

Organisational Innovation and the Sociotechnical Tradition: Introduction

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While the 1990s have seen sustained attempts in Australia, on the part of the federal government and others, to encourage firms to adopt International Best Practice, the results so far are somewhat disappointing. Firms find themselves tugged in several different directions, by competitive pressures, by industrial relations shifts, and by the demands for higher levels of quality, timeliness and responsiveness. While they are exhorted to adopt teamwork and other initiatives that go under the rubric 'Best Practice', there is as yet little sense of the underlying principles that inform these organisational innovations, nor of the history of their introduction into Australian organisations over previous decades.

In May 1995, under the auspices of the Australian Best Practice Demonstration Program, and the Australian Quality Council, an international colloquium was convened, by myself and Professor Malcolm Rimmer, to help shed light on these issues. Scholars from around the world were invited to Melbourne to discuss their own experiences in organisational innovation in the framework of the Sociotechnical Systems tradition, first developed at the Tavistock Institute in London in the late 1960s. It was the STS tradition that formulated most of the elements of workplace change today associated with 'Best Practice', and in the intervening period there has been a rich store of experience in the further development of the principles and practice of STS organisational interventions. This colloquium was the first opportunity to debate this international experience, and confront it with Australian experiences, held for many years.

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Two papers presented at that colloquium, by young Australian scholars, are reproduced in revised format in this Symposium. The first, by Andrew Griffiths, who is a PhD candidate at the University of New South Wales, is concerned with tracking the mixed record of teamwork and STS initiatives in Australian workplaces over the past three decades. The picture, according to Griffiths, is anything but rosy. Initiatives inspired by STS ideas were rare, and usually short-lived. This study, which blazes a new trail for industrial and historical research in Australia, shows that organisational innovations wither and die in the absence of sustaining institutional supports. The second paper, by Marian Baird, who is a PhD candidate in industrial relations at the University of Sydney, reports on a study of two sites in Australia where STS initiatives have been attempted, one a brownfield site and the other a greenfield site. Baird finds important differences in the uptake of new systems at the two sites. In exploring the differences, Baird focuses on the significant role of unions in facilitating or frustrating the success of organisational innovations. Industrial relations systems at the workplace are one of the significant 'institutional arrangements' that can help to diffuse innovations, or stop them in their tracks. These two papers raise issues which are of clear relevance for the current programs supporting organisational innovation in Australia today.