

Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”

TRANSLATIONAL CONSULTING

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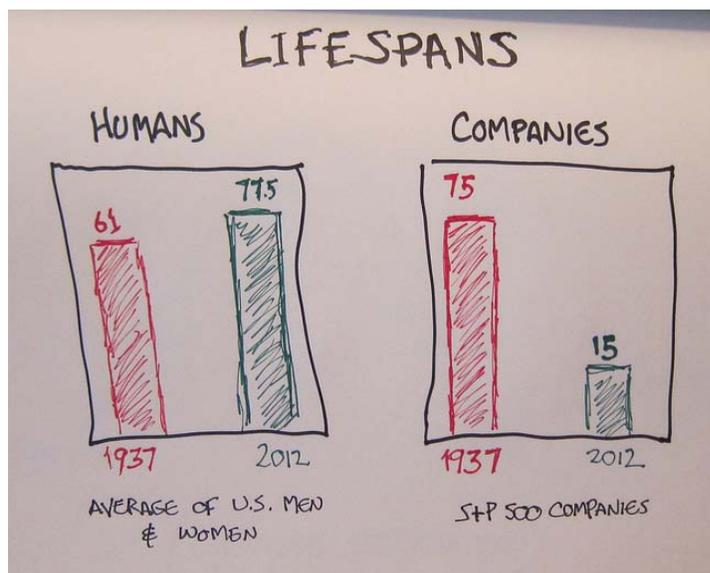
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INTRODUCTION

The strategic management consulting industry has been on a continuous rise (according to some studies, the market for organizational consulting, including IT, is somewhere between \$20-30bln); On the other hand, studies have shown that the average life span of organizations have been on a steady decline from over 75 years in 1937 to less than 15 years today. It is a paradox because one thing is clear, how do you explain why organizations are consuming more and more of the advice while they are disappearing from the business radar?



It is the fact that numerous unresolved dilemmas in business, society and government characterize the beginning of the twenty-first century. Based on the evidence presented in copious studies, prevalent problem-solving approaches are failing to deal with our increasingly complex world.

Today's organizations are faced with an overwhelmingly complex landscape of decisions, and more than ever, they look to consultants for "expert advice". Moreover, the business environment is increasingly becoming global, dynamic and interconnected resulting in an accelerating rate of change that is accompanied by a corresponding rate of obsolescence of much of what we have learned from experience. An increasing number of problems we now face have few or no precedents; hence, there is a decrease in the number of familiar ways to solve them effectively.

The systems that appeared to be so successful in the past now fail to attain satisfactory results in spite of great effort. As a response to this state of affairs, a variety of hopeful and expensive corrective programs are implemented with no substantial results.

Engaging in approaches such as “continuous improvement”, “bench marking,” and analytical thinking, in some instances, has only made things worse. Specifically, efforts at tinkering at the margins and seeking cosmetic solutions to even the most urgent problems of our times have no doubt precipitated more problems and lackluster results.

Traditional organizations either ignore the crisis or throw money at it. Neither approach works. Leaders attempt to act without a reasonable presumption of success. Academics attempt to wrestle with these problems, only to find that they do not fit so easily within the traditionally narrow branches of learning. The difficulty is that disciplines are categories used to segregate types of knowledge and understanding. Each discipline views a different aspect of the same reality. Yet, reality is composed of systems that go beyond the intellectual categories we create.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH – TRANSLATIONAL CONSULTING

Unfortunately, much of the advice offered is insufficient in a world where the decision contexts are changing from relatively “placid” to highly “turbulent” environments where dynamic complexity leads to uncharacteristic failures in organizations, programs and projects that previously were successful.

There is a sense of urgency based on the belief that an increasing number of unresolved dilemmas are because of what some call: a crisis of understanding. Making sense of a myriad of variables that affect the performance of systems and determining causal relationships that underlie seemingly unstructured problems, has become a daunting challenge. At the same time, society has witnessed the gradual decline in the effectiveness of health, education, transportation, criminal justice, and communication systems, to name a few.

Most importantly, many organizations seem to be incapable of dealing with the increasing complexity of the world and tend to seek simplified solutions to even the most urgent problems of national significance. The core of the crisis lies in a lack of “situational awareness.” All too often we are solving the wrong problems. This is what some, such as Ian Mitroff (see References) call “Type III” errors, i.e., “confusion between symptoms and causes.” This failure to attain expected results in spite of great effort is to a great extent attributable to the emergence of a new, unique class of problems. Therefore, conventional formulations and solutions are inadequate to cope with them.

Although the existence of such kinds of problems, as distinguished from more familiar simple problems is a well described phenomenon in today's management sciences, many practitioner organizations are either not aware of the them or lack the appropriate mindset and the methodology to deal with them.

Moreover, as the economy becomes increasingly knowledge-based and global, where the core values are mass collaboration and innovation, new technologies and broader and richer channels of communication that allow for organizational stakeholders to combine their knowledge to inspire fresh ideas and realize new opportunities, demand alternative approaches. Although new products and services remain a priority, organizations with superior financial performance are searching for better ways to pursue collaboration across their business ecosystems, anticipating a yield of multiple innovative ideas.

Therefore, emerging conditions having an increased rate of change, increased complexity and increased uncertainty have made traditional organizational forms, planning methodologies and response strategies (solutions) less effective.

This dilemma presents a tremendous opportunity for the development of novel approaches to dealing with highly complex problems that require unique solutions. To transform traditional consulting to meet these challenges, it requires at minimum, synthesizing arts, science and systems and design thinking approaches in social sciences to dramatically accelerate the capacity to understand and deal with even the most intractable problems.

To accomplish this vision, a new kind of *translational* consulting approach with the capacity to tackle ambitious challenges and with a deeply collaborative spirit across disciplines and organizations need to be developed. This highly innovative and novel consulting approach will empower the new generation of educators/consultants to develop a new model of consulting which is based on the lessons learned from *translational* medicine and science (translational research is the basis for translational medicine).

According to the definition cited in the Wikipedia, translational medicine could be defined as:

“The process which leads from evidence based medicine to sustainable solutions for public health problems? It aims to improve the health and longevity of the world's populations and depends on developing broad-based teams of scientists and scholars who are able to focus their efforts to link basic scientific discoveries with the arena of clinical investigation, and translating the results of clinical trials into changes in clinical practice, informed by evidence from the social and political sciences.”

In response to these challenges, it is contended that, the translational consulting needs to bridge the gaps between theory and practice, between business, engineering, medicine, arts and sciences, design, and between the traditional view of the world and alternative views of the world. It should offer a research approach that works across disciplines, combines analysis and synthesis, and seeks wisdom. Specifically, it should be uniquely situated to promote transdisciplinary research, which transcends the

obstacles of traditional research in order to best tackle the issues faced by society and organizations today by seeking to bridge this gap by:

- Building cross-disciplinary bridges.
- Building digital bridges.
- Building cross-national bridges.
- Building cross -institutional bridges.

Through education and consulting projects, the new approach should be playing an important role in fostering:

- A new Mindset
- Breaking down functional barriers-- without losing deep knowledge
- Transdisciplinary Teams to do research, education and consulting
- Going from Data to Wisdom
- New Pedagogical Approaches to learning
- Collaborative Innovation through open innovation and crowdsourcing

In today's knowledge-based economy, an organization's value is increasingly derived from its intellectual assets. The challenge of creating value through the engagement of the stakeholders in design activities in, particularly, "business model" innovation is paramount. Therefore, the central question facing management is: How can business opportunities and value be created from the knowledge that resides within individuals and organizations?

Finally, a critical element to organizational success is strategy execution. The first important challenge with execution is how to attract the participation of a broad community of stakeholders in the implementation of the plans and then how to sustain their participation over time.

Typically, the more stakeholder involvement, the more momentum behind the execution of the plan. The concepts emerging as central to stakeholder collaborative innovation are "open innovation," "design thinking," and "Enterprise 2.0 technologies." These concepts need to be synthesized into the construction of a holistic and a cohesive approach to organizational innovation.

Therefore, translational consulting will require a fresh approach to the development of a new consulting paradigm which should include a new mindset, new methodologies and specifically, a new revenue model for the consulting firms. For the practitioner organizations and consultants the challenge remains to recognize this phenomenon and to consider alternative approaches as possible new ways to conducting their business.

REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHY

John Pourdehnad is an educator and a consultant. He is the Associate Director of Training and Consulting Services at the School of Arts and Sciences and adjunct Professor of Systems and Design Thinking at The University of Pennsylvania. From 1979 to 2009, John was, first a student, and later an associate of the late Russell Ackoff, one of the founding fathers of Systems Thinking.

John has worked as a consultant in a broad range of industries spanning numerous Fortune 100 corporations, non-profit organizations, and government agencies. He has published on systems and design thinking and lectured around the world in various educational, corporate and government institutions.

He has received several awards and honors for his work including Highly Commanded Award from Literati Club, Fellow of Da Vinci Institute of South Africa, Member of Organizational Excellence, Bulgaria, and he is a Fulbright Scholar. He is a member of the editorial board for a number of journals and was a featured contributor to BusinessWeek online.

John Pourdehnad holds a Ph.D. in social systems sciences from the Wharton School of University of Pennsylvania.

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