

Managing change by abandoning planning and embracing improvisation

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The management of change projects is accommodating a rise in improvisational working practices. A number of lessons are offered that assist in the stimulation of effective improvisational practices when implanting strategic change within organisations. Specific problems surround the tensions created when simultaneously controlling project team members whilst allowing them organisational space and the opportunity to work improvisationally. Reasons for the rise in improvisational working are also highlighted, together with the ways that a sample of organisations deals with the outcomes. A matrix is offered, which segregates case study organisations according to their cultural homogeneity and success in developing employee trust and motivation.

This paper distils many of the elements of a four year programme of research. The study in question considered the interface of projects, implementation and change within six organisations in the retail lending sector. Although diverse in size, orientation and mode of operation, these organisations share a common factor: they all use projects as the means by which they implement strategy and change. This is not surprising, as evidence from project management researchers indicates that the use of projects to implement change is widespread and effective (Grundy, 1998). This study follows a qualitative model, the intention not being to test hypotheses to destruction in the positivist tradition, but to adopt more of a realist approach, searching for insights in the rich data unearthed from a number of case studies.

This approach, coupled with the fact that the use of project management to achieve strategic change within organisations has become accepted (Turner, 1999: 35), has resulted in a study that uncovers a number of innovations in the use of project-based techniques to implant such change. Consequently, many findings that are new (and often surprising) have emerged as this research has progressed, as the subject organisations have moved towards greater maturity in the project-managed implementation of strategic change. On a broader level, firstly, and most importantly for this research, no-one has considered the way in which implementation, project management and change combine and influence each other in the financial services sector. The linking of these areas within a specific, relatively under-researched sector has exposed a number of findings.

Secondly, this paper considers the application of elements of the improvisation literature to project managed change. The findings in this area indicate strong support for and use of improvisational working practices within the project-managed implementation of change, notwithstanding the recognised project management paradigm of 'plan, then implement'. The results of this study also highlight a number of critical areas and reinforce the view that within modern, evolving and complex organisations in commercial sectors where change is rapid and accepted, the management of the people involved in and affected by change is paramount. The ability to react to changing markets, external environments, competition and patterns of consumption, as well as the need to develop new products and retain customers is considered vital to organisational success. Flexibility is required to facilitate this, as well as the development of the necessary socio-behavioural skills within the workforce.

There is also evidence of a move away from structured, project-based techniques, and the implications of this can be problematic. The findings of this study indicate that managers within the more successful organisations allowed their employees significant freedom to experiment with process, task management and unstructured work practices in order to achieve objectives. This has resulted in significant challenges in the management of those employees. In particular, employers are finding that the specific duties of managers identified in Fayol's (1949) classical view of work: 'plan, organise, command and co-ordinate, and control' are becoming distorted by a move to flexible working.

By 1975, Brech had refined these elements into 'identifying, planning, control, co-ordination, and motivation' as the main elements of management, demonstrating a trend away from the commanding and controlling that is evident today. The move to flexible working practices and the trend allowing employees to draw on unconscious expertise and tacit knowledge to improve their work is releasing opportunities for improvisation. Managing such activity is a new challenge for managers, requiring greater involvement with behaviour rather than tasks.

Setting the scene

The origins of this research are grounded in a combination of past employment, genuine interest and a desire to undertake research that has legitimacy and relevance to practitioners operating within the project-managed implementation of change. Having previously spent over 20 years employed within the UK financial services sector, latterly as a project manager implementing technological and behavioural change, this research allows an opportunity to interrogate and explore many of the problems that appeared to distort attempts to manage such change and achieve the desired outcomes.

This has led to a curiosity about the nature of those problems and the possible remedies. Published research in the area of the successful management of change projects appears biased towards the mechanistic rather than the organic (as defined by Burns and Stalker [1966]), as well as drawing on

Emile Durkheim's earlier work on mechanical and organic solidarity routines). There is a tendency for such research to be grounded in a routine-based planning and control mentality, with a concentration on prescriptives, and a limited regard for interaction with and analysis of other organisational imperatives. This study will help to address that balance.

Project-based working practices are being employed more widely within organisations, and appear to be almost universally adopted to manage organisational change (Pellegrinelli and Bowman, 1994). The implementation of strategic change has evolved from the three stage processes proposed by Lewin (1947) of unfreezing, changing and refreezing; Beckhard and Harris (1977) of present state, transition state, and future state; and Tichy and Devanna (1986) of awakening, mobilising and reinforcing. Beckhard and Harris (1987), in a movement away from their earlier work, suggest that: '*... change management is not a neat, sequential process*', effectively discounting much of the early work on 'three stage' models of change.

This finding reinforces indications that the sequential approach fell out of favour in the 1980s, as the implementation of change embraced more challenging contingent approaches, including Bourgeois and Brodwin's (1984) work which offered five models of change, whilst indicating that: '*none . . . is correct for all companies*' (p. 260). Dunphy and Stace (1988) also offered a contingency model to identify and resolve different circumstances of change and linked these to different styles of change management.

By the 1990s, there was general acceptance of the construction of organisations as social arrangements for the controlled performance of collective goals (Huczynski and Buchanan, 1991). In addition, environmental turbulence has contributed to the difficulties in anticipating future scenarios for organisational success, marginalising traditional ways of planning and implementing change, and offering opportunities for more experimental and less structured approaches to change, including the use of improvisational working practices.

There is, however, often a chasm between the outcomes of management research and the translation of those outcomes into useable practice, i.e. the context of application. What is needed is the creation and articulation of knowledge that can assist practitioners within organisations in the satisfactory execution of their duties. Within the context of the project-managed implementation of strategic change this is taken to mean that any findings may help practitioners achieve their desired outcomes. This research is designed to meet that imperative in respect of the growing awareness of improvisational working practices within changing organisations.

Literature review

Improvisation involves combining known and unknown routines in different contexts, and can be considered from a philosophical as well as an organisational stance. Ryle (1979) adopts a philosophical viewpoint, using the perspective of how thoughts develop, and how improvisation features in that process. He suggests that: '*the vast majority of things that happen . . . are . . .*

unprecedented, unpredictable, and never to be repeated (Ryle, 1979). As a result of this:

it follows that the things that we say and do in trying to exploit, avoid or remedy that small minority of the particular partly chance concatenations that happen to concern us cannot be completely pre-arranged. To a partly novel situation the response is necessarily partly novel, else it is not a response (Ryle, 1979).

He suggests that however well an activity is planned, there will always be a novel set of circumstances to deal with and therefore improvisation is a part of daily life, thought and communication. Ryle (1979) describes improvisation as ‘. . . the pitting of an acquired competence or skill against unprogrammed opportunity, obstacle or hazard’ although he is not specific about the meaning of an ‘unprogrammed opportunity’. It is clear from his written output that he sees improvisation as using resources that are to hand to resolve unforeseen occurrences. This is the essence of bricolage, which can be described as constructing a solution with the resources that are to hand at a given moment (Levi-Strauss, 1966).

The organisational view of improvisation adapts these principles to achieving tasks within organisations. Improvisation has for some years been a part of, or at least recognised in, organisation theory. The early view was, however, expressed in terms of organisational dysfunction: either as an unintended outcome (March and Simon, 1958), or as an organisation design failure (MacKenzie, 1986). There is a growing body of post-1994 literature that considers improvisation as an organisational attribute that:

. . . ontributes to and is an outcome of organizational absorptive capacity for new knowledge, structural flexibility, market flexibility, operational flexibility, intrapreneurial culture and of the organization path dependence of exploitation and exploration adaptations (Lewin, 1998).

It therefore appears that as a result of the speed and degree of change within organisations and their environments, the organisational perception of improvisation has been revised. From being an outcome of ‘getting things wrong’, and having therefore to effect a repair, improvisation is now seen as a positive skill in making meaningful decisions within a limited timescale, without the best information and resources.

There is a trend within academic writing to apply metaphors to many aspects of management and organisational development. Leybourne (2002) considers metaphors for organisational improvisation, condensing the significant output that considers the area using both jazz performance (Barrett, 1998; Berliner, 1994; Hatch, 1999) and theatre (Crossan, 1997), and which resulted in a dedicated AoM conference track in 1995. This use of improvised jazz as a metaphor for improvisation within organisations is a popular tool, with Hatch (1998) being an introduction to these themes. Hatch (1999) is a more comprehensive and coherently argued publication, built around the jazz improvisation theme, but with links to sense-making (Weick, 1979) and to teamwork and collaboration, as well as organisational culture and identity.

Hatch also considers the temporal aspect of improvisation, providing a link with the work of Moorman and Miner (1998a; 1998b). Crossan suggests that many companies have created an over-reliance on the planning process, which because of its long time horizons cannot be described as a creative and spontaneous process. She states that lessons from improvisational theatre can assist in delivering ‘. . . faster, better, smarter’ (Crossan, 1997) innovative solutions and faster cycle times.

Improvisation is also linked with aspects of time, particularly pressure to achieve to a demanding or compressed timetable. Moorman and Miner (1998a; 1998b) consider definitions and components of improvisation. Improvisation in this context is defined as: ‘. . . the degree to which composition and execution converge in time’ (Moorman and Miner, 1998b). It follows from this that the more proximate the time between the design and implementation of an activity, the more improvised the activity.

This temporal link between the two activities is considered to be important in judging the degree of improvisational activity. They also suggest a continuum of degrees of improvisation, building on some of the ideas of Weick. Several topics related to improvisation are examined, suggesting that there are three correlates of improvisation; intuition, bricolage and creativity. Moorman and Miner (1998b) consider the link with learning and organisational memory, suggesting that improvisation produces new learning within organisations, which can then be lodged in the ‘memory’ of the organisation. Miner, *et al.* (2001) extend this set of three correlates or constructs, adding adaptation, compression (defined in terms of the time-scale) and innovation, suggesting that the combination of these six ‘constructs’ can result in a specific type of learning.

Bricolage has already been mentioned as involving the use of resources that are to hand to resolve unforeseen occurrences. Lehner (2000) develops the use of bricolage within organisational improvisation, broadly supporting a positive relationship between implementation and bricolage, as: ‘. . . planning threatens flexibility whereas bricolage enhances flexibility of strategy implementation’. He also discusses environments that are subject to ‘high dynamism’, which may: ‘. . . render planning futile’ (Lehner, 2000), thereby supporting a key assertion of this paper, that improvisation, i.e. the fusing of planning and execution, is widespread in fast moving commercial sectors. In any event, it is apparent that successful improvisation is the domain of adept bricoleurs.

e Cunha *et al.* (1999) provide a comprehensive review of the emerging 1990s improvisation literature. They formally define improvisation, alongside a review of its antecedents, influencing factors and outcomes. A literature review is included, dividing existing work on theory development in improvisation into first, second and third stage articles. First stage articles attempt to transpose the improvisational work carried out in jazz soloing and theatre to organisational contexts. Second stage articles move improvisation away from the arts and into organisations, developing definitions (usually from a grounded theory approach) and building the foundations to allow research of a more positivist leaning.

An emerging third stage is also identified, considering amongst other areas a temporal perspective of organisational improvisation. Chelariu, *et al.* (2002)

expands on certain elements of this work, offering a comprehensive review of the way learning interacts with improvisation, and presenting a typology of improvisation. There are also links with the use of improvisation within projects. There is also the need for an underpinning structure as well as the need for skills and knowledge, which can be learned or rehearsed for improvisation to work within organisations. Moreover, improvisation often takes place within project management, especially towards the end of a project, when bricolage comes into play because budgets are exhausted and the completion date is near. There is however, little mention of projects in the improvisation literature and little mention of improvisational techniques in the project literature.

Projects are acknowledged tangentially in Chelariu, *et al.* (2002), but otherwise a different context is used (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997), unrelated to the use of project management to implement change. Interest in improvisation is growing rapidly, although little work has been published relating to any of its aspects.

A description of the study

This study was designed to address issues relating to the interface of implementation, projects and change, the importance of socio-behavioural, cultural and political issues within that interface, and the use of improvisation within strategic change. This paper is concerned specifically with findings relating to the way in which the management of project team members may need to change to accommodate the use of improvisational working practices. The interface between implementation, projects and change has often been considered in a narrow way (following positivist traditions) and it is useful to consider the inherent relationships by delving deeper into phenomena that can only be accessed using methods such as case studies (Yin, 1994).

This method is able to yield pertinent (Bryman, 1988) observational and narrative data that can produce new insights and explanations. Case study-based research offers: ‘. . . *an inductive, qualitative approach to increase the chance of discovering the unanticipated*’ (Gersick, 1988), and is ‘. . . *designed to generate new theory, not to test existing theory*’ (Gersick, 1988). An emphasis on ‘discovering the unanticipated’ allows the development of new explanations and theory from qualitative data, and case studies are often seen as the ideal vehicle for this (Frost and Stablein, 1992).

As researchers, we are not fully aware of the problems faced in considering the linkages that may exist between implementation, projects and change, as there is a dearth of theory that addresses the three areas together. There is even less literature addressing the use of improvisation within change and how it is managed. Such a statement does not suggest that managers improvising within project-managed implementation are not engaging with the problems of that implementation; only that these matters have rarely been considered or researched empirically using qualitative research methods.

The study that underpins this research and provides much of the primary data upon which the findings articulated in this paper have been based was

located in a sub-sector of the UK financial services sector. Six retail lending institutions ranging from a major quoted bank (*BigBank*) through a building society (*MutualCo*) and an ex-building society (*ExSociety*), to larger (*FinanceCo* and *DivestCo*) and smaller (*NewCo*) retail lending organisations were used. Building Societies are UK-based, mutually-owned organisations originally formed specifically to supply housing finance – rather like US savings and loan organisations.

This sample was chosen, taking into account the relative populations of organisations in each of the sub-sectors, the required number of cases needed to provide an opportunity to develop theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1994) and the need to include cases with differing characteristics, or polar types (Pettigrew, 1988). The data collection and analysis took place during 2000–2001, involving many visits to the organisations and the collection of around 100 hours of interview data. Observational and secondary data was also incorporated into this broadly qualitative study.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out at the strategic, managerial and operational levels within the organisations, and across a wide cross-section of functions. This data was analysed and each of the six organisations written up as a case study. Cross-case analysis was then undertaken and a number of themes, trends and modes of operation were identified. The study focused on the processes, mechanisms and routines that the six organisations used to implement the outcomes from the strategic planning process. The prime focus of this paper is, however, the movement away from standardised and documented processes and mechanisms towards use of improvisational routines and mechanisms, and how the work carried out in this area is monitored, managed and controlled.

Findings

Levels of improvisational activity

One key finding from the study was that only one of almost 100 interview respondents, all of whom were engaged at some level within the project-managed implementation of change, did not support the use of improvisation. It was also evident that the considerable level of improvisation unearthed and identified within the six case study organisations was not confined to the management of change projects, but had insinuated itself into many parts of the organisation. Specifically, one senior manager in the Management Development area of *BigBank* suggested that most of the work that happened in his organisation is done through informal structures, loose collaborations of people who have similar views or initiatives, stating:

I might assemble two or three people who I know have a particular specialism in an area . . . you just get on the phone and make something happen informally, which fits with the idea of improvisation for me.

The head of IT within *NewCo* was equally enthusiastic, saying:

You have got to improvise all the time to find the solution. To improvise is to be innovative and you need to be innovative to succeed. It throws things open

for people to be more creative and sometimes when you do that, you get better ideas brought in . . .

Similar data from other the case study organisations closely mirrors and strongly supports improvisation as a means of achieving within organisations, notwithstanding the different levels of maturity and effectiveness of the outcomes.

This is interesting in itself, as the traditional process model that combines the overlapping areas of project management, implementation and change resembles Figure 1. The input will be the strategy from the strategic planning activity, and more specifically, the outputs from that plan that require implementing. Project management is the enabler and projects are designed to achieve the changes required within the strategy. Learning from the sequence of events represented by Figure 1 informs future activity. However, that process model does not take account of accidents, or emergent or unintended consequences. *FinanceCo* and *DivestCo* most closely follow this process, whilst *ExSociety* and *NewCo* have relaxed their internal controls over it significantly, allowing controlled improvisation to flourish.

A key question for organisations is how closely the outcomes of this process resemble the preconceived notions of the strategic managers and whether they result in a satisfactory outcome. A number of respondents from the qualitative interviews undertaken for this study still think of project management as a tool rather than a process (notably *FinanceCo* and *DivestCo*). This perception can manifest itself in a concentration on planned activity, rather than on the social and behavioural issues that affect change. If, however, organisations are socially constructed entities, then planning is deemed to be increasingly unreliable as a means of managing complex issues in turbulent environments (Stacey, 1996); improvisational working practices are increasingly used to allow employees to try and resolve such difficulties.

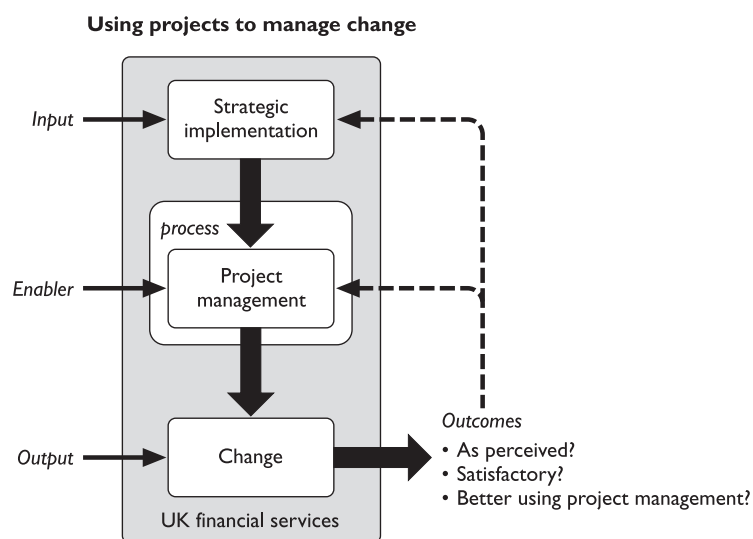


Figure 1: A process model of the project-managed implementation of change

It is clear that the process suggested in Figure 1 does not specifically embrace improvisational working practices, notwithstanding evidence from this study that they are widely utilised. Indeed, respondents from all the case study organisations suggested that improvisation was a vital part of the change implementation and that such practices were essential to the successful management of change initiatives. Improvisational activity is increasing as organisations become more comfortable with the concept, although there is considerable variation in the evolution and effectiveness of improvisational work both across and within the cases.

Structural and cultural support for improvisation

Naturally, the fact that so much work takes place that falls outside the planned routines and the documented processes laid down by the organisation means that the management of improvising employees needs to be addressed. Tensions arise between the need to control employees and the need to allow those same employees the freedom to explore new ways of performing their tasks. It is also critical for the success of such styles of management to eradicate any opportunity for blame to attach to an employee who may not be a successful improviser. An improvisational work practice that proves to be ineffectual or unsuccessful must be able to be treated as a learning experience rather than a mistake for which blame is apportioned. This is a key cultural consideration.

There are a number of areas that have to be addressed. Some of these areas are structural, in that they are organisationally based, culturally embedded and difficult to change. Others are related to process (and therefore more flexible), but still involve complex and organisation-specific behaviours to be amended and managed. The structural areas include the way in which employees work and interact within the organisation. Specifically, it appears that a consensus-based strategy that is stable and understood by employees assists creativity and improvisation; this can be underpinned by team working and flexible senior managers, who give workers the freedom to innovate and improvise.

Secondly, the culture of the organisation is critical. A homogeneous culture, with little or no negative political activity is desirable. In this study, *FinanceCo* and *DivestCo* were struggling with this aspect of their culture, while *BigBank* was operating under a significantly fragmented cultural model. Employees need to be motivated and there is evidence that the removal of formality from the cultural symbols and rituals of the organisation is beneficial. An example of this would be a casual dress code, and the minimisation of indicators of status such as executive facilities and reserved parking. The evidence from this study indicates that such removal of formality certainly has a positive effect in *ExSociety* and *NewCo*.

Thirdly, it appears that communication is critical to the successful management of change processes and also to the management of employees who are encouraged to improvise to achieve tasks and activities that support or trigger change. In particular, change needs to be well signalled, with employee input

encouraged and valued. The organisations in this study that managed change successfully (again, notably *ExSociety* and *NewCo*) devoted considerable effort to communication and had a significant informal network of communication forums that shared information and learning. The process-related areas that appeared to be vital to managing change overlap to some extent with the structural areas. They are, however, less embedded into the culture and structure of the organisation and are therefore arguably easier to amend.

Firstly, training was a key element in successful improvisation and change. Plentiful and focused training assists employees, builds confidence and improves skills. All six case study organisations train their employees, but both *FinanceCo* and *DivestCo* have problems in this area. There is also evidence that employees who are more confident and more highly skilled improvise more effectively, and build a repertoire of routines, practices and mechanisms that are recognised as known remedies for many of the problems that arise during the project-managed implementation of change.

Much of this repertoire is built up as a result of the capture of successful improvisational activity, some of which may be acquired implicitly and stored as tacit knowledge. The second area aligns closely with this phenomenon. Specifically, it is important to learn from such activity and to benchmark performance under the new way of working with previous similar activity. Genuine attempts should be made to disseminate this learning and assimilate it into new routines and procedures, developing what *BigBank* describe as 'emerging best practice' as a result.

Within this study, the six case study organisations achieved these aims and ideals to different degrees, involving differing organisational stances. These stances tended to be influenced by the homogeneity of the organisational culture, and also by the levels of trust placed in employees, and their motivation to achieve within their orbit of responsibility. Plotting the six case study organisations on a matrix that uses these two factors as the axes distributes the organisations into three groups of two.

Organisations with a low homogeneity of organisational culture and a low employee trust and motivation quotient are keen to improvise to claw back time slippage in tasks, but are not sufficiently confident of management support for improvisational activity. Much organisational improvisation within these companies is therefore surreptitious. *FinanceCo* and *DivestCo* fall into this category. Management support for improvisation is minimal, although there is considerable evidence that it is taking place. These companies have been labelled 'surreptitious strivers'.

Organisations with a low homogeneity of organisational culture and a high employee trust and motivation appear to have token management support for experimentation and improvisation, but are not fully supportive of employees who fail to improvise effectively. Blame is often attached to failure, and this makes employees cautious in exposing their improvisation to management scrutiny. An element of surreptitiousness therefore also appears within this group of organisations, which comprises *BigBank* and *MutualCo*. These companies have been labelled 'cautious experimenters'.

The third pair of organisations possess a high homogeneity of organisational culture and a high employee trust and motivation quotient. Employ-

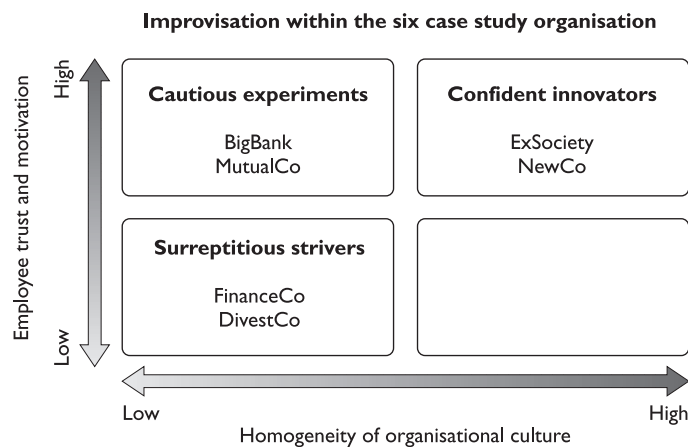


Figure 2: Matrix of the six case study organisations

ees are supported and effective in their improvisational activity with a culture that allows learning from mistakes and the capture of effective improvisational activity. This group, which comprises *ExSociety* and *NewCo*, has been labelled ‘confident innovators’. They manage change effectively using innovative processes, many of which are generated by the use of improvisation, and they have the mechanisms to capture and disseminate such successful innovation to other areas of the organisation. The matrix that depicts these groupings is displayed as Figure 2.

The value of improvisation

A major finding of this study is a consideration of the use of improvisation within the project management of change. Although there is no doubt that practitioners have always improvised to some extent during the execution phase of projects, the scope and extent of the improvisational activity within the case study organisations was a revelation. This mode of achieving tasks and milestones within projects is antithetical to the recognised view of project management, where rigorous planning is an embedded requirement of the project life cycle. It is, however, manifestly clear that improvisational activity is widespread within project-managed change in the case organisations. The reasons for this are varied, but have common origins.

Firstly, all the organisations are attempting to manage change on many fronts, with insufficient human, physical, or financial resources. Secondly, the time pressures on change managers to deliver solutions to business problems, or to improve processes mean that project managers attempt to reduce delivery times by moving away from the original plan. This is particularly evident in *BigBank* and *MutualCo*. Thirdly, because of the speed with which new products have to be developed to keep abreast of competitors, project deliverables change in scope and nature during the project life cycle.

Traditional project methodologies call for re-planning within a set of change control procedures, but temporal pressures do not allow for this to

happen. Therefore, improvisation ensues in an attempt to deliver to the new organisational and strategic requirements. During this study, *ExSociety* were using this mode to deliver web-based access to products and testing the new access pages in a 'live' environment, updating the pages daily as problems were resolved.

There are perceived benefits to improvisational working practices, provided that they are recognised and supported by the whole organisation. Firstly, they have the potential to generate what *BigBank* describe as 'emerging best practice'. This can be captured and shared across the organisation. Regrettably, of the six organisations in this study, only *NewCo* and to a lesser extent, *ExSociety* had the mechanisms and routines to achieve this. It is also apparent that *NewCo* could only do this informally, although routines were being developed to formalise the capture and dissemination process.

Secondly, talented project managers can circumvent the formality of rigid project methodologies to deliver change quickly and with the maximum of flexibility and innovation. However, the risks of this approach are obvious in a sector such as financial services, which is so risk-averse and bounded by regulation and legislation. Surprisingly, audit and compliance departments within the chosen organisations voiced strong support for improvisation in most cases (especially in *FinanceCo*, notwithstanding their cultural and structural difficulties with improvisational working practices).

Perhaps this support for improvisational work within projects is a tacit acceptance of its importance in achieving change, providing risk management routines are comprehensive and rigorous. However, this acceptance of improvisation is poorly communicated in many instances and much improvisational activity is surreptitious, resulting in differing perceptions of this activity across managerial levels. Certainly, the tension between improvisation and rigid project methodologies is causing challenges to organisations, only some of which are being resolved in a creative manner.

It has been evident during this study that one trend enthusiastically adopted by all the case study organisations is the need to develop a flexible workforce. The organisations all felt that they were offering training that resulted in a multi-skilled and committed employee base. This was not necessarily the view of employees – and at the wider level of questionnaire responses to questions about levels and effectiveness of training, there was a degree of ambivalence about the quantity and outcomes of training (again, *FinanceCo* had particular difficulties in this area).

Additionally, there is an assumption that flexible, multi-skilled workforces will then be empowered to discover new, more effective ways of dealing with organisational problems. It should also be possible for employees to join forces in ways that extend their individual capabilities whilst creating and developing new joint capabilities – in other words, the essence of team working. Within the study however, the only organisations that are progressing meaningfully towards this ideal are *ExSociety* and *NewCo*. Indeed, *BigBank* appears to be withdrawing the opportunity to use innovation and creativity within many of its operational areas, particularly those involving customer contact.

Flexibility within processes and procedures is another core issue. Certainly, the two organisations within this study that allow employees space, freedom and opportunity to influence their own working practices, namely *ExSociety* and *NewCo*, appear to have better motivated and happier workforces. They are also very customer oriented, with no legacy of strategies based primarily on operational efficiency. Indeed, the structure of both *ExSociety* and *NewCo* has been specifically designed around customer service. There appears to be an understanding in these two more progressive organisations that staff, not physical assets are the key to sustainable competitive advantage in a sector where the pace of change is increasing.

An element of tension between organisation and disorganisation, possibly based on capturing and re-applying learning from successful improvisational activity, is proving successful, especially within *ExSociety*. However, there are serious challenges involved in ensuring that this type of activity (which often depends on allowing employees to improvise within a framework with boundaries that are implied rather than specific), is effectively managed. Trust is vital and within more traditional organisations, there may be a cultural chasm to cross to achieve this.

Modifications to Fayol's classical view

Although the full study that underpins this paper set out to investigate the interactions between implementation, project management and change, perhaps it is now time to revisit the process of management and assess the implications of the research findings. At the start of this paper, Fayol's (1949) management duties were identified and some consideration was given to how those duties were re-focused by Brech (1975). Table 1 summarises how the emphasis of these elements of management have been redefined in the light of the changing nature of work, and specifically in the light of the rise of improvisational working practices.

It is evident from this table that there have been a number of interesting changes in the responsibilities of managers, almost all of which involve a move from task-based responsibilities to more behaviourally-based responsibilities. Planning is still a key management function, although it tends to be directed more to the management of change and planning for likely future scenarios. Fayol's (1949) organising role has been diluted by the rise of autonomous teams, but there is still a responsibility on the part of the manager to ensure the performance of employees and also to assess or benchmark that performance in many organisations.

Command has reduced, but co-ordination is still important, especially in project-oriented organisations and roles. Control by managers is diluted by the need to create temporal space for improvisational activity, but the boundaries of the framework within which such activity takes place still have to be policed. Motivation is the new key area for many managers, together with commitment, and the building of trust. These developments have resulted in the need for managers within organisations to amend the priorities and imperatives that they apply to their role. This is particularly so in

Table 1: Elements of management – changes in focus and practice

Elements of management: changes in focus and practice				
Fayol (1949)		Brech (1975):		Today:
Planning:	This element remains fundamentally unchanged and is still the province of the senior and middle manager.	Planning	Managers are still responsible for planning, but ‘emergent’ strategies based on fast-changing environmental conditions are becoming more common.	Planning: <i>(but in more turbulent environments)</i>
Organisation:	There has been a relatively significant level of change, as the rise in flexible working practices and the growth of autonomous team working has moved much organisation of work flows and work design to those teams.		With scarcity of resources (human, financial and physical), managers are now employing bricolage in the resourcing of work to a greater extent.	Organisation: <i>(of resources based on bricolage)</i>
Command and co-ordination:	The combination of command and co-ordination is becoming rarer, as decision making embraces consensus to a greater degree.	Co-ordination:	In today’s progressive organisations managers still co-ordinate work (and the project manager is a classic example of this), but much of this activity has moved to the level of the team.	Co-ordination:
Control:	Both management models include control and this key element of management was traditionally a large part of the management role. The control of work and employees is still a management concern, but a larger part of the role is now control of the ‘future state’ of the organisation.	Control:	Concentration on employees having the skills, expertise and knowledge to meet the challenges of future organisational requirements and challenges. Managers today also have to ‘control’ the boundaries of the improvisational framework.	Control:
	Motivation has become a key element of the management role. This was not foreseen in Fayol’s model, which was developed at a time when organisations were built on the bureaucratic model and employees were not encouraged to participate in organisational decisions.	Motivation:	Commitment and trust becoming more important as employees draw on tacit skills/ knowledge, intuition and creativity to resolve organisational difficulties using improvisation.	Motivation, commitment, and trust:

organisations and sectors where change is continuous. Many managers have moved from a role of managing tasks and processes, to a situation where management of the behavioural and cultural context that influences employee motivation and application is more important.

For these managers, the creation of a supportive culture through the influence of sympathetic organisational activities is a medium to long term

goal. This requires managers to empathise with and inspire employees, requiring the utilisation of skills that are not easily taught, as well as the relaxation of controls that have been deeply embedded within organisations.

Some thoughts on social and political resistance to change

There are other problematic areas to deal with. At least two of the case study organisations within this study have been hidebound by obstructive political activity. Weick (2001) suggests that: '*. . . organizational design is social rather than individual . . . it is built of social entities*'. This comment (and Morgan, 1997) reminds us that the reality of organisations is socially constructed and negotiated. The influences of both inter and intra-organisational politics at many levels within the project-managed implementation of strategic change has been seen in the study to influence outcomes, both positively and negatively. It could therefore be argued that such political activity is 'just the way life is' and the important aspect is how good people are at it.

Change is, however, rarely dependent on the actions of lone individuals, although it is recognised that some individuals may have more influential roles than others. It tends to be shaped by actions and interactions amongst many different people, who may choose whether or not to be involved in political activity. Such activity can be positive or negative and can be invoked to frustrate change or to promote and progress it. Evidence from this study suggests that politics is often cited by victims of effective negative political activity as the reason they do not progress within an organisation. Conversely, adroit and accomplished instigators and participants in political manoeuvrings are often successful within organisations. This in no way endorses such activity as a force for change within organisations, although it can appear to have that effect.

Rather, it can manifest itself in the obstruction of change, and this is particularly so within *FinanceCo*, and to a lesser extent, *BigBank*. The breaking down of such resistance is often a matter of communication, which is accepted as a key element in change initiatives (Belout and Gauvreau, 2004). Specifically, if employers know how an initiative will affect them and they see a benefit in the new model, then the tendency to resist is diminished.

This study has also uncovered an appreciation of the possibilities that the knowledge economy offers to organisations that can successfully exploit its opportunities, and there is a growing acknowledgement of intellectual assets as a key competitive resource. Knowledge working is recognised as an influential area for attention within evolving and progressive organisations. New knowledge comes about through exchanging and combining existing insights in novel ways. Trading and combining knowledge depends on people being able to work together, to understand each other and to trust each other. Taken together, these relationships can be viewed as social capital, which underpins knowledge creation and thereby, value creation. Managers have to manage this process and organisations can assist in providing the culture for it

to happen. *ExSociety*, and to a lesser extent *NewCo*, appear to be achieving this demanding set of challenges better than the other case study organisations.

There is, however, a fundamental problem. The tacit knowledge that employees acquire through experience is a form of power. Foucault considered power and knowledge to be inextricably linked (Foucault, 1977). The possession of knowledge confers power on the possessor, and the sharing of that knowledge, which is the essence of the learning organisation, reduces the power of that employee. Influencing the cultural norms of the organisation to remove the barriers to knowledge sharing is a daunting task, particularly in large organisations with deeply embedded cultural language, values, symbols and myths.

Conclusions and lessons for the practitioner

At this point it may be useful to use the results of the study to offer an ideal profile of the characteristics of a potentially strong organisation in terms of the implementation of project-managed change. This organisation will have well defined and powerful mechanisms and processes to create, align, guide, monitor and cancel change-related projects, together with effective routines to review project performance and apply the knowledge gained to the improvement of future projects. Project standards and procedures that form a framework for change and controlled improvisation will support these activities. Allied to this, there will be a homogeneous culture that pervades the organisation, in addition to mechanisms that support and develop managers, team members and employees through training, education, communication and support, so they can manage, execute and cope with change. There will be little negative political activity and minimal resistance to change.

There are, however, management challenges attached to all these organisational ambitions. From the data collected and analysed for this study, the organisations that come closest to this ideal are *ExSociety* and *NewCo*, notwithstanding the fact that *NewCo* is still developing adequate documented project management standards and procedures. It is also apparent that many organisations both inside (*BigBank* is a perfect example) and outside this study are being hamstrung in achieving these ideals by a focus on short term profitability, demanded by shareholders, parent organisations and ultimately by the expectations of financial commentators.

A general conclusion that emerges from this study is that it also appears that many organisations do not place enough emphasis on equipping employees to cope with change as a part of the implementation of that change. Perhaps this manifests itself in a need to support employees on their journey through organisational change, with progressive managers supporting this odyssey. Well managed change may need to acknowledge that people cope with changing business environments in different ways and at different rates. This is an area where further study could result in a better understanding, leading to significant gains for organisations. In this paper, a number of areas have been highlighted that transcend accepted practice about managing and implanting change within organisations. As a result of this, there are a number

Table 2: Lessons for managers

Lessons for managers	
Key messages:	Rationale:
Relaxation of control:	Improvisation cannot flourish in an environment where employees are hidebound by restrictive policies and procedures. Temporal space also needs to be provided in order that employees can try new ways of achieving organisational tasks and activities.
Tolerance of non-optimum solutions:	Decision-making within the modern organisation is never going to be based on choosing the optimum solution from an infinite number of alternatives. Turbulent and fast-changing environments mean that 'satisficing' decisions, that meet current needs, are more likely to emerge from improvisational working.
Dismantling of political coalitions:	Much resistance to change is the result of political factions stifling change for their own ends. Open communication and the dilution or removal of political agendas will assist in allowing good improvisational activity to emerge.
Building commitment and trust:	Managers have to build a culture of trust and commitment, in order that employees feel comfortable trying new ways of achieving, and confident that their efforts are appreciated (both intrinsically and extrinsically).
Learning from good improvisation:	As successful improvisation occurs, resulting in the creation of 'emerging best practice', formal and informal arrangements should exist to capture and codify such routines, in order that they can be shared within the organisation.

of messages emerging from the research that managers may wish to draw on in order to apply some of the benefits of improvisational working practices within their own organisations. The key elements are encapsulated in summary form in Table 2.

Some of these elements may be problematic to implant in all organisations, as they rely to a great extent on the relaxation of control and the increasing commitment and trust of a flexible workforce. Employees can then act as bricoleurs and draw on tacit and explicit knowledge to solve organisational problems using intuition and creativity. This is problematic for organisations that are still dependent on bureaucratic structures to exert control (i.e. parts of the burgeoning Public Sector), but this study has shown that the outcomes can be beneficial.

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