



Strategy

What's the Use?

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Presentation Aims

- To debate whether strategy has any value
- To consider throwing away strategy shelfware
- To look at alternatives of strategy in practice

More detailed EVINCE Strategy work can be found on the website at www.reading.ac.uk/EVINCE/output/is.htm

This presentation has developed via a number of workshops and presentations with a variety of audiences:

- D. Neyland and C. Surridge (April 2003) 'Strategy - What's the use?' (AUA Annual Conference, Derby)
- D. Neyland and C. Surridge (March 2003) 'High Speed EVINCE' (BCS, Reading)
- C. Surridge (June 2002) 'Information Strategy - An Essential Navigational Tool?' (UKOLN Institutional Web Managers' Workshop, Strathclyde)
- D. Neyland and C. Surridge (May 2002) 'High Speed EVINCE' (HEFCE FDGMP Conference, Sheffield Hallam)
- D. Neyland and C. Surridge (April 2002) 'Information Strategy - Mapping or Reaching for Stars?' (SCONUL Conference, Cambridge)
- D. Neyland and C. Surridge (April 2002) 'Strategy - An essential navigational tool?' (AUA Annual Conference, Southampton)
- D. Neyland (March 2002) 'The Contest Of Information Strategy: Utilising Alternative Approaches To Produce 'Good' 'Management' Practice' (Strategy World Congress, Oxford)
- D. Neyland and C. Surridge (November 2001) 'Reach for the Stars. Strategy and IT Professionals Navigating the Future' (UCISA MISG Conference, Sutton Coldfield)
- D. Neyland and C. Surridge (November 2001) 'An Introduction to EVINCE - using ethnography to evaluate IT-related change' (OU Library Research Seminar programme)
- D. Neyland (November 2001) 'Who Wants A University Information Strategy? Antagonism, Scepticism and Champions of Change' (4S, Boston, USA)

Who are the Strategy Players?

Thinking about

- your Department/Office
 - your Institution
- and
- who *is*
 - who *should be* included

The idea is to consider how inclusive strategy is, can and might be...

Different audiences have suggested a wide variety of potential groups, including all types of staff and management, funders, government (and other) agencies, students - and perhaps their parents, lay members, and even "the public".

Consensus did tend to be that in practice there is limited inclusion.

Information Strategy

Studied at two institutions (1 and 2):

- Observing ISCs and an ISC WP
- Interviewing committee members

Reviewing JISC work

Review of Management and STS literature

The EVINCE Ethnographer spent a year observing "information strategy" at two partner institutions, and gathering contextual information.

Information Strategy - Institution 1

- How to shape the future
- Carrying out an information audit
- The differences between information, knowledge & data
- Carrying out small scale projects
- Deciding the level of abstraction

Institution 1 had a 5-year old strategy which had never been acted upon, while Institution 2 had a 5-year old Information Strategy Committee which had never produced a strategy.

Information Strategy - Institution 2

- Concern about the future
- Unity, Purpose/direction
- People know what it is they're doing
- Clear targets, Informational
- Linking Strategies, Joined up-ness
- Getting people off your back
- Reducing dependence on academics as senior managers

At both sites, there appeared to be an association between information strategy and the future. Beyond that, though, it was clear there were a range of views and ideas about what information strategy was, what it could and should do, and how it might be useful, or not. There were also differences in the way the future concerns were played out at the two institutions.



In order to overcome this strategy impasse, we turn to a story from Science and Technology Studies (STS):

Bruno Latour (1991) provides us with an analysis of the hotel room key in which a hotel manager becomes concerned that guests are going out on the town with their keys and losing them. This loss is a constant financial and security consideration for the manager. In order to ease these problems, the manager puts together a scheme that encourages guests to hand in their keys; there is a desk placed by the door with a sign above it saying 'please hand in your keys.' This fails to operate in the manner the hotel manager wishes though, as people ignore the sign, cannot read the language it is written in, forget after reading the sign to follow its actions and so on.

The manager comes up with a new scheme. In this second scheme, the sign and the desk remain, but in addition, the keys are given weighty metallic key-fobs. The message then becomes you can drop off this weight at the hotel desk instead of having to carry it around town. This is more successful, but still people on occasions, put the weight in their bag, decide they want to keep control of the key and so on.

The key to this story is that the sign or the desk in the first scheme do not guarantee that the manager can determine a set of social responses at a distance and the weight in the second scheme does not guarantee the "correct response" either. There are a set of social and technical relationships at play in which people need to be able to read and understand the sign, remember that sign when carrying the key and/or they need to realise the weighty key-fob can be left at the desk. The manager effectively attempts to set out a path of action he hopes guests will take. What is key to the slightly more successful second scheme, is that the manager builds more barriers to not taking his desired path of action (Woolgar, 1991). Having to carry the weighty key-fob is designed to encourage guests to stick to the desired path of handing it in.

Strategy and Distance

1. Distance of Time
2. Distance of Space
3. Distance of Action



The key story suggests that the production of a single strategy at a distance from implementation and practice of the strategy is unlikely to succeed. This notion of distance needs to be interrogated further. Distance in relation to strategy at each EVINCE partner University can be treated in at least 3 differing ways:

Firstly, there is a distance of time with strategies produced now for an intended future effect. A great deal of action can occur in the distance between strategy production and enactment which can make any strategy document less relevant or any future it suggests, less useful.

Secondly, there is a distance of space between the strategy committee and the departments and faculties the committee wishes to see enact the strategy. The committee is seen as very much at the centre of the University and the departments and faculties at the periphery. This division can result in faculties and departments identifying themselves as separate from the strategy process, often it is not seen as their strategy or is identified as an imposition.

Thirdly, there is a distance of action. The faculties and departments, if they do pick up strategy documents or guiding principles, can often interpret their content in widely differing ways. This interpretative work can occur entirely detached from the central committee resulting in a range of sometimes ill fitting strategy processes occurring simultaneously, but separately, across a University.

Refs

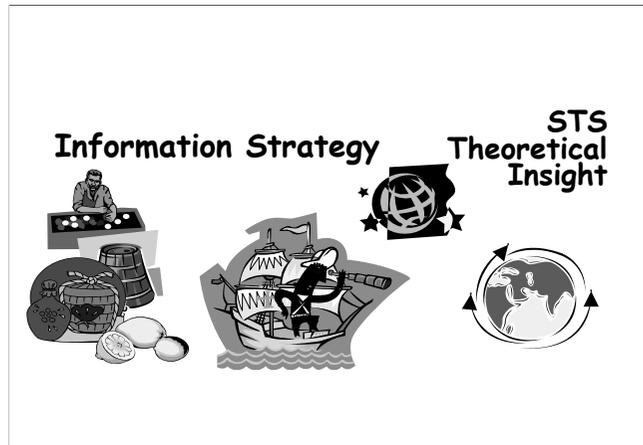
Latour, B. (1991) in: Law, J. (Ed) (1991) *A Sociology Of Monsters - essays on power, technology and domination* (Routledge, London)

Woolgar, S. (1991) in: Law, J. (Ed) (1991) *A Sociology Of Monsters - essays on power, technology and domination* (Routledge, London)

How do they play?

- what barriers or distances are there in your experience?
- what solutions have you found?

This exercise again, tries to raise questions surrounding who or what is included and excluded from strategy and seeks experience/recognition of distances.



Another story from STS, this from Law (1986) tells a story of Portuguese navigation. In this story, Law looks at what made Portuguese navigation in the 15th and 16th Century so successful. He suggests that 'success' was the result of building durable routes from the centre to the periphery. The centre in this story was Portugal, the periphery was the edge of the known world and durability involved the opportunity to retain and maintain the route from centre to periphery.

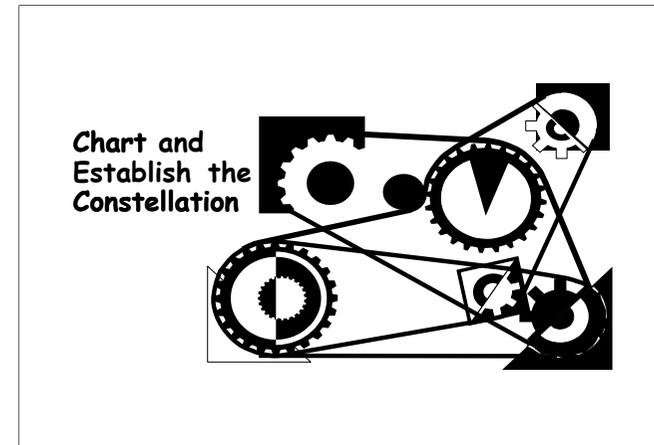
This is about the coverage of distance or rather, drawing distance into closeness. It is a story of the production and control of mobile resources, documents and devices. It is also a story about the distance of the unknown and how, through movement from the centre to the periphery and the development of connections, the unknown is drawn in closer and made potentially more knowable.

The documents relied upon were ever renewed maps which translated the stars and coastlines into useful documents. The devices ranged from ships to food storage facilities which made the movements possible. So the story is about mobility, durability and the manipulation and deployment of resources. It is about making multiple complex and mundane connections not just to get somewhere, but to bring that somewhere here. The abstract becomes the known, the distant becomes the proximal and something which hadn't seemed possible previously, now had an established, regularly repeatable route.

The Portuguese, Law argues, effectively managed to incorporate the external and the unknown into their sea-faring journeys, translating the external and unknown into internal and known aspects of their manoeuvres. Thus instead of wind and currents being unknown external factors, charts, training and increasing knowledge of these factors allowed for wind and currents to be drawn into navigation. Instead of being detached and unknown, these factors became things to consider in plotting routes which could be flexible. As long as they still retained the connection from centre to periphery and back again, the Portuguese could take alternative routes along the way, perhaps with more favourable conditions, passing through alternative ports of call while still making the connection to their final destination.

Refs

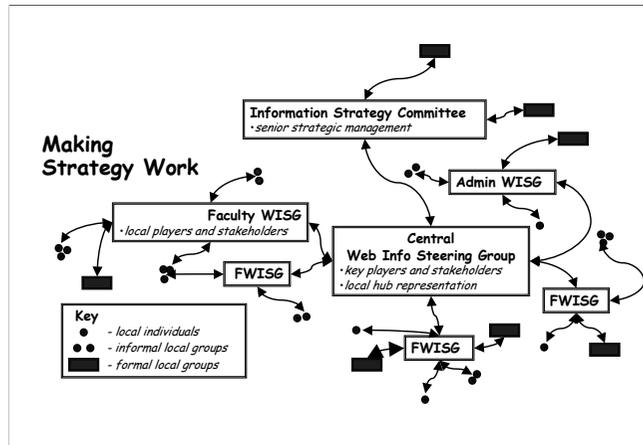
Law, J. (Ed) (1986) *Power, Action And Belief - a new sociology of knowledge* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London)



How does this then fit with the discussion of strategy? The story suggests that mobility, durability and deployment could be useful processes to consider. It also suggests that distances can be reduced through the plaiting of complex and mundane connections. This isn't to say that the future can suddenly be determined at a distance, as the hotel key story demonstrated. Instead it suggests that the variety of distances involved in strategy processes need to be considered and these need to be incorporated into an on-going strategy process which constructs multiple complex and mundane routes for information flow across the University. The resources, technologies and people involved in these routes need to be incorporated into the strategy process and need to be allowed a flexible role within those routes, setting questions which can propel the strategising process on.

So the Good Management Practice Principles that this analysis might be able to suggest are:

- The various distances of strategy could be identified.
- To overcome the distance of time: Strategy could be considered as an on-going process rather than just a single document.
- To overcome the distance of space: Routes to incorporate distances could be considered and the assemblage of people, technology and resources which make up those routes could be identified.
- To overcome the distance of action: There needs to be a flexibility about the process in which the routes, people, technology and so on can all be questioned or redirected as necessary within the on-going strategy process. In this way various interpretations of strategy can co-exist and indeed be connected across the university.

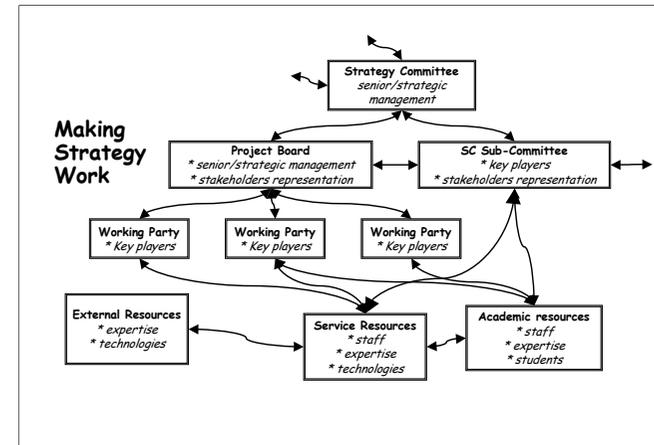


To look at this in practice, we can draw on some examples from EVINCE observations of how on-going groups might be constructed.

This is a structure being put into place at one of the EVINCE partner institutions, as a means of better managing (world wide) web development and support services. It mirrors the organisational structure, linking formal and informal groups locally to the broader faculty, central and strategic groups and committees.

Interestingly, the impetus has been both bottom-up (with two faculties in particular looking for more institutional support and guidance in this area) and top-down.

It will be interesting to see how this evolves.



Another example of a structure, in place at one of the EVINCE partner institutions, is based on a large scale project, managing the introduction of a new student record system.

From the onset the new system was recognised to be more than implementation of new IT. An external project manager was employed and the structure illustrated above was devised.

Rather than using the organisational structure, this model suggests working groups based on the underlying business processes.

The working groups include system providers and users at all levels, and so involve academic and administrative staff, and, in some instances, students. Some staff have been seconded to the project, indicating its importance to the institution.

The project structure has the potential to link a wide range of University members to the senior managers, and to the strategic planning - of the project and beyond. This may offer a powerful means of creating a strategic dynamic, and thus may contribute to a cultural shift affecting at least the institutions teaching and learning activities in fundamental and perhaps radical ways.

Making Strategy Work: Principles

- be fit for purpose
- in legal, contractual and local compliance
- have a clear custodian
- managed effectively and efficiently
- publicised and shared appropriately

Basic principles can help elucidate and clarify aims, and can provide a point of reference where priorities are difficult to disentangle or agendas conflict.

The following are drawn from a variety of sources. They attempt to address the key issues. University information needs to:

1. be fit for purpose

within the context of the University's mission, corporate plan and related strategies and

in terms of accuracy, relevance, consistency and completeness, currency and timeliness, audience, accessibility, longevity and medium.

2. be held and used with respect [or conform] to legal, contractual and local policy and rules.

3. have a clearly identified custodian

with the following responsibilities clearly assigned and agreed by that custodian:

- maintenance (via data entry or issuing of reminders)
- provision of appropriate checks and audits
- procedures for promoting availability of the data & mediating/agreeing appropriate access
- provision of appropriate indexing and search facilities
- appropriate read and write access ensured
- appropriate archive, preservation and disposal procedures
- observation of these principles and appropriate policies
- (seeking) resourcing of the above.

4. be collected, held, made available effectively and efficiently
for example -

- collected/maintained once only, and as close to source as possible/feasible;
- with appropriate links to related information;
- with provision of appropriate search and retrieval facilities
- with clear procedures for negotiating access;
- with clearly authorised working source (usually in e-format) and master copy.

5. be publicised and shared appropriately

Making Strategy Work: in practice

Your Brief:

- Updating the "telephone directory"
- identify related information & stakeholders
- discuss likely "distances"
- test the utility of the "principles"

This attempts to provide an easily understood example, where simple ideas to avoid duplication while seeking to maintain accurate and timely data, perhaps alongside associated data, can be explored.

Making Strategy Work: Feedback

- Is the "telephone directory" strategic?
- How?
- Is identifying "distances" useful?
- Did the "principles" play a (useful) role?

While a telephone (or other) directory may not be "strategic" in its own right, the means by which it is compiled and maintained may indicate the strategy (or lack of it) underpinning information management across an institution.

For example, is the data checked

- by a regular update request to departments,
- by individuals maintaining a personal record including other personal/HR data,
- from telephone billing data,
- or by individuals remembering to let "the office" know when a change is made?

Is the data shared with the billing process? Are other contact details maintained via the same update process?

There is no single "correct" way to manage a telephone directory, but it does provide a relatively accessible process for investigation. It may indicate duplication of effort, or integrated maintenance (or lack of it) across a number of data sets and offices. This could be repeated for other, perhaps more complex, information systems across an institution.

It may also be a process which can be assessed for improvement, which may in turn suggest a variety of possibilities for more strategic management of other information, and help develop a better understanding of the needs and potential value of information strategy in a broader context.

You could use your investigation of the telephone directory to think through the way projects are handled in your own institution, and how they might be handled from a more strategic angle.

Conclusions

- To be effective, strategy needs to be embedded across identified resources
- Embedding requires robust routes across and through the organisation
- Strategic principles can aid planning and decision-making

Our conclusions indicate that strategy needs to be seen as a dynamic process, rather than a document and actions list.

Effective strategy will have cultural implications in terms of the way information is seen and understood, handled and managed.