



## Open Space - Room for thoughts | The Xpragmatic View



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As we discussed in the Xpragmatic View #79, deploying Web 2.0 practices and tools in a business context is tempting, yet not straightforward. The organisational context is often the strongest inhibitor. However, some of the cultural changes in our society that are driving Web 2.0 (or are driven by Web 2.0) will not go away. Therefore, enterprises will become increasingly disconnected from social reality, unless they change. They better do.

### Open Space Technology

Recently, I exchanged some interesting e-mails with Louise Brissette of Service Ipsé on the subject of Open Space Technology (OST). Unlike the name suggest, OST has nothing to do with technology. Instead, it is a way to convene people for a meeting and it provides a method to organise these meetings.

OST is especially useful while trying to address important, often future oriented, complex business issues and it facilitates decision making in larger groups. More details on the approach can be found on the [Worldwide Open Space website](#).

The Open Space principles are not exactly new. Already in the 80's, Harrison Owen was the first to describe the basic concepts of OST. Owen observed that, while attending seminars, the real value and insight were not derived from the various presentations and sessions, but rather from the informal interactions with other attendants during the coffee breaks.

OST tries to "emulate" such behaviour by creating a meeting environment whereby participants decide themselves on the agenda, dynamically form or disband groups, freely discuss the issues that matter to them and in general, by avoiding formalism and hierarchy.

As such, OST incorporates many of the characteristics that we observe today in Web 2.0 behaviour. It builds on the belief that groups are "wise". It avoids hierarchies and promotes discussion between peers. Participants are the direct stakeholders in the issues that are being discussed. Agenda's and groups are dynamically created driven by an organic process of collaboration, etc.

Still, I do not think this is the way to go...



[Open Space Technology](#)  
[A User's Guide](#)  
[Harrison Owen](#)

### Change the right things

Let's be clear on this, above statement has nothing to do with my perceived value of OST, but

rather with my own natural behaviour. There is a lot I can say about that, but in essence, it all boils down to two core "beliefs".

The first one is my belief that the essence of your feelings, the core values that you adhere to, etc. are things that do not change over time, whatever happens in your life. Once at the age of sixteen (or something like that) all of this is fixed. According to certain studies, even these first years have little impact. Therefore, do not try to change the inner core; it will not work.

The second one is my belief that people have no problem expressing and exploiting their more "emotional" competences, permitting the right context is present. Today's organisations are largely structured not to provide such context. Therefore, do not look for workarounds; provide the right context.

So, once you believe this, decisions are straightforward.

The first company I worked for was a software house. I worked there for 9 years and there were many reasons why I should have left earlier. However, the real reason I finally did was because they became in conflict with both of these rules.

More specifically, the top management made the decision that all employees should participate in one of these team-building exercises. You know, these happenings where they drop you somewhere in nature and you then have to face all kind of weird challenges as a team. Very popular stuff in the 80's.

The real problem of this company was not a lack of team spirit, at least, not amongst the regular employees. The real problems were the personal agenda's of management and their complete incompetence to transform the organisation, migrating from a largely "protected" environment into a real commercial business environment.

Do not try to change the people. The people are OK. Do not look for workarounds. Provide the right context.

Pursuing new career opportunities...

## Organisational context

So, in a nutshell, this is also a bit the same feeling I get while reading about OST. I do not question the value of the approach. It can deliver results. I also adhere to the idea that heterogeneous groups can produce results that exceed the capabilities of the individuals.

No, my real question is: why does OST exist? Why do we need an approach that is "added" to the organisation instead of having such behaviour naturally "embedded" in the organisation?

This is the same type of thinking we already discussed earlier in [Innovation by design](#). Unfortunately, describing the problem is easy, envisioning the solution is a major challenge.

OST demonstrates that a large group is able to rapidly get to conclusions on complex issues. However, can we envision something similar that addresses all day-to-day operations and management of a complete business? To be honest, we are currently nowhere near a workable idea on this.

But that's of course part of the fun...

## 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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