actors, using appropriate ST tools and techniques. Motivation to use such tools is not to make workers</p>		

	<p>'happy', as early proponents of ST intended. It is rather to engage with them in a transformation from systems achieving mediocrity into systems achieving excellence in realising desired benefits. If IS are to provide a global gateway, then participants must be engaged in a genuine dialogue. They must be equipped to become active partners in design processes, or else there is a risk that resultant gateways are irrelevant, or even disruptive of effective communication. Many types of standardisation may be seductively convenient in a quest for globalisation. However, local identities and autonomy, as a conduit for the full richness of life as it is lived, must be supported. This much has been demonstrated by, e.g. the work of Hofstede. The theme of ST design could be viewed as a necessary condition to equip participants; the challenge is to scale them up to a global situation.</p> <p>As Mumford points out in her later work (e.g. 2006), an open systems perspective is needed if the benefits of ST methods are to be realised. The interconnections with the wider system within which a particular work system is sited must be taken into account. Any organization subsists from moment to moment as an emergent property of the interactions among the people who are its members, creating systems that are not just open but dynamic. In the context of networked organizations, dynamic complexity is not merely expanded but <i>radically altered</i>. The role of ICTs in a networked society is not simply to create connections <i>between</i> individuals and organizations, but to support transformations in organizational life as it is lived. In this track we invite contributions to shed light on the benefits and effectiveness of adopting a ST perspective to deal with this dynamic. ST, systemic approaches will ensure that new kinds of technical and organizational systems are built in harmony.</p> <p>References</p>
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