



The transformation of the parts | The Xpragmatic View



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For the fans of social technology, the past decade has been a vibrant one and more is to come. In the next decade, we will be transformed.

The start of a new year and especially, the start of a new decade always come with numerous articles and posts that give us predictions of what to expect for the coming period. This time, we saw a lot of posts on the theme of "transformation". One such example is this post by David Houle, [The Transformation Decade](#).

We will be transformed

Of course, there is some truth in this. These are turbulent times. In the coming ten years, we will see a lot of change. But is that any different from what we have seen in the past ten years? And will it be a change for the better? Looking at the outcome of the Copenhagen convention, we might have to wait for the next decade...

However, there is more. There is the growing belief that the ongoing evolution in so-called "social technology" will transform our life, our work, our society and our own personality in an unprecedented way. In the next decade, we will be transformed.

That is strange, since most scientists agree that (unless external intervention such as brain surgery or other fancy things) our core personality, beliefs, values, etc. hardly change once we have reached the age of about 16.

Of course, we will start doing new things, using other tools, searching information in a different way, working together in novel ways... But will we be transformed?

The newer generations will be raised in new contexts and possibly, will inherit a somewhat different average social behaviour. The older generation, well, will be faced out, all contributing to the ongoing gradual evolution of the average "human personality". However, is there a change of the individuals?

While looking at change and transformation, we must ask ourselves whether we are looking at the change of the individual or at the change of the encompassing system of which they are a part.

Improving the interactions

Over the past weekend, we watched some DVDs with lectures by Russell Ackoff. The DVDs were a gift of William Bellows, Associate Technical Fellow & Lead Enterprise Thinking at Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne. Thanks again for that, Bill!

As most of you will know, Ackoff was one of the greatest experts on 'Systems Thinking'. Without

going into the details, one of the laws of systems thinking is that improving the individual parts of a system does not necessarily result in a better system. It might even make things worse. Instead, we must focus on improving the interactions between the composing parts in a way that benefits the overall system.

Now, as always, language gets in our way and the word 'interaction' carries too many loads. So, for this discussion, we will use the expression for "the mutual exchange of value between actors in a way that contributes to the overall performance of the containing system".

So, to what extent does "social technology" improve the interaction between the parts?

At first sight, a lot. Our ability to reach new people, find new information, irrespective of time and location has improved considerably.

Yes, but are we talking about improved interactions or about improved communications?

Mobile communications does allow us to interact with colleagues, friends and family in a much more flexible way. But does it give better interactions?

Collaborative tools do increase the ease of sharing information, working together on the same project, informing each other about our activities, finding answers... but does it give better interactions?

Perhaps. Maybe not.

In many cases, these improved communications are just dearly needed fixes for the issues created by our present business and personal life environment: too many choices, too many interests, more need for flexibility, just-in-time, mobile offices, too little time, two income families, etc.

We might end up having many more contact moments, but do we have better interactions?

So, let's now look at this in the context of a social technology such as Twitter. For sure, Twitter has created a revolution by providing a "contact mechanism" that essentially allows anyone to connect to anyone who is part of the system. Doing so, there is enormous opportunity to find new ideas, information, news, etc. Some even call it the emergence of a global brain.

However, does it improve interactions between individuals?

We doubt it. The exchange of information and ideas on Twitter can certainly improve the learning and understanding of the individuals involved. But does it improve the system?

Perhaps. That will largely depend upon the personalities of the participants and their intentions while using the platform. However, as we have already written in [Where are the learners?](#) *"today, the vast majority of the messages on Twitter are posted for personal positioning purposes and add very little to the build-up of knowledge within the network."*

And does it allow us to have more interactions? Does it allow us to move past Dunbar's number?

Again, we doubt it. Twitter certainly allows us to "follow" a far greater number of people. But what remains of the interaction? To what extent do we really have a "stable social relationship" with these contacts?

With its 100 million members, Twitter looks enormous. However, knowing that there are only some 5-10% really active members, it remains a minor spot on the social canvas of our planet. Today, we see members following 1000+ people. Already a daunting task that only allows for occasional dips into the ongoing stream of tweets. What would happen if a billion people were using Twitter?

Twitter is not the answer. It does not scale. It is not the solution because it essentially allows the improvement of the parts, but adds little to the improvement of the system.

Many will argue that still, this combination of improved individual knowledge will result in a better performance of the system. However, as Ackoff would say, this is the same flawed thinking as the one they teach you at business schools. The kind of thinking that gave us globalization, the financial crisis and global warming.


We are well on the road for the next decade...

About the author



Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.

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