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Strategic Discourse across Organizational Meetings: Towards a Systems Perspective.

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Abstract

This paper presents a tentative theoretical conception of how organizational meetings may be viewed as a system rather than as individual events. Perspectives from process metaphysics (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010), meso-discourse analysis (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000, 2011) and systems thinking (von Bertalanffy, 1969) are adopted, to explore and expand the theoretical resources available to conceptualise a 'system of meetings'.

The primary data draws from 130+ hours of recorded meeting proceedings, spanning 58 meeting events, from multiple sub-groups within a medium sized company.

The paper first provides an exploration of how organizational participants may broadly construct inter-connectivity between their meetings. The data is initially viewed from both a process and systems perspective:

- In process terms, the organizational discourse is conceptualized as a 'river of discourse', within which meeting discourses take place, over an evolving time span, and thus contribute to the inter-connectivity of meetings.
- In systems terms, the meeting events are conceptualised as interconnected sub-groups of meetings, which in turn are nested within a wider system of meetings, which layer into the still wider organizational system (or system environment)

Discourse analysis is used to show how, under either conceptualization, participants discursively construct means of connecting their meetings. Existing concepts such as immutable mobiles (Cooren et al., 2008) and temporal frames (Boden, 1997) are initially applied. Additional concepts such as meeting 'trans-participants' and 'present absentees' are developed from the data to illustrate the potential for constructing a theory to explain how organization meetings are systemically connected to each other, embedded within the organization and contribute to the ongoing organizing (Weick et al., 2005) process.

The paper concludes with an invitation to explore:

- the merits of further research on developing this conceptualization of a 'system of meetings' using the available data set.
- how such a conceptualization may make a theoretical contribution to the organizational and process literature
- how a substantive theory in this area could lead to a practical contribution for organizations to improve the use of organizational meetings.

1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explore and expand the theoretical resources available to conceptualize organizational meetings as a 'system', rather than as singular strategic events or episodes.

The paper addresses two questions:

1: How could the strategic discourses within and between meetings support conceptualizing them as a 'system of meetings'?

2: Could a useful theory contribution be developed from this conceptualization?

In order to proactively address the questions, two initial assertions are proposed:

Assertion 1: Organizational meetings can be conceptualized as a system of meetings, generating an emergent output that is more than the sum of their individual contributions.

Assertion 2: It is feasible to develop a theoretical basis for such a system of meetings, with the potential to gain emergent benefits from a new way for organizations to manage and use their meetings.

Meetings are conceptualized as components in an organization's evolving processes and more specifically as an integrated system of meetings (SoM), rather than as single events. Process and systems perspectives are adopted as a means of stimulating the emerging theoretical thinking.

The paper begins with a short literature review on theory development, informed by concepts from engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007). Organization literature relating to Process Metaphysics and Strategy-as-Practice (S-as-P) is reviewed to provide an overall process context in which a systems perspective might be adopted. Meetings literature is reviewed to identify current and previous theoretical guidance on conceptualising and studying meetings. A review of systems literature provides concepts which may be adopted to support a systematised view of meetings. The industry context is briefly set out followed by methodology considerations associated with data gathering, recording and analysis. This is followed by an initial representation of the primary data using a range of diagrams, followed by the details of the theory proposal. The paper concludes with a view of the potential to pursue this research topic and an invitation to critically assess its future potential and merit as a research topic.

2 GUIDANCE FROM A MIXED LITERATURE

This research has been informed by aspects from five main literatures to date. Relevant considerations from each of the five are briefly summarised in this section.

2.1 THEORY DEVELOPMENT

One definition of theory is ‘the mental image or conceptual framework that is brought to bear on the research problem’ (Van de Ven, 2007: 19). This definition seems somewhat confused given that a mental image could be significantly different from a conceptual framework, and being brought to bear falls short of being a specific purpose that a theory might fulfil. Addressing the process of theory development, Weick (1989: 517) adopts a more specific definition of theory as: ‘an ordered set of assertions about a generic behaviour or structure assumed to hold throughout a significantly broad range of specific instances’. While more specific, this definition can still be viewed as open to different interpretations of specific words or phrases, leaving open the concern that seeking a single definition for an idea such as 'theory' may simply be an impossible task.

Focusing more on the features to be looked for in developing theory Weick (1989: 517) asserts that the search for theory must identify ‘relationships, connections, and dependencies in the phenomenon of interest’. The final outcome of the theorizing process may then be appropriately measured against some or a number of specific definitions appropriate to the context in which the theory is intended to make a contribution. The emphasis on the characteristics to be displayed by a theory removes the constraints imposed from any one definition, focuses the researcher on exploring possibilities instead of searching for a single outcome and keeps open the possibility that new insights and refinements may be possible arising from additional inputs at a later stage.

From a process ontological and epistemological perspective, temporal orientation, conceptual product and researcher perspective have a considerable bearing on the knowledge that will come from a theorizing process (Langley, 2009). Temporal orientation requires the time frame over which data is available or the research is conducted to be explicitly articulated in the emerging theory. Introducing researcher perspective requires some degree of reflexivity to ensure the researchers motivations and outlook are transparent in the final product. The strengths and weaknesses of theory

generating strategies are judged by Langley (1999) based on four characteristics of the emergent theory - accuracy, parsimony, generality and usefulness.

This research focuses on theory development for two principal reasons:

1. Organization literature related to meetings is relatively diverse but meetings in themselves have not generally been the subject of investigation in management literature (Dittrich et al., 2011). Hendry & Seidl (2003) and Jarzabkowski & Seidl (2008) have written illuminating work on meetings as strategic episodes. They particularly focus on how meetings relate to the wider organization in general and how they contribute to organizational strategy in particular. Studies have been carried out on a wide range of meeting practices including the micro processes and discourses within meetings (Samra-Fredericks, 2000b, 2003); on how discourses across meetings constitute 'collective minding' and a form of 'organizational intelligence' (Cooren, 2004); decision making within meetings (Huisman, 2001); the relationship of meetings to organizational strategy (Dittrich et al., 2011, Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011), to name a few.

While many studies focus on how meetings relate to each other in the context a particular phenomenon, there appears to be little research focusing on meetings collectively and their overall inter-connectivity as the topic of research.

2. Bettis (1991) called for the results of strategic management research to 'ultimately find important application in both industry and government'. Addressing the failure of strategic management research 'to provide specific managerial implications and prescriptions', Russell Crook et al (2006: 418) suggested 'more insights are needed to ensure that scholarly research informs practice'. Most recently, this is expressed as 'an increasing concern that management theories are not relevant to practice' (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011). From these practice focused exhortations spanning the last twenty years, pursuing this research may lead to development of a theory contribution that could add to the organizational literature on meetings while providing guidance to practitioners for improving the overall use and alignment of organizational meetings.

Rescher's definition of process as 'an integrated series of connected developments unfolding in conjoint coordination in line with a definite programme' (Rescher, 1996: 36) bears many similarities with a systems view (von Bertalanffy, 1969, Checkland and Scholes, 1999, Meadows, 2009, Luhmann, 2006) which highlights inter-connectivity,

coordination and control across system elements. Both perspectives provide a means of conceptualizing how such inter-connectivity and control may exist outside deliberate intention and may influence the overall contribution of meetings (collectively) to an organization. In ascribing meaning to the expression ‘the whole is more than the sum of parts’, von Bertalanffy (1969: 55) explains it as ‘simply that constitutive characteristics are not explainable from the characteristics of isolated parts’. Applied to an organizations meetings and adopting Langley's (1999) ‘uncodifiable creative leap’, this study seeks to identify how the organizations meetings may be considered as system like, in part through the constitutive nature of the participants’ discourse.

Neither process metaphysics nor systems thinking are methodologies. They are considered both complimentary and contrasting ‘Weltanschauung’ (Checkland and Scholes, 1999: 35) or ‘worldviews’ (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010: 9), for the purpose of analysing the proceedings of meetings. Discourse Analysis (DA) (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000, 2011, Potter and Wetherell, 1987) is used as an analytical methodology to show how these connections are constructed and maintained by the discourse of an organization's members.

The difficulties associated with gaining access and recording live organizational discourse as primary data are well recorded in the literature (Barley, 1990: 227, Russell Crook et al., 2006: 418, Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 75, Johnson et al., 2007: 65, Langley, 2007). The availability of audio recordings is an exception to the more general rule of scholars relying only on field notes in these types of studies Cooren (2007a), providing an exceptional resource for developing theory from empirical data.

2.2 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (DA)

DA as methodology is a philosophical approach to empirical research which should include ‘a concern with text, discourse and context’. It also takes a ‘social constructivist view of the social world’ being analysed (Phillips and Hardy, 2002: 5).

Due to the absence of a detailed prescription of methods for data analysis Phillips and Hardy (2002: 74) go so far as to say ‘researchers need to develop an approach that makes sense in light of their particular study and establish a set of arguments to justify the particular approach they adopt.’

Grant et al. (2001) identified a spectrum of definitions for DA attributed to different authors. At its simplest it could be viewed as ‘spoken dialogue’ in contrast to written texts. Alternatively, it could encompass both spoken and written texts. Taking an expansionist view, it could include all forms of spoken and written text.

For the purpose of this study, two definitions of discourse are particularly apt and overlapping: Potter and Wetherell (1987: 7) consider discourse in a broad sense, defining it as ‘..all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds.’ Phillips and Hardy (2002: 3) refine this definition somewhat, describing a discourse as ‘an interrelated set of texts and the practices of their production, dissemination and reception, that brings an object into being.’

DA is used in this study to explore how organizational meetings are socially produced events and how they are created, maintained and held in place over time as an integrated whole (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). A meso-discourse approach (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) is adopted, being relatively sensitive to language use in context but seeking broader patterns by going beyond the details of individual meetings to identify how discourse contributes to the construction of inter-meeting connectivity.

2.3 FROM PROCESS METAPHYSICS AND STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE PERSPECTIVES.

Process metaphysics is not a prescriptive methodology to be applied to a research situation. Rescher (1996: 32) expresses this by saying it is not ‘so much a doctrine as a tendency - a mode of approach to the philosophical issues.’ In his closest allusion to a systems perspective, he states ‘when smaller processes join to form large ones, the relations is not simply one of part to whole but of productive contributory to aggregate result’ (Rescher, 1996: 56). His later proposition about ‘structure of patterns’ and the concept of ‘universals’ (p71/72), correlate with the more specific concept of hierarchy in systems thinking, which is addressed later in this section.

For the purpose of this paper, Pettigrew's (1997: 38) definition of process, is considered most appropriate: ‘a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in context’. Multiple levels of analysis, temporal interconnectedness, context and action relationship, holistic rather than linear explanation and linkage to

outcomes represent Pettigrew's (1992: 340) guiding assumptions for process studies. Each of these has some level of congruence with a systems perspective - temporal interconnectedness being the weakest and holistic explanation the strongest.

Acknowledging the range of definitions for process (Van De Ven, 1992), Langley (2007) provides a background on how process philosophy has been brought into organization studies. She advocates the dynamic consideration of phenomena in terms of movement, activity, events, change and temporal evolution but laments the apparent absence of process thinking in published material. Due to the emphasis in S-as-P research on what people do and how it embodies process thinking (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007), Langley sees a stronger link with S-as-P than with the more traditional organisation literature which is considered less imbued with process thinking. She argues that greater visibility of temporal influences will enhance visibility of how patterns of systemic relationships develop around organizational phenomena. Studies adopting what Langley (2007) calls 'Listening to language', involving the constructive power of discourse, are considered to be a strong reflection of processual research.

Process ontology is mainly focused on the sequential and temporal relationship of events (Langley, 1999). Events are not always clearly delineated or readily identifiable. As a consequence, clearly identifying and delineating processes for the purpose of analysis is also problematic. The concepts of sequence and temporality are used to show relationships between events which in combination identify processes. Space is a further element to be taken into account when identifying and analysing processes (Pettigrew, 1992). The four dimensional view implicit from this process ontology leads to multi-layers of analysis when studying processes, reflective of Boden's (1994) concept of lamination as she applied it to micro and macro discourses.

Explicating on the theory-practice gap, the concept of 'entwinement' is introduced by Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011: 343) to articulate what they consider our most basic form of 'being-in-the-world'. Describing this as being 'part of a meaningful relational totality with other beings', they contend entwining within 'sociomaterial practices' provides an entity with intrinsic meaning. Entwining's consequential link to practices is then argued to provide an underlying logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990). Identifying temporal structure and directionality as constitutive of meaning, Bourdieu (1990: 81) touches on

the foundational aspect of process. It is note worthy that both concepts are explicitly absent from the systems perspective described later in this section. Applying the concept of entwinement to a single meeting resonates with a meeting needing to be part of a SoM in order to have more integrated meaning and an identifiable logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990).

Process and S-as-P are jointly evident in Spee and Jarzabskowski's (2011) detailed analysis of strategic planning as a communication process. Of particular interest is the nature of the data used in their work and the analytical methodology employed. While the intended outcome of their work is different from that intended by this paper, it provides a valuable insight into the close relationship between Process and S-as-P (Langley, 2007) which was previously noted. Adopting the conception of an organization and its processes as an on-going process of 'becoming', Spee (2011) makes some detailed and telling findings about the relationships between events and their surroundings and how they evolve over time. Both of these studies focus on the process of strategic planning and how meetings are used as one organizational activity to channel the planning process. In terms of S-as-P and Process Metaphysics, the concept of an SoM as initially abducted from the available data (Van de Ven, 2007: 140) and inducted from preliminary analysis as reported in this paper, may contribute to establishing meetings (collectively) as a form of practice and process that could serve both strategizing and organizational change as part of organizational becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002).

2.4 MEETING THEORY

Research on meetings has taken a wide range of perspectives: Written and oral communication resources for organising and managing meetings were analysed for their use and impact within meetings but they didn't indicate any deliberate attempts to link the meetings in any way (Volkema and Niederman, 1996). Ethnographic recording of meetings and subsequently conversation analysis were used to examine the micro discursive practices which make up the interpersonal interactions within these meetings (Samra-Fredericks, 2000a). Samra-Fredericks used 'lamination' (Boden, 1994) to illustrate how micro discourse features may combine to contribute to the macro

organisational environment, but she too did not report on any explicit or deliberate connections between meetings (Samra-Fredericks, 2000a, 2003).

The prevalence and importance of meetings for formulating and implementing organizational strategy has been reported in the literature (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, Johnson et al., 2006, Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008). The concept of 'episodes' from Luhmann's social systems theory is adopted by Hendry & Seidl (2003) to identify three phases within meetings (initiation, conduct and termination) to show how meetings can stand apart from but also be integrated with organizational activity. A more systems oriented approach is adopted by Jarzabkowski & Seidl (2008) to analyse how meetings impact to stabilize or destabilize the existing strategy of organisations. Their identification of a taxonomy of meeting practices and three different routes that topics could take through meetings was a significant contribution to understanding the internal workings of routine meetings. Their use of data from fifty one meeting instances enabled identification of a comprehensive range of meeting practices and how they combine to impact on the topics being addressed at individual meetings. They highlight how Hendry and Seidl's (2003) three phases of meetings establish meetings as distinct 'episodes' within the organizations routine activity but they didn't explore the concept of deliberate inter-connectivity between meetings within the same organization. With a central focus on strategic planning and particularly the iterative evolution of a strategic plan as a communicative process involving both talk and text, Spee & Jarzabkowski (2011) highlight the specific role that meetings played in enabling the contribution of talk to that process. The planning process in this instance is one common thread linking a large number of meetings within a single organization but the question of systematically and deliberately linking meetings remains to be addressed.

There appears to be a gap in the literature on studying and reporting on meetings as a collective organizational phenomenon and how they may be conceptually linked to each other within their systemic context. As Cooren et al (2007: 157) put it

What seems needed is a study that pays attention to the detail of interaction while accounting for transportation effects, that is, the ways by which a given discourse manages to travel from one point to another (emphasis in original).

Combining the development and implementation of organizational strategy as ‘large-scale projects and goals of organisations (Boden, 1997: 18), with a view of routine meetings as a prevalent means through which strategy is developed and implemented (Hodgkinson et al., 2006, Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008, Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011), provides a theoretical and functional grounding in the literature for adopting a systemic view of organizational meetings. In this context, Boden’s (Boden, 1997: 20) characterisation of meetings as ‘temporal frames’ and how ‘everyday talk’ orients organizational members to this temporal dimension can be blended with a process metaphysical perspective (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010) to provide a unique analytical lens through which discursive practices of such everyday talk may be analysed to provide insights to develop this theory perspective.

Viewing meetings as ‘situated sequences of activities and complexes of processes unfolding in time’ (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010: 9), a process metaphysics perspective provides a means of comparison and contrast to identify additional ways of conceptualizing meetings as a collectively occurring phenomenon in the overall service of the organization. Developing theory to support the SoM concept presented in this paper provides an opportunity to consider how features such as lamination (Boden, 1994), immutable mobiles (Cooren et al., 2007) and discursive practices may be integrated into a theoretical framework as communication or control mechanisms.

2.5 FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF SYSTEMS THEORY

This brief review of systems literature is intended to identify key features of systems that may be relevant to the purpose of this paper.

General systems theory (Meadows, 2009, von Bertalanffy, 1969, Luhmann, 2006) identifies the conceptual elements and characteristics of a (general) system. Such features are generally evident in a wide range of naturally occurring or man-made systems.

In his initial work on developing General Systems Theory, von Bertalanffy (von Bertalanffy, 1969: 28) identifies the following principles as underlying systems in general: (1) hierarchic order, (2) progressive differentiation and (3) feedback processes. Control and communication within a system is provided by feedback processes which are intended to cause adjustments to the elements within the hierarchic order, to ensure

achievement of the intended teleological outcomes, whether defined or emergent, by or for the system.

The concept of hierarchy within a system is not denoted by any sense of authoritarian structure (Checkland and Scholes, 1999: 19) but rather by one of layers of construction which make up the whole system. Meadows (2009: 85) explains this as a layering of sub-systems within each other, which may be considered conceptually similar to Boden's (1994) lamination. Such hierarchy evolves from the bottom up, with the upper layers serving the purposes of the lower layers - a counter-intuitive view of how hierarchy might be conventionally understood.

The concept of 'emergent' or 'emergence', is an important property of systems, indicating that the whole system produces outputs that individual components cannot produce alone. Emergent outputs then come to characterise or identify the system as a whole (Checkland and Scholes, 1999: 22, von Bertalanffy, 1969: 55, Meadows, 2009: 12).

In the context of Strategy-as-Practice, Mintzberg's (1994) views on the demise of strategic planning and the need for strategic thinking involving 'intuition and creativity', were aligned with his work on emergent strategy (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985, Mintzberg, 1987), emergent strategy went on to inform the changing views on strategy development processes from a previous emphasis on strategic planning (Mintzberg and Lampel, 1999). Vaara & Whittington (2012: 29) consider 'emergence in Strategy-making' to be strategy that evolves as an unintended consequence of organizational activity as opposed to being deliberately specified from particular strategizing activities. They draw specific attention to the need for further research into this aspect of S-as-P. This study has the potential to contribute to that S-as-P research agenda, in which meetings may be conceptualized as 'practices [that] form patterns of action that constitute emergent strategies' (Vaara and Whittington, 2012: 29).

It is important to establish that systems, in the context of this research, are not intended to be a literal representation of the situation being studied. Acknowledging the founding contribution of von Bertalanffy in developing General Systems Theory, Checkland and Scholes (1999: 22) point out that his use of the word system as an abstract concept to interpret events around us was simultaneously used to identify real world activities as exemplars of his conceptual intentions. This resulted in a level of confusion of what is

intended by systems thinking and particularly the word 'system'. Confusion is still frequently encountered with use of the word 'systems', immediately orienting the discussion towards IT, computers, information systems and so on, but seldom if ever towards the idea of systemic or 'wholeness'. von Bertalanffy viewed general systems theory as a 'broad view' representing 'scientific exploration of "wholes" and "wholeness" ' (von Bertalanffy, 1969: preface). Checkland and Scholes (1999: 22) describe this as 'holonic thinking' and use the phrase 'holon' to describe

... a whole having emergent properties, a layered structure and processes of communication and control which in principle enable it to survive in a changing environment.

Communication and control are identified as essential system components which enable a system to adapt and survive in a changing environment. Meadows (2009: 11) identifies just three essential components of a system: 'elements, interconnections and a function or purpose'. These three system components implicitly reflect the same characteristics advanced by Checkland and Scholes (1999). Meadows (2009: 25) places considerable emphasis on the different forms of 'feedback loops' which provide the communicative mechanisms by which control (or lack of control!) is exercised within a system. We refer to lack of control as some feedback mechanisms may lead to the destruction of the system. Understanding such system features enables impending self-destruction to be identified in sufficient time for preventative interventions to be made. Such mechanisms then contribute to the continuity and survival of the system.

In his conception of social systems, Luhmann (2006) places communication as the single defining operation that marks out a system from its surrounding environment. Communication is considered the exchange of information which is understood by a recipient (Luhmann, 2006: 49). Differentiating between communication within a system which is self-referential, versus communication with elements external to a system, Luhmann posits that the system is therefore the difference between itself (as a self-referential entity) and the environment in which it exists. The system may then be identified by finding the point(s) of difference with its surroundings.

As systems evolve, they may become more complex. What started as 'undifferentiated wholeness' may evolve to show a greater level of differentiation of the system

components, leading to 'progressive mechanization' (von Bertalanffy, 1969: 70). In preservation of its 'wholeness', this in turn will require the system to evolve means of control and co-ordination between its constituent parts in order to continue to pursue its intended collective purpose. In order to preserve dynamic equilibrium, systems develop feedback loops to enable communication between the system's components, to ensure alignment towards and delivery of the systems overall purpose (Meadows, 2009: 25). Systems may become self-organizing, as they adapt to survive or to meet an evolving purpose, which in turn produces heterogeneity and unpredictability (Meadows, 2009: 79).

These system features suggest the potential and perhaps necessity for certain types of systems to become autopoietic - to have the ability to regenerate from within their own resource or more specifically to 'produce or reproduce the elements of which they consist' (Muller, 1994: 43). As systems increasingly differentiate themselves from their environment, they increase the likelihood of adopting autopoietic characteristics to achieve and preserve that differentiation. The same principle applies within a system of increasing complexification. As sub-systems develop, the original systems of which they are a part may become elements in the (new) sub-system's environment. Sori (2009) illustrates how this concept applies in a business organization generally and to brand management in particular.

Speaking from an empirical and practitioner perspective Meadows (2009: 14) suggests 'It's easier to learn about a system's elements than about its interconnections'. To enhance visibility of interconnectivity, pictures and diagrams are prevalent in representing systems concepts. All parts of a picture can be seen at once, reflecting how a system should be viewed and how it operates (Meadows, 2009: 5). Langley (1999: 700) identifies 'visual mapping strategy' as one of seven approaches to developing theory from process data. It has the benefit of enabling different dimensions of the data context to be represented simultaneously and the effects of time, sequence and parallel processes to be relationally represented.

3 CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INDUSTRIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

Note: For clarity, where the first person is used in the context of interactions with KT-Inc, it refers to the first named author (Martin Duffy) as the researcher working in the field with KT-Inc.

Providing detail on the wider industry along with the specific organisation would enable identification of the organization due to the specific nature of the industry and the relatively limited number of organizations operating in that industry sector. To preserve the identity of the organization, detail is only provided about the organization, in a redacted form to preserve anonymity.

KT-Inc is an SME comprising approximately 70 employees. The company has been operating in the same industry sector for in excess of fifty years. The business comprises seven principle elements, each of which is briefly described below. This represents a diverse range of activities relative to the organisation size but they are necessary to support the industry sectors the company supplies.

Manufacturing & Operations - The core activity of the business is driven by the manufacture, sale and distribution of their diverse range of products within a single category of product type. The product type is ubiquitously used in society, which partially accounts for the multiple channels through which their products can be sold. This in turn informs the diversity of distinct structural and operational elements within such a relatively small organization.

Retail - The company has a portfolio of retail shops which sell their products directly to the public. The shops are owned and operated by the company and the company continues to expand this sales channel.

Re-seller distribution - In addition to their own retail outlets, KT-Inc has a large client portfolio of re-sellers, relative to the number of retail outlets they operate. These resellers carry the same product range as the retail stores and are a key retail distribution channel. Many of the resellers carry competitors' products within the broad product category manufactured by KT-Inc.

International - The company's retail and reseller distribution model has a limited international exposure. This distribution channel is being developed as part of an overall plan for organic expansion.

Industrial - Specialised sub-products are suitable for application in an industrial context and on an industrial scale. The company has a dedicated unit to service and exploit opportunities for development and expansion in this area. It covers both domestic and international sales and provides potential for significant growth in the future, which is under active consideration.

Research & Development - KT-Inc maintains a small R&D unit which is an integral part of manufacturing and operations. They are closely involved in overseeing quality control and the development of new and innovative products. This helps to maintain a relatively small company as a significant presence in large, competitive retail and industrial sectors.

Administration - The administration of each of the units described above is carried out from one central location. Administration staff provide services across the different business sub-units.

As with many businesses, KT-Inc was significantly affected by the adverse economic climate in Ireland between 2008 and 2012. In response to the challenging trading conditions, significant change was instituted from June 2011, approximately four months after data recording for this study commenced. These changes had a significant impact on the company's internal structure, how it services its customers and how it plans to develop in the future. Changes also occurred in key personnel and the leadership and managerial roles they fulfil at board and major business unit levels.

Two key features are note worthy within the company and both significantly inform the theory development in this study: (1) the organization was undergoing significant change and (2) strategizing is ever present.

The company uses a three year strategic planning horizon with an annual renewal of their strategic plan. The change agenda for the company was principally driven by demands from the adverse economic climate. It responded by restructuring for survival in the short term and positioning itself for expansion when the economic climate improves in the longer term.

3.2 DATA SOURCE AND ACCESS

The full empirical data for this study comprises 160+ hours of recorded meeting proceedings. It was electronically recorded at 61 individual meetings, from 16 distinct groups within the participating organization, spanning a 16 month period. The data reflects both the depth and breadth of access afforded in the organization and overcame what Langley (2007) considers the ‘daunting task’ of acquiring information from management decision makers.

Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) provide a close correlation to the type of data available in this study, particularly in respect of the electronic recording of meeting proceedings. They differ in their accumulation of additional ‘text’ and ‘talk’ data in the form of strategic planning documents, interviews and notes of informal discussions to inform the particular focus and research questions in their study.

3.3 PROXIMITY ISSUES.

Three risks associated with proximity are identified by Johnson et al. (2007: 67) - contamination, ‘going native’ and political alignment.

Contamination is the risk we are most acutely aware of. After agreement to take part in the research, and as I am a practicing consultant in strategic management, I offered a number of consulting days to the company to assist them as they considered appropriate. This was agreed on the basis that I would provide assistance if requested and if I felt competent to assist. Otherwise, it was agreed that I would simply attend their meetings with a view to recording the proceedings. To date, assistance has been requested in four different ways: invitations to contribute at meetings, informal individual or group meetings 'off the record', formalised workshop training/ facilitation and coaching. Each of these pose personal challenges in the three risk categories identified by Johnson et al. (2007). Contamination is of particular concern when contributing at meetings or conducting workshops. This is mitigated by avoiding any tendency to ‘follow-up’ on implementation of any ideas introduced unless expressly asked. ‘Going native’ and political alignment pose potential risks through ‘off the record’ meetings and coaching type interactions. Adoption of Van de Ven's (2007) engaged scholarship approach would make explicit the researchers inputs and so both mitigate and make explicit any

contamination effects to the participants and in subsequent research output. The involvement in this research of an academic supervisor, Brendan, who is not so engaged with the organization also helps to identify and mitigate potential contamination issue.

3.4 DATA RECORDING.

The meetings in KT-Inc were recorded on a Sony ICD-SX700 digital recorder. I normally took a seated position to one side in the meetings to avoid being in any way obtrusive. Some groups invited me to sit ‘around the table’ with them. Personal notes were also written by hand during the meetings. Basic details about the topic under discussion, along with an associated time mark, were recorded to aid later cataloguing. Personal notes and comments from an analytical perspective were also recorded, where a relationship to events in other meetings could be recalled or where personal insights came to mind during the meetings. On some occasions, I was asked to make inputs to the meetings from a consulting perspective. These requests normally related to topics on which the participants thought I could make a useful contribution, given my consulting background. This is a noted phenomenon in longitudinal research projects (Tuckermann and Rüegg-Stürm, 2011: 231). Following meetings, audio recordings and personal notes were loaded into Transana for later coding and analysis.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Meetings have been explored in the literature using a range of different methodologies such as: Ethnography (Samra-Fredericks, 2000a, Samra-Fredericks, 2000b, Schwartz, 2004), Conversation Analysis (Cooren, 2004, Huisman, 2001, Nielsen, 2009, Samra-Fredericks, 2003), Critical Discourse Analysis (Wodak et al., 2011) and Discourse Analysis (Aritz and Walker, 2010, Duffy, 2010, Volkema and Niederman, 1996). These previous studies show how participants use multiple forms of discourse to interact in their meetings.

Informed by the forgoing, Discourse Analysis (DA) (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, Potter and Wetherell, 1987, Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) was used initially to analyse a sample of the empirical data in this study.

The initial questions guiding preliminary data analysis were:

- 1: How could the strategic discourses within and between meetings support conceptualizing them as a 'system of meetings'?
- 2: Could a useful theory contribution be developed from this conceptualization?

In general the meetings for each group in the organisation were planned and conducted as singular events or 'strategic episodes' (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008). They were rarely if ever organised or implemented with other groups' meetings in mind. Where other group meetings were considered, it was generally in the context of accommodating the attendance of the same individual(s) at two or more meetings.

In order to develop theory from the available data a phased and blended approach of methodologies is being considered. The theory development process is considered in four phases: 1. Conceptualising the possibilities. 2. Grounding theory from the full corpus of data. 3. Refining theory elements through discourse analysis of relevant data fragments. 4. Preparation and presentation of theory with a view to contributing to organization literature as well as informing both a consultant and client perspective.

4 AN INITIAL REPRESENTATION OF THE DATA CONTEXT

To provide initial 'juxtaposed' perspectives (Van de Ven, 2007: 21) at a very broad level, a processual view and a systems view of the meetings under study are initially adopted. Both of these perspectives take a similar philosophical view. Process metaphysics offers a view on how things around us **should be** perceived, while systems thinking provides a more detailed ontology for ways in which they **can be** perceived. It may be argued that the former provides a philosophy for interpretation of our world while the latter offers a more tangible way to interpret and represent the world around us. The concept of interconnectivity of events is the most striking overlap between the two modes of thinking. The two greatest differences appear to be: (1) the emphasis on purpose which defines a system and its boundary, while specific purpose does not seem to be explicit in the process view, and (2) the temporal imperative in process thinking that is not explicitly called for in system's thinking.

This section presents picture representations of the data from a process perspective and a systems perspective. The two views were adopted to stimulate associative and comparative thinking, with a view to developing fresh insights from the data and also to consider how they may be mutually complimentary.

4.1 A PROCESS REPRESENTATION

Visualizing the proposition that ‘the Heraclitian individual cannot step into the same river twice’ (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010: 3) prompted the first conceptual representation of the data context, as presented in Figure 1. Notwithstanding Rescher's (1996: 52) contention that ‘Heraclitus was only half right’, when he says it is the same **water** that cannot be stepped into twice rather than the same river, the organization is presented as a ‘river of discourse’, reflective of the multiple discourses taking place at any given time. A similar metaphor of a river basin (as opposed to a river) was used by Pettigrew (1992), to capture and reflect the diversity of influences from the environment in which the topic of interest is located and to achieve ‘holistic explanation’, which Pettigrew characterizes as the ultimate in processual analysis.

Every discourse, whether between individuals or groups is unique in time, space and participants and cannot be revisited. Process ontology views every individual as an evolving product of every experiential encounter, and so their immersion in any part of the organization’s river of discourse is an unrepeatable experience. Both the organizational discourse and the individual will have changed as a result of previous immersions. In this context, meetings and their constitutive discourses can be viewed as discursive elements of the organization that run in parallel with the main stream of organizational discourse. The river analogy was also prompted by the physics (as opposed to metaphysics) of real rivers. The flows in a river arising from tributaries, branches, bends, deltas, eddy currents etc provide metaphors through which to view the overall data, interrogate it for insights on the dynamics taking place and interpret the data to develop a theory to reflect what is taking place, explaining how participants systematize and create connectivity throughout their meetings. It also provides a means of conceptualizing and projecting how particular occurrences within meetings’ discourses may contribute or lead to unfolding events in the future.

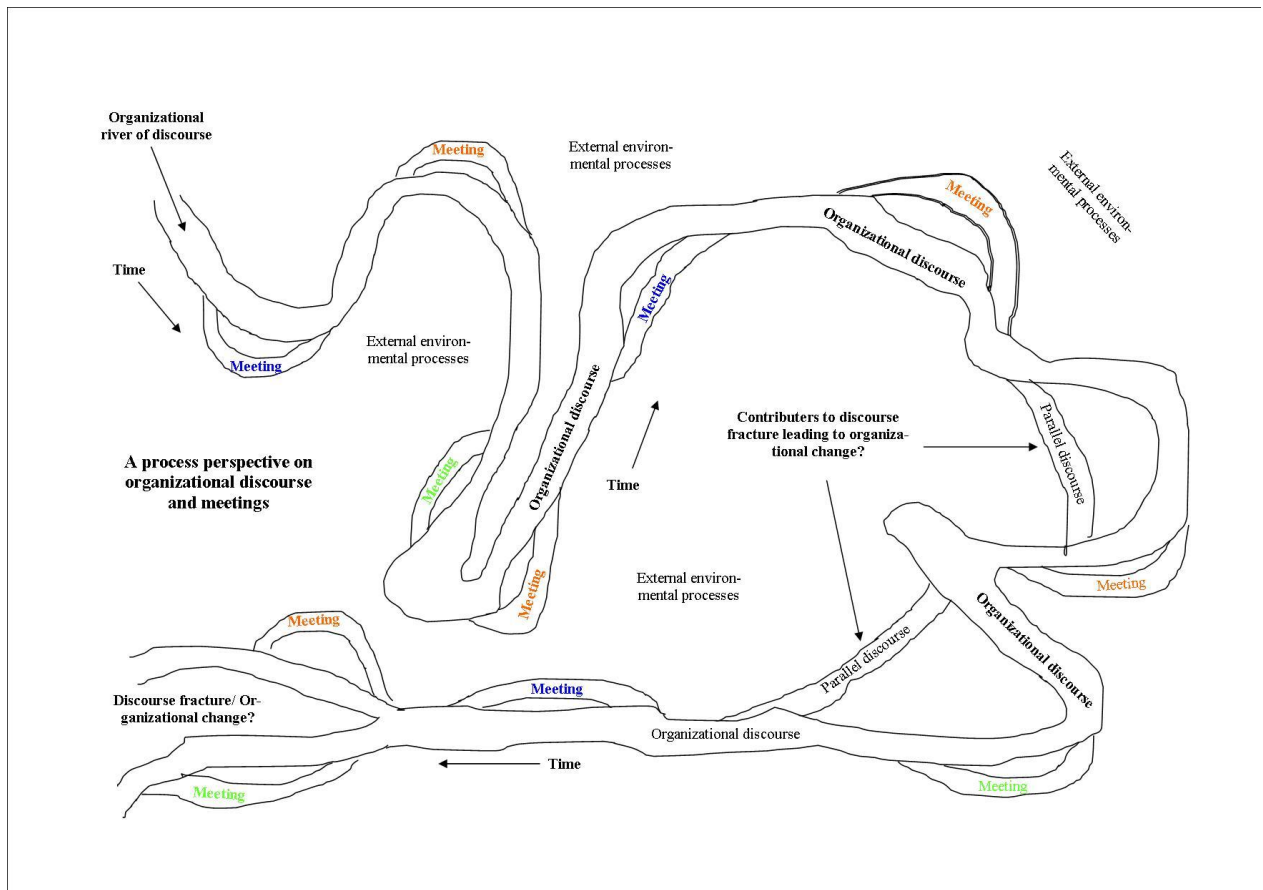


Figure 1 – An organizational river of discourse

Notes on Figure 1

- Time is made explicit in the representation by the direction of flow in the river.
- Meetings occur as deliberately scheduled parallel discourse with the main flow of the organizational discourse.
- The external environment is ever present to influence the direction of flow in the organizational discourse, represented by the meandering direction.
- Eddy currents or disturbed discourse might be expected at the points at which meetings leave and join the main flow of the river.
- Parallel discourse could represent completely separate discourses taking place between different groups, each unknown to the other.
- Such parallel discourses could ultimately lead to discourse fracture – representing organizational change or more serious organizational splits.

4.2 A SYSTEM REPRESENTATION

A number of diagrams are provided to illustrate how the available meeting data may be initially visualised from different system perspectives. Figure 2 provides a sequential view of when meetings took place and a hierarchic view based on the quantum of hours of recorded material per group. Alternative criteria for determining hierarchy could be used depending on the purpose of the representation. This reflects the systems principle that a system is a representation of reality from a stated perspective – if you specify a different perspective (worldview or Weltanschauung) then how the system is represented may change. The range of diagrams in this section reflects different perspectives on the prospective systems being studied.

Meeting / Group				Dates																											
				2011																											
		Number of meetings	Total time recorded	15-Feb	7-Apr	20-Apr	21-Apr	29-Apr	6-May	10-May	20-May	27-May	31-May	10-Jun	13-Jun	15-Jun	16-Jun	17-Jun	20-Jun	22-Jun	24-Jun	24-Jul	25-Jul	29-Jul	5-Aug	26-Aug	30-Aug	2-Sep	20-Sep		
1	Board	8	38:30:00	2:00:00						5:30:00												5:55:00							5:55:00		
2	Resellers & Retail team	8	34:45:00				3:10:00							4:10:00										2:25:00							
3	Exports team	5	29:35:00			3:25:00										4:25:00															
4	Operations team	22	21:50:00				0:50:00	1:10:00		1:15:00	1:20:00		0:45:00				0:25:00				0:20:00	1:25:00		0:25:00	0:45:00	1:30:00		1:10:00			
5	Marketing forum	2	7:20:00													3:40:00															
6	Management Team	6	5:21:00									0:26:00															1:05:00				
7	Meetings with individual managers	3	4:15:00	1:50:00																											
8	Strategy workshop (Senior managers)	1	4:05:00																												
9	Officers group (Exec Directors - GM/ Fin/ Mktng/ Ops)	1	2:00:00																		2:00:00										
10	Resellers special initiative	1	2:00:00													2:00:00															
11	Industrial Products team	1	0:55:00																			0:55:00									
12	Special Project Group	1	0:55:00											0:55:00																	
13	General staff briefing	1	0:30:00				0:30:00																								
14	Resellers special training meeting	1	0:30:00																												
Total		61	152:31:00																												

Figure 2(a)

Meeting / Group		22-Sep	30-Sep	14-Oct	21-Oct	24-Oct	4-Nov	15-Nov	30-Nov	2-Dec	8-Dec	9-Dec	6-Jan	13-Jan	17-Jan	3-Feb	6-Feb	8-Feb	17-Feb	21-Feb	22-Feb	20-Mar	28-Mar	29-Mar	24-Apr	8-May	15-May
1	Board							5:30.00							2:20.00						5:35.00				5:45.00		
2	Resellers & Retail team					6:15.00			6:10.00								4:50.00					4:45.00				3:00.00	
3	Exports team										5:20.00								4:35.00							11:50.00	
4	Meeting on Operations team		1:15.00	0:45.00	1:15.00		0:55.00			0:55.00	0:50.00	1:25.00	1:10.00			0:40.00			1:20.00								
5	Marketing forum	3:40.00																									
6	Management Team	0:55.00						0:55.00												1:00.00			1:00.00				
7	Meetings with individual managers																							1:00.00		1:25.00	
8	Strategy workshop (Senior managers)																								4:05.00		
9	Officers group (Exec Directors - GM/ Fin/ Mktng/ Ops)																										
10	Resellers special initiative																										
11	Industrial Products team																										
12	Special Project Group																										
13	General staff briefing																										
14	Resellers special training meeting								0:30.00																		
	Total																										

Figure 2(b)

Notes on Figure 2

- Meeting durations are shown in hours and minutes.
- Dates indicate the primary temporal relationship between meetings.
- Two diagrams are used due to space. The lower diagram (b) sequentially follows the upper (a)

Figure 3 presents the same meeting frequency data but from an organizational sub-group perspective, representing relational potential between sub-groups.

Groups and Meeting Dates

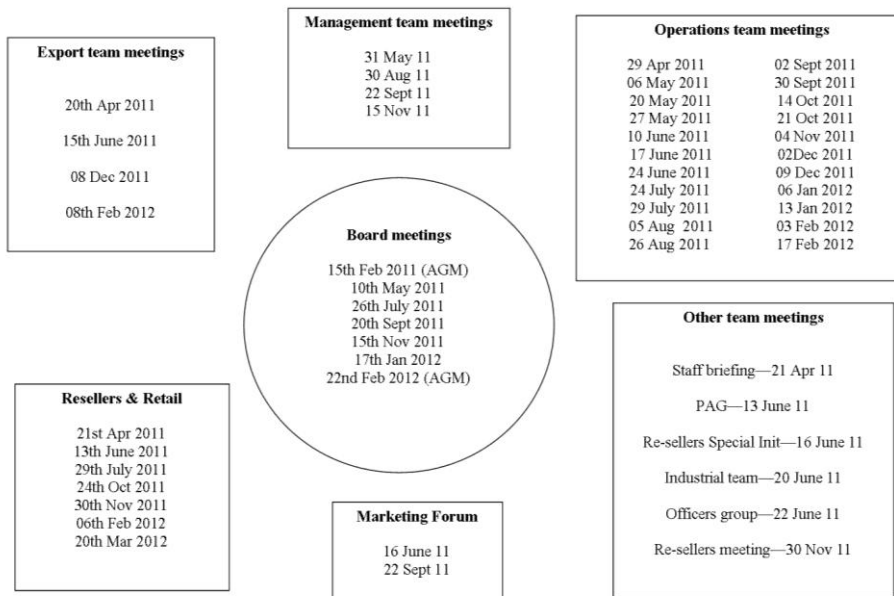


Figure 3

Figure 4 shows the meetings from the perspective of participants taking part in the meetings of different sub-groups within the company. The connecting arrows indicate the individual participants who overlap different groups and highlights one of the connections between the meetings of different groups.

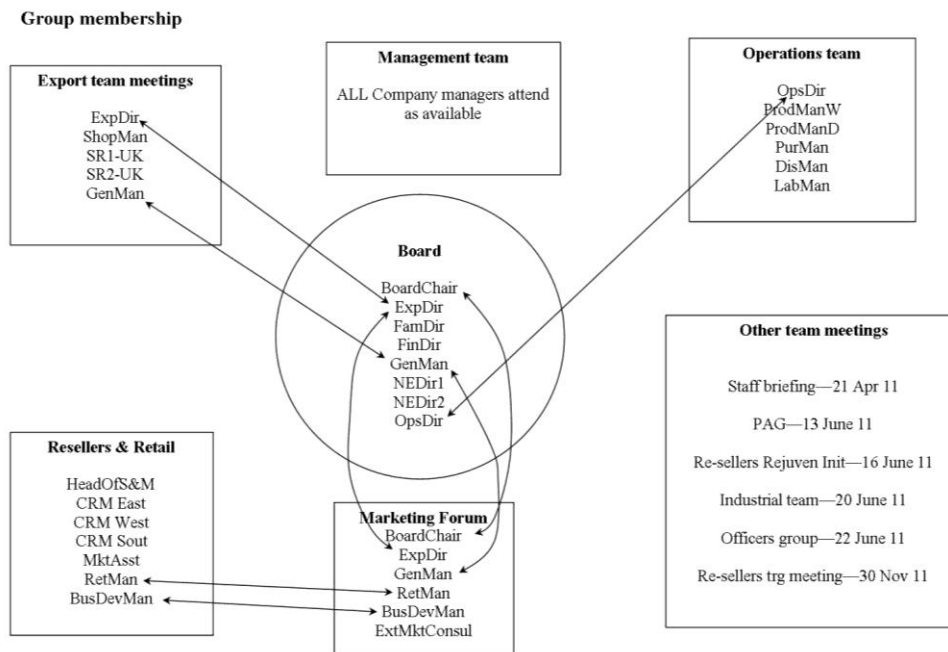


Figure 4

Notes on Figure 4

- NEDir 1 in the Board group assumed BoardChair role approximately five months into data recording.
- GenMan was the BoardChair until NEDir 1 assumed the chair role.
- BusDevMan role was made redundant nine months into data recording.
- MktDir role existed up to seven months into recording.
- ExpDir new role was created when MktDir and BusDevMan roles ceased.
- HeadofS&M role replaced BusDevMan role and also assumed MktDir roles.
- Marketing Forum was discontinued when HeadofS&M was recruited.

Figure 5 illustrates the most recent situation within the data, indicating how particular individuals interact across different groups. In the case of KT-Inc, it is note worthy that the number is relatively small.

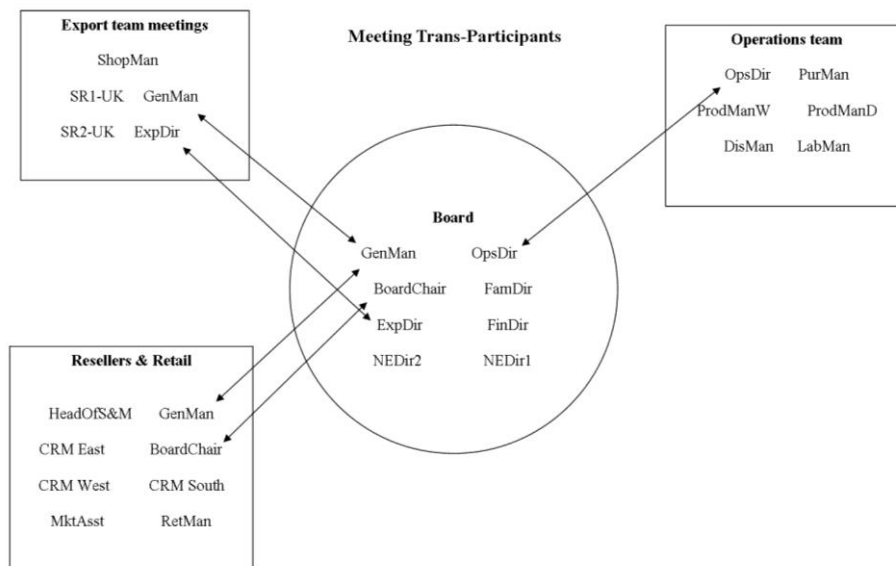


Figure 5

4.3 A MEETING SYSTEM MAP

System boundaries are intellectual constructs superimposed on data to aid interpretation. Meadows (2009: 95) characterises them as ‘artificial, mental-model boundaries’ with the boundary to be adopted determined by the nature of analysis taking place. When viewed from a systems perspective, the data can be represented as nested layers of interconnected elements. In this view in Figure 6, boundaries are placed around groups of elements comprising (sub-)systems demarcated by boundaries defining the meetings of different sub-groups in KT-Inc. This aids identification of how their meetings may be interconnected. For illustration purposes, if the focus of analysis was strategizing or organizational change, the systems, elements and associated boundaries could be drawn completely differently, with meetings appearing as some of the individual elements in a strategizing system, but not necessarily the only elements. For example, drafts of strategic plans, strategy workshops, market research etc could all be identified as system elements in a systems map representing strategizing.

Systems thinking is therefore used to represent the available data from a particular perspective with a view to generating theoretical insights, rather than as literal representation of physical systems which exist in the organization. The overall perspective in this case is to view the data as a system of meetings. It should also be noted that each (sub-)system is individually named.

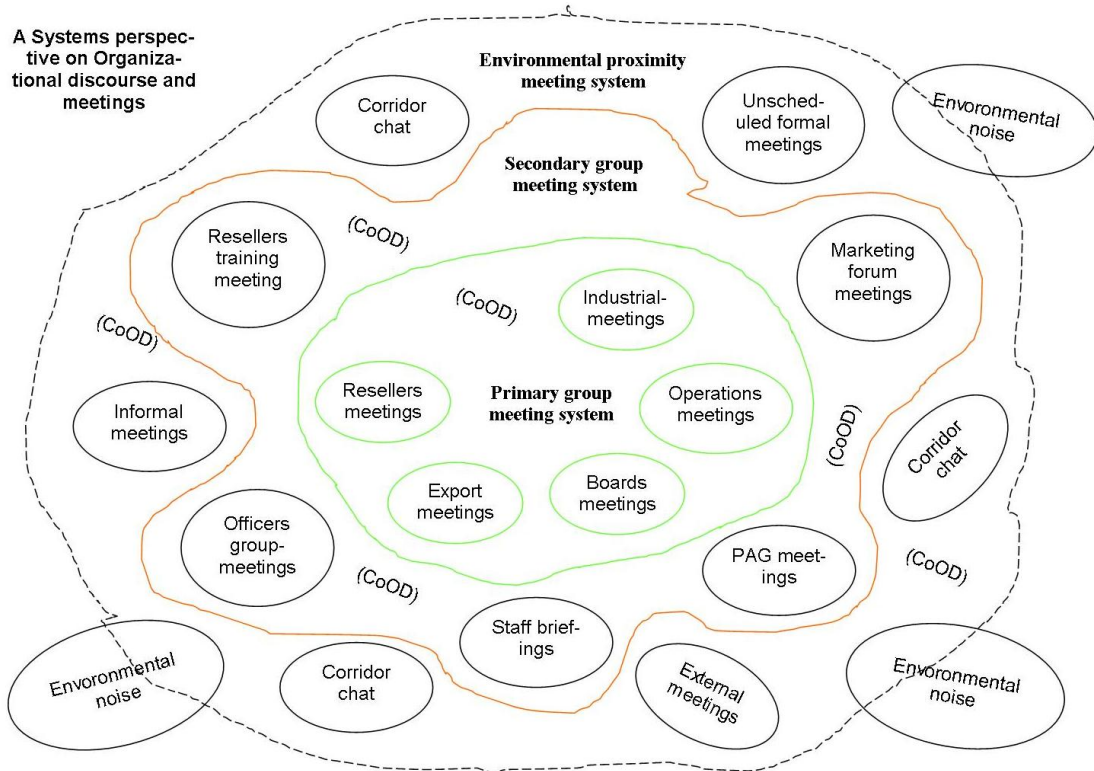


Figure 6

Notes on Figure 6

- The five elements in the Primary group meeting system could each be considered a system of meetings in their own right. This is not shown for space reasons. See Figure 3 for how each might be viewed as a (sub) system.
- The Primary group meeting system is nested within the Secondary group system to illustrate that it is a sub-system of the secondary group.
- CoOD refers to ‘Cacophony of Organizational Discourse’ – to represent the wide range of discourse in meetings and throughout the organization that can impinge on all meetings and meeting sub-systems. It is to the organization, what water is to myriad parts of a river eco-system.
- The boundaries of the Primary and Secondary sub-systems are drawn to indicate what are considered to be homogenous meeting entities within each sub-system.
- The Environmental proximity system represents the porous boundary between the organization’s general discourse and the outside environment.
- Environmental noise is considered discourses from outside that could be disruptive of the organisations discourses – positively or negatively.
- The environment (outside the dotted line boundary) is considered those elements over which the organization does not exercise control but which may exert influence on the organization (as a system).

4.4 VISUALISING THE RESEARCH QUESTION IN THIS PAPER

Figures 2, 3 and 6 provide one representation of how meetings were organised and took place within in KT-Inc. Given how their meetings have just been presented, we might consider as a thought exercise, the management team reflecting on the use of their resources over the previous eighteen months. They might reasonably ask an external consultant for assistance to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of (all) meetings in KT-Inc. This would prompt the obvious challenge for the consultant to propose changes to their existing arrangements and it would raise the equally obvious question for the consultant to identify theory foundations to guide his thinking and inform any consequent decisions made by the management team. Continuing with the use of diagramming in systems terms, one simplified conception of the relationship between theory, consultant and client in this context is shown in Figure 7.

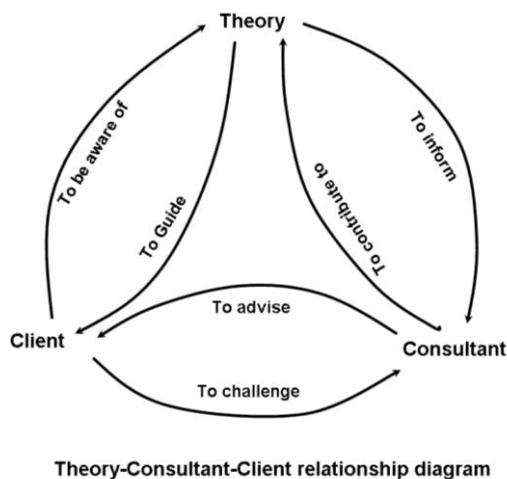


Figure 7

This leaves open the simple question: If the client wanted to take a more integrated approach to managing their meetings in pursuit of their overall organizational activities, what theoretical guidance could the consultant draw on to inform the advice he might give? This research aims to contribute to that theoretical material.

5 THE THEORETICAL PROPOSITION

The theoretical proposition in this paper makes two initial assertions:

- Organizational meetings can be conceptualized as a system of meetings, generating an emergent output that is more than the sum of their individual contributions.
- It is feasible to develop a theoretical basis for such a system of meetings, with the potential to gain emergent benefits from a new way for organizations to manage and use their meetings.

In the context of Langley's (1999) seven strategies for developing theory this paper reflects aspects of visual mapping, grounded theory and narrative strategy without committing to any single approach at this early stage. The visualisation of the data just presented aids the development of initial theoretical explanations from systems and process perspectives.

The theory proposition in this paper is founded on:

1. An apparent gap in the literature on meetings, in that inter-connectivity between meetings does not appear to have been studied or reported on as a phenomenon in its own right. Some studies have identified common features or characteristics present in different meetings (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008) while others have tracked the same topic or activity across meetings in the same organization (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). But few if any have made meetings collectively the specific subject of their study.
2. Personal experience and observation that organizations seem to pay little attention to how their meetings may be interconnected or how deliberately connecting them may offer ways to improve their efficiency or effectiveness.
3. An 'uncodifiable creative leap, however small' (Langley, 1999) and 'intuitions' and 'speculative ideas and deductions' (Weick, 1989: 518), to develop a view of meetings as a systemic resource within organizations. This is perhaps best illustrated by a practical idea and question – if one senior administrator in an organization was assigned responsibility for coordinating the agendas and minutes of (clusters of) meetings in an organization, would it likely improve the effectiveness and efficiency of meetings in contributing to the overall aims of the

organisations. Our intuitive, speculative and deductive answer is yes. However, there appears to be an absence of focal theory to explain whether this might be true or not. This simple question represents the primary impetus to develop a theoretical foundation for a SoM.

The trend in current literature on meetings, combined with personal consulting experience with management teams, suggest that meetings are not viewed or considered as a 'collective'. The theoretical proposition of this paper is that if conceptualised as a SoM, they may be collectively capable of delivering emergent properties, providing greater contribution than the sum of the contributions of individual meetings, and achieving an identifiable purpose attributable to the overall system.

The concept of 'emergent' was introduced by von Bertalanffy (1969: 55) to indicate how the characteristics of the overall complex of individual parts in a system may be different in nature to those of any of the individual parts. Hence detailed study of individual parts in isolation of the others will not necessarily provide insight into the 'emergent' characteristics of the 'whole'. Adopting a systems perspective, Tsoukas (1996) identified 'the collective mind' as 'an emergent joint accomplishment', in the context of conceptualizing organizations as 'distributed knowledge systems'. He considers that the emergent property comes into being 'as individual contributions become more heedfully interrelated in time'. This temporal dimension provides an essential process consideration which is not always explicit within systems thinking. Boden (1997: 8) proposes 'temporal frames' to account for how temporally ordered activities provide a means for organizational members to contribute to constructing their organization through their talk within those frames. This conceptual process mechanism could be adopted to anchor temporality within a SoM.

In the context of this study, 'emergent property' is considered 'the ability, in principle, to pursue the purpose of the whole' (Checkland and Scholes, 1999: 24). The concept of 'purpose of the whole' is particularly important in systems thinking. It suggests a pre-meditated intent for why a system should exist and may be concretised if the intention is to produce a tangible output. Meadows (2009: 11) sees purpose as one of three essential components of any system. At a general level, it may be suggested that an organization's meetings simply serve the overall purpose of the organization. Such a generally inferred

purpose may then be fulfilled by the organization's meetings without being specifically articulated or even being explicitly present in peoples' minds when they attend meetings. However, if the meetings were re-conceptualised more directly as a system with a particular purpose, they may generate emergent properties that no individual meeting could produce, that are more specific in nature and that provide greater benefit of the organization.

5.1 APPARENT PURPOSE OF MEETINGS IN KT-INC.

From background discussions with managers in KT-Inc, changes at board level were initially instrumental in bringing about a change in strategic focus within the company. These changes were already being discussed when data collection commenced for this study. As the implications of this change in strategic direction became apparent, further changes were made to the organization structure and new managers were recruited to plan and implement the new strategy. These combined changes in strategic perspective, strategy and structure are an embedded part of the discourse of the majority of meetings recorded.

KT-Inc's meetings appear to be used in the service of these two principle organizational pursuits: strategizing and organizational change. Strategizing (Jarzabkowski, 2008: 1392) is evidenced through the evolving process of developing strategy, preparing implementation plans and rolling out those plans. This was entwined with changes in personnel, organizational structures and organizational processes to support and enable the organization's strategizing. It is not possible to distinguish where one of these activities begins and the other ends. They appear to exist in a causality loop but both are strongly in evidence throughout the meeting discourses.

General system requirements applied in the case of the data from KT-Inc and the SoM as the focus of this research, may be contextualised and summarised as follows:

- A system purpose - To support organizational strategizing and associated organizational change.
- System elements
 - Individual meetings
 - Sub-groups' meetings as sub-systems

- Interconnections between elements
 - Physical – participants, locations, equipment, documents etc
 - Discursive – connections created through the talk of participants

5.2 EXISTING AND NEW THEORETICAL CONCEPTS.

Initially, four theoretical concepts are considered in this paper to account for inter-connectivity between meetings, which is a fundamental part of any system. Two of these are drawn from existing literature and two from the data. Additional concepts derived from the data are then introduced with potential for further development as the research progresses.

The concept of ‘immutable mobiles’ (Cooren et al., 2008) is used to show how elements of strategy are deliberately ported between meetings to communicate the intended strategy and also to progress the associated change agenda. The General Manager provides one example of using a presentational format of KT-Inc’s strategic plan to brief managers in a number of sub groups meetings. His presentations to the Resellers & Retail team (06th Feb 12), Export team (08th Feb 12), Managers team (21st Feb 12) and Board (22nd Feb 12) were used to identify how the strategic plan might constitute an immutable mobile. It is worth noting that he refers to the presentational version and a more detailed version of the plan at each meeting, prompting the question ‘which is the immutable mobile?’

The analysis shows that the strength of an ‘immutable mobile’ may therefore be dependent on a combination of the person bearing the message, the message itself and the audience receiving the message. This raises the possibility that there may be degrees of both mobility and immutability, which could have a bearing on the nature of inter-connectivity they could provide in a SoM. Additional considerations on immutable mobiles are raised in the next section.

Meetings could also be characterized as ‘temporal frames’ (Boden, 1997). Describing temporal frames as ‘an overarching framework of accountability’, they provide a way of viewing meetings as a mechanism of control within the organization. Conceptually, the nature of individual meetings and the groups within which they take place, may define them as different types of temporal frames, exercising different levels of control, within

which organization members contribute to the evolving organization and its strategy or change agendas. Adapting this to the SoM concept may enable development of a purpose for a SoM as well as conceptualising how control could operate within such a system.

In this context, temporal frames also relate to Bodens's (1994) other well known concept of 'lamination', through the sequential nature of meetings and how they may generate 'laminates' over time that combine to produce a laminated output that no individual meeting would be capable of producing alone.

Two new concepts are developed from the data to partially account for inter-connectivity, communication and control.

Trans-participants. The first concept is called 'trans-participants' in meetings. In simple terms meeting participants could be viewed as those people physically present. 'Trans-participants' reflects a category of such participants who attend the meetings of more than one group. They act as a communicative bridge between the meetings of different groups. Where discrete groups have their own periodic meetings, trans-participants represent a means by which cross pollination of groups and their activities takes place. It is a means of communication as well as a potential means of control, communicated across meetings, within the organization as a whole. The potential roles of trans-participants could be expanded and defined in significantly more detail when considered in the context of immutable mobiles as well as temporal frames, leading to degrees of trans-participants based on the number of different groups' meetings they attend and the level of influence they exert. Figure 4 previously indicated four managers in KT-Inc who might be considered trans-participants, based on the group meetings they attend. Factors such as the number of meetings attended, relative influence at meetings, topics they raise or how other participants react to them, could all provide a basis for identifying levels or degrees of trans-participants. This would require a considerably more detailed analysis of the full primary data set. Thinking reflexively, it is worth noting that I was a temporary trans-participant for the duration of my data collection. Analysis of how participants showed awareness of or reacted to my presence may yield further properties of the trans-participant concept. This could also provide insights on how extra-organizational parties may serve as trans-participants in an organization's SoM.

Absent-participants. The second concept derived from the data is that of ‘absent participants’, where the presence of absentees can be discursively constructed and manifested within meetings. This phenomenon is observed in the way meeting participants invoke the views, opinions or pronouncements of people who are **not** physically present. It is a discursive construction by meeting participants and appears to be used to influence the direction of a discussion, to reinforce an individual’s contribution or to provide information that should be taken into account in the current discussion due to its cited origins. It may also be used as a crutch by participants to reinforce their own views or standing within meetings. Its relative power lies in the way in which the invoker characterises the ‘absent participants’ views, the specific issues on which the absent participant is referenced or the individual who is citing an ‘absent participant’. This concept is derived from analysis of meeting notes at this stage and can be developed to a greater level of detail when the electronically recorded data is fully coded and analysed. Further analysis could explore the role of the invoker in establishing and using ‘the presence of absentees’ or it may be a means for present participants to exercise personal control within meetings. It is noted that one of the trans-participants uses this approach quite frequently but more detailed analysis is required to understand the possible reasons for that and if it is a prevalent feature of any other managers’ interactions. It is important to note at this stage that the trans-participant concept is a behavioural feature initiated and executed by participants at meetings. An additional new concept, control by proxy explained in the next section, is initiated by someone not at a meeting but executed by someone who is attending. Whatever the emerging possibilities, trans-participants may be a means through which control could be exercised within a system of meetings, with a view to achieving a defined purpose, both of which are key theoretical requirements of general systems (von Bertalanffy, 1969: 42, Meadows, 2009: 25, Checkland and Scholes, 1999: 19).

5.3 EXPANDING THEORY CONCEPTS FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION.

Additional concepts from the literature or derived from the data have the potential to be adapted to contribute to an overall theory on a SoM. Based on preliminary analysis to date, some of the possibilities are very briefly outlined below.

Lamination (Boden, 1994) - this concept suggests that micro processes or events may combine one on top of the other (laminated) to contribute to a more macro interpretation of unfolding events. This could become evident within meetings or could be explicitly adopted within a theory to account for how individual meetings could be constituent elements in a SoM, contributing to the overall system's purpose. As referred to earlier, lamination within a SoM may also provide a way to explain how contributions from individual meetings occurring sequentially as 'temporal frames', could contribute to an emergent outcome from the system. In addition, if sub-elements of individual meetings were considered as temporal frames, in which meeting participants used their talk to contribute to the same aspect of meetings over a period of time, lamination could provide a conceptual tool to enable such temporally spaced contributions to be drawn into a coherent pattern of emergent contribution within a SoM. An example could be the use of standing items on the agenda of a number of meetings.

Immutable mobiles (Cooren et al., 2008) - The available data may provide examples of how either the mobility or immutability of aspects of meetings could be used to contribute to a specific set of meeting elements that could become communication or control devices across a SoM. Meeting elements evident in the data from KT-Inc such as agenda format and content, meeting ground rules, meeting review mechanism, organization strategic plan, technical or financial briefings or periodic events (annual audit, seasonal product demand, calendar year end etc) all may contribute individually or collectively to identifying immutable mobiles which could be adopted across a SoM. Some of these have the potential to be developed as discrete conceptual devices in their own right, explicitly for use as features in a SoM theory.

Coupling (Besio and Pronzini, 2010) - this describes common structures or elements which may be used across different systems and may vary in degree (such as loose or tight). The concept may be valuable to build a theory contribution on how sub-systems of meetings may operate within wider systems of meetings. An example might be where the

meetings of individual departments comprise a sub-system of meetings. The sub-system may then be coupled to other departments' or groups' meeting sub-systems. Coupling could also arise between the meetings within any individual group (sub-system).

Clustered artefacts (derived from the data) - KT-Inc has a written policy on conducting meetings which is posted in a number of meeting rooms on their premises. Not surprising is the requirement for each meeting to have an agenda. Behavioural guidelines are also provided for meeting conveners and the duties of meeting chairs and participants are set down. Unusually, the policy also provides for a review to take place at the end of each meeting but staff indicated that this did not take place at their meetings. Some time after data collection started, the Board sought my views on how they might improve their meetings. Such requests are a reported phenomenon in longitudinal research relationships between participants and researchers (Tuckermann and Rüegg-Stürm, 2011: 231). Following my advice, KT-Inc's board initially adopted a specific format for their meeting agendas and also a structured approach for carrying out their meeting reviews. At the general manager's request, all managers were briefed on these two new 'artefacts' and they were adopted by different groups in their meetings. Previous research on such artefacts focused on their use in individual meetings (Volkema and Niederman, 1996). Charting the variations in use and degree of adoption of these specific meeting artefacts across the meetings of different groups may provide insights for how they could contribute to a SoM theory.

Temporal markers (derived from the data) - mentioned previously under immutable mobiles, periodic events such as annual audit, seasonal product demand or calendar year end among others, could form part of a temporal drum beat, providing time-related controlling influence within a SoM. Including such markers in a SoM theory could perhaps guide the optimum timing and co-ordination of meetings to aid communication, control and achievement of purpose. A temporal drum beat may itself become a theoretical construct to account for a number of temporal markers in the context of a SoM.

Control by proxy (derived from the data). Unlike the previous concept of absent participants, which may be used by meeting participants to exert influence at meetings, individuals who are **not** present at meetings may also seek to exert their influence or control. They may deliberately or subliminally influence others to carry their message in

meetings which they do not attend. A potential example from the data relates to a single page presented by the incoming BoardChair at his inaugural meeting on the 26th July 2011. Having documented and distributed his views on team commitments/ behaviours, tracking the content through meetings may indicate if it constituted an immutable mobile or was the initiation of control by proxy. Analysis of participants' discourse will illuminate how either (or perhaps both) concept applies and by extension could be used to inform a future SoM theory.

This concept of control by proxy is related to the previous concept of absent participants but the essential difference is the individual invoking and likely to benefit from the practice – the absentee in the case of control by proxy and the individual present in the case of absent participants. Exercising control or influence will be the common outcome, but achieved by two different individuals in the organizational setting.

Influence of absence (derived from the data) - extending the concept of absent participants previously raised, it may be insightful to explore the implications of absence of other material from one meeting where it may have been available at another. Taking the idea of 'data-information-knowledge' (Ruggles, 1998: 84) as a continuum for making sense of what people experience in a business context, data presented at one meeting may have limited meaning due to the limited capacity of participants to meaningfully interpret the data. The same data presented at another meeting may be 'converted' into 'useful information' through the input of a participant who can make sense of the data. This information could be shared at a third meeting at which an individual not present at either of the first two may be able to contribute historical perspective from the organization or broader perspective from outside the organization, which could render it as 'actionable knowledge' (Weick et al., 2005: 415). An example from the data relates to demographic data presented to a Board meeting on the 29th March 2012. This becomes information as Board members interpret, add their views and make sense of the data. It is converted to knowledge by the sales team, when subsequently presented to them at their meeting on the 15th May 2012 and they can take sales directed action based on the original data/information. Developing this concept of 'the influence of absence' could also contribute to a SoM theory.

6 CONCLUSION

Abstracting from this preliminary analysis, broader problems can be defined in terms of intra and inter-meeting communications of strategic relevance. Luhmann's view of communication as a fundamental component of social systems (Knudsen, 2011, Stichweh, 2000, Luhmann, 1996) supports positioning the problem of intra and inter-meeting communication within the wider social system of the organisation and supports the conceptualisation of meetings collectively as a system (Meadows, 2009, von Bertalanffy, 1969, Luhmann, 2006). In broader systems terms, the organisation represents the environment within which the SoM exists. Contiguous meetings of different functional groups could then be viewed as sub-systems within an holistic SoM in the overall organization. Adopting a relational ontology (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010) and analysing the meetings at the meso-discourse level (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) offers the possibility of developing theory to support this conceptualisation of an organization's meetings as a system of meetings. Langley's (1999: 694) challenge of

moving from a shapeless data spaghetti toward some kind of theoretical understanding that does not betray the richness, dynamism, and complexity of the data but that is understandable and potentially useful to others

is particularly apt given the theoretically and practically oriented intention of this research. The purpose of the paper is to present an alternative conceptualization of organizational meetings for peer consideration. Data collection continues as this paper was being written. Previous research involving similar data indicates a very diverse number of ways in which it could be used as a basis for further research and more detailed analysis. As a contribution to the Fourth International Symposium on Process Organization Studies, the continued research with the data set would be beneficially informed by the conference's feedback on:

- the general merits of further research on developing the proposed conceptualization of a system of meetings (SoM).
- the relative value of a SoM theory to the organizational and process literature.
- the potential for new theory in this area to lead to a practical contribution for organizations to improve the use of organizational meetings.

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