

How to study an organisation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe how to construct and manage a study into an organisation in order to improve its functions such as marketing, sales operations or strategy. The point is to understand and then select improvement pathways rather than imposing standard solutions. In order to understand, however, you have to make the time to study the organisation and principles from the discipline of ethnography may help with that.

1. Introduction

It's tempting to think of an organisation as something that exists in its own right - as real as a cow or a person. What an organisation is, however, is a pattern. It's a shape that emerges from the thoughts and actions of the people that have chosen to work together, connected by threads of values, aspirations and skills, and bonded by a legal structure that is accepted and enforced by the wider environment.

Such an approach to thinking of an organisation is very different to the more traditional approach: one that thinks of it more like a machine. A machine is designed to do a job and all its parts are cut out and fitted together to work in a predictable way. Some people think of organisations in the same way and believe that the way to fix a problem is through changing a part or preventing the problem from happening in the first place.

Is one approach right and the other wrong? If you are a manager are you better off looking at things like a mechanic looks at a car or are you better off thinking like an ethnographer?

There is unlikely to be a clear and simple answer to such a question. There is, however, lots of material available if you want to think of your organisation as a machine. Just pick up any *How-To* book to get a feel for how this works. This paper will, just to get a feel for a different type of thinking, explore the ethnographer's approach and see if it's something we can use to try and understand organisations and perhaps even make decisions.

2. What is ethnography?

Before I look at that I should probably set the scene for this paper. I'm not an academic: just someone interested in understanding the world around me and writing about it helps. That means nothing in here has been peer-reviewed or tested for quality in any way. I'm also limited by my ability to read and understand what is available and that means there are books and papers locked away in libraries and electronic castles that I can't access.

But that's ok because in the world we live in we have access to lots of information and because we're interested in the world as it is we should try and study what we see.

On that basis the starting point for someone like me trying to understand ethnography is Wikipedia and, unsurprisingly, people who know what they are talking about have a lot to say. For example, the "ethno" part has to do with groups of people and the "graphy" has to do with writing. It's a way to understand groups of people by studying them and writing about them. What we're trying to do is appreciate their thoughts, actions and lives as they happen in and are influenced by the environment they live in.

This kind of study used to be the preserve of someone that would go and live in a remote society to understand and document their ways. We don't need to travel to find interesting groups to study these days because they are all around us — from organisations dealing with questions of how to change from a carbon-intensive to a carbon-neutral way of doing business to how to be

4.4. Interpreting thoughts and actions

I saw a quote on LinkedIn where a writer said “I understand what is happening only when I start writing about it.” You can have a theory or a belief that something is going on but it’s only when you start to put it down on paper that it takes a form independently of what’s in your head. When it exists apart from you then it starts to be useful because you can share it and continue to question and develop the thoughts in it.

In the same way you have to look at what’s going on and try to make a start at translating what’s happening. If you’re not familiar with what’s going on it’s a process of interpretation as you take what you see and hear and translate it into words that you understand.

4.5. Do a detailed description

As you walk around an organisation and listen to what’s going on you need to take notes and write down your impressions, later transcribing them and going through what you’ve put down. Like a writer, the more detailed your descriptions and research the more likely it is that you’ll spot something interesting.

4.6. Look for patterns of ideas and beliefs

That process of being alert and looking at what’s around you, recording as much as you can to process later is what will end up giving you an insight into what’s going on — leading you to discover the underlying patterns of ideas and beliefs that show up day to day in what happens in the organisation.

4.7. Being reflexive

At the same time you have to be conscious of your own role. If you want to get to know these people yourself then do you avoid being critical, do you flatter their ego and ignore unpleasant things? It’s the same problem with businesses. Most research reports into businesses avoid labelling any of them as poor performers and carefully construct assessment systems where you’re good however you respond and that’s because the intent is not to inform but to sell the report as a marketing tool. It’s easy to fool yourself into thinking you’ve spotted something new and interesting when all that’s happened is that you’re being shown what you were hoping to see.

5. Conclusion

This paper argues that while many people see organisations as mechanistic systems that can be controlled and managed another view is to see them as collections of people acting in accordance with a shared narrative and culture, creating meaning as they go along. If you want to change anything about that organisation this view suggests that you start by understanding the organisation and the best way to do that is to take the time to study it.

Ethnography is the study of people and so the ideas and methods used by ethnographers seem like they could be useful in helping us take a structured and rigorous approach to the study of organisations. This is, however, just a hypothesis and whether you find it useful or not will depend on what happens when you try and use the model in Figure 1 in a real world project.

About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

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