



Organisations and ecosystems



The Xpragmatic View #69
 October 2005
 by [Marc Buyens](#), Xpragma
marc.buyens@xpragma.com
[url: http://www.xpragma.com/view69.php](http://www.xpragma.com/view69.php)

Recent evolutions in our understanding of physics and biology indicate that our environment, including ourselves, is the result of a far-reaching process of interaction and complementarity. Apparently, something makes that matter and organisms "automatically" collaborate growing to larger and more complex entities. Is there a place for business in the universe?

Air terminals and philosophy

During our last vacation trip, we had the questionable pleasure of spending the night in one of the terminals of the Athens' airport. It gave us the opportunity of reading a major part of one of the books we had taken with us, "The Non-Local Universe" of Robert Natheau and Menas Kafatos.

Empty airport terminals at 3:00 AM are likely not the most perfect places to read this type of book, but overall it wasn't too bad.

Indeed, The Non-Local Universe is a fascinating book that discusses some recent evolutions in our understanding of quantum physics and biology that are a starting point for the authors for a series of philosophical reflections on the origin of life, human consciousness and the place of the human race in the universe.

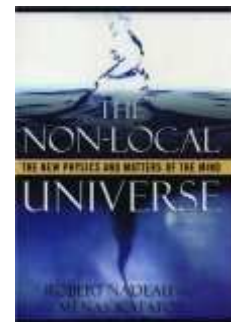
A nephew who is a philosophy student at the University of Ghent recommended the book to us. However, we must warn the interested reader, The Non-Local Universe indeed is a fascinating piece of literature but unfortunately, the authors lack the gift of simplicity in their language.

As was mentioned in one of the customer reviews at Amazon.com: "... They never use a one-syllable word when a four syllable word will do ... I could easily see them describing a 'cow as a 'lactating bovine mammal'."

Well, perhaps it wasn't all that bad. Still, in combination with the rather complex subject, it sure is quite a reading challenge.

Anyway, it is not our intention to discuss here the quality or the lack of quality of this book. We mention it only because some of the evolutions discussed in this book provide a good starting point for some more down-to-earth reflections on our current business environment.

Such starting-point is the more recent finding that our environment and we ourselves seem to be the result of a far-reaching process of interaction and complementarity, whereby smaller parts (matter, organisms) continuously "collaborate" to create new "wholes". The result is an



The Non-Local Universe
 The New Physics and
 Matters of the Mind
 Robert Natheau and
 Menas Kafatos

ongoing evolution towards increasingly complex entities that exhibit new capabilities that exceed the sum of the abilities of the composing parts.

Organisational eco-systems

Of course, it is always dangerous to transpose such observation to another environment. Still, it is a tempting idea to look for similar concepts in the structure and the mechanics of today's business organisations.

And indeed, at first sight, there is some similarity. Today's business organisations also evolve to increasingly complex networks of collaboration via mechanisms such as mergers, acquisitions, partnerships, outsourcing and other forms of cooperation. Therefore, at first sight, there is indeed some similarity. However, this also is where the comparison ends.

If we look a little bit further into the details of these market mechanisms and especially, when we take a closer look at the internal organisation of companies, there are far less parallels to find.

First, when we look at the real collaboration and interaction of companies that operate in the same market, it becomes rapidly clear that the real networking activity is much more limited. Most companies still operate according to the traditional we-against-them paradigm.

However, for an external observer, it seems quite obvious that such market in its entirety could evolve much more rapidly and more efficiently if there was more cross-fertilisation and interaction between the composing entities. Unfortunately, most organisations continue working towards their ultimate goal of complete market domination, where further innovation and evolution largely disappears.

Fortunately, another reality is that there are always various types of events that will stimulate some degree of cross-fertilisation and interaction. Examples are mergers and acquisitions or the outsourcing of activities that will often bring together quite different business cultures. Job changes within or between organisations are other examples.

Still, we must recognise the reality that these types of cross-fertilisations are often not planned for or worse, they are often seen as unwanted side effects of the more "strategic" initiatives.

Similar observations can be made while looking at the internal organisation of companies. In a similar way, these organisations are a complex network of interaction of physical and financial assets, automation, procedures and of course, employers and employees.

However, how well are these networks stimulated to become a "better" organisation that exhibits new competitive advantages? What makes that such network "automatically" grows and improves?

All these questions bring us, once again, to the theme of "innovation".

Innovation as the resultant of the organisational structure

Already for decades, organisations are looking for new ideas, new products, creative approaches and more innovation. Over the past years, some serious progress has been made and a common thinking and sound business practices have emerged.

In general, the current thinking about innovation is that it is certainly not a one-time effort, but rather an ongoing process of improvement focusing on three main categories of competences:

- The creation of a working environment that facilitates and stimulates innovation
- The development of personal skills and the promotion of practices, tools and methods to stimulate creative thinking

- The management of new ideas.

Especially this first point has much to do with the interaction and collaboration between individuals within an organisation and in the list of recommended best practices you will find things such as:

- Adopting an open communication between all layers of the organisation so that everyone is fully aware of the strategic direction, the opportunities and also the challenges of the organisation.
- Having a willingness to accept a reasonable amount of risk allowing promising, yet riskful ideas to have their fair chance for development and implementation.
- Stimulating an entrepreneurial mindset.
- Being tolerant for failure.
- Fostering knowledge sharing and cross-fertilisation of ideas across all entities of the organisation.
- Having the conviction that anyone in the organisation can be a potential contributor for innovation.
- Introducing a fair amount of challenge.
- Promoting creativity.
- Freeing up the necessary time and resources for innovative thinking.

Many of these approaches seem obvious. Indeed, we "feel" that these are reasonable and appropriate steps. Still, we also have to acknowledge that very few of the approaches mentioned above are a "natural behaviour" that fits perfectly with the reality of the traditional organisational structure.

Worse, the way traditional companies are structured is in fact only large chain of boundaries and hurdles that are even so many inhibitors for innovation. All our steps to create the environment that facilitates and stimulates innovation are only poor attempts to avoid or circumvent the obstacles we first put in place.

Therefore, it would be wise to look at the innovation paradigm from another perspective. Innovation is not something that is "external" to an organisational form and that can be grafted upon making use of various tools or techniques.


Instead, innovation is a natural resultant of a suitable organisational form and, assuming the presence of this, does not require much additional or formal guidance. Unfortunately, most businesses are still looking, as hard as they can, in the other direction.

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.

 LinkedIn profile: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/marcbuyens>

 Follow on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/mbuyens>

© 1999-2009, Xpragma bvba. All Rights Reserved.

Xpragma bvba - Mechelsesteenweg 254 - 2820 Bonheiden - Belgium
Tel. +32-(0)15-340 845 - info@xpragma.com - www.xpragma.com

 RSS feed: <http://www.xpragma.com/english/rss/xpven.xml>