



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2010

**Unpacking the effectivity paradox of strategy workshops: do strategy workshops
produce strategic change?**

MacIntosh, R ; MacLean, D ; Seidl, D

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-44943>

Book Section

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

MacIntosh, R; MacLean, D; Seidl, D (2010). Unpacking the effectivity paradox of strategy workshops: do strategy workshops produce strategic change? In: Golsorkhi, D; Rouleau, L; Seidl, D; Vaara, E. Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 291-307.

Unpacking the Effectivity Paradox of Strategy Workshops: Do Strategy Workshops Produce Strategic Change?

Robert MacIntosh, Donald MacLean and David Seidl

Chapter published in the *Handbook of Strategy As Practice*

Final draft

INTRODUCTION

The recent turn of strategy research toward practice-based theorising (Balogun *et al.* 2007; Johnson *et al.* 2003, 2007; Whittington 1996, 2006) has increased interest in the everyday micro-activities of strategy practitioners. Strategy, it is argued, is better conceptualised as something people *do* rather than something that firms in their markets *have*. The interest in what managers actually do has a long tradition in the field of strategy process, starting with the seminal studies of Mintzberg (1973). Yet, in contrast to earlier research on organisational practices (Dalton 1959; Kotter 1982; Mintzberg, 1973), which emphasised the informal side of managerial work, the strategy-as-practice approach – whilst acknowledging the importance of emergence – calls for a re-appreciation of the role of formal strategic practices. As Whittington (2003, p. 118) argued, formal practices deserve our particular attention for two reasons: not only are they pervasive phenomena in organisational life – a large part of organisational activity is in some way concerned with formal practices – but they also inflict considerable costs on the respective organisations. Responding to such calls, several researchers have looked into the organisational effects of various formal practices such as different administrative routines (Jarzabkowski 2003, 2005; Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2002) or strategy meetings (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008), discussing their role in organisational strategizing.

More recently, attention has begun to centre on the role of strategy workshops as a particular formal strategic practice. Strategy workshops can be defined as specific events which take place outside the normal schedule of business meetings in an organisation and which focus explicitly on strategy. A survey of 1300 UK managers

established that strategy workshops were a common occurrence in modern organisational life (Hodgkinson *et al.* 2006). The survey indicated that some 90 percent of such workshops last two days or less and that 73 percent take place away from the organisation's premises. Hendry and Seidl (2003) argued that the separation between workshop activity and the usual day-to-day activities enables the participants to step out of their established routines and mindsets in order to reflect critically on the organisation's strategic orientations.

Various studies have drawn on Doz and Prahalad's observation that organisational transformation 'usually requires stepping out of the existing management process – since these processes are set to sustain the "old" cognitive perspective' (1987, p 75) to develop the view that strategy workshops enable strategic change. This has fuelled interest in how participants experience such workshops (e.g. Schwarz and Balogun 2007). Bourque and Johnson view strategy workshops as highly ritualistic (2007), and others have argued that strategy workshops do not always have positive outcomes (Hodgkinson and Wright, 2002) or that they are virtually meaningless (Mintzberg 1994, p. 108). Johnson and colleagues (Bourque and Johnson 2007; Johnson *et al.* 2006) explain the perceived effectiveness of strategy workshops by what might be termed the '*effectivity paradox*' of strategy workshops, since they argue that 'the very separation and anti-structure that [strategy workshops] foster *may hinder the transfer of ideas and plans back to the everyday work situation*' (Johnson *et al.* 2006, p. 27, emphasis added). In one sense then, strategy workshops might actually inhibit strategic change. Johnson and his colleagues use a vignette of a single strategy workshop to illustrate the point that, despite the explicit intention to follow through the actions agreed at an off-site strategy workshop, in fact, little happened after the workshop. This finding, however, is in contrast to the results of a study by Schwarz and Balogun (2007), who reported on workshops that had substantial effects on the strategic directions of the organisations involved. Thus, it appears that some strategy workshops get around the effectivity paradox.

A potential explanation for this difference emerges from a closer examination of these two studies. While Johnson and his colleagues refer to *one-off* workshops, the study by Balogun and Schwarz involves *series* of workshops. Nevertheless, no systematic analysis of the differences in outcomes between one-off workshops and sets of

workshops has been conducted as yet. Against this background, the present study aims to explore the effectivity paradox in different workshop settings. We address the following research questions: do strategy workshops that are explicitly set up to bring about strategic change actually fulfil that goal? If so, under what circumstances? Also, are the differences between ‘one-off’ and ‘serial’ workshops posited above, borne out in empirical results?

The chapter has three sections. In the first section, we explain the empirical research design and method of analysis. In the next section we present our empirical findings, distinguishing three groups of organisations: first, organisations in which the strategy workshops have led to lasting strategic change, second, those in which they didn’t, and third, those in which they had only a transient effect. Comparing the data, we identify critical aspects of workshop design and practice. In the final section we will discuss our findings and their contribution to the field of strategy as practice.

1. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The empirical material discussed in this paper was collected as part of a research programme that involved a network of firms operating in the UK. The research draws on a study of ninety-nine strategy workshops conducted by a total of ten organisations over a five-year period. In all of those cases, the express intention of the workshops was to effect some significant and lasting change in the organisation’s existing strategy in terms of observable phenomena such as the nature of the products or services offered, the segments or customers targeted, the mission and scope of the organisation, the managerial structures and processes used in the organisation, etc. The first and second authors of this chapter acted both as facilitators and action researchers in these workshops. The organisations that participated in the research were drawn from a range of small and larger private sector firms and a variety of public sector organisations.

Some of the larger multi-national organisations were not UK-based. In those cases our research was conducted with UK-based subsidiaries. All of the smaller private sector firms and the public sector organisations were UK-based. A research network, which included senior managers from each organisation, was set up as a backdrop to the strategy workshops in which those organisations took part. It was arranged that

members of the network would meet bi-monthly to share experiences and discuss findings from the research, as they became available.

Our study was longitudinal since the network ran over a five-year period. Over that period, strategic change processes varied from changes in ownership, to mergers and re-engineering projects. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the ten organisations, the workshops conducted and contextual factors which affected the processes of strategic change.

Insert Table 1 and Table 2 about here

Given our focus on strategy workshops and their effectiveness, we chose to adopt a research design which drew both on more traditional scientific approaches, labelled 'Mode 1', and more engaged research approaches, labelled 'Mode 2' (Gibbons *et al.* 1994; MacLean *et al.* 2002; Nowotny *et al.* 2001; Tranfield and Starkey 1998). Such combinations have variously been suggested in order to counterbalance the limitations of each individual approach (Huff 2000; Huff and Huff 2001).

Applying Mode 1, we followed an approach based on the multiple-case method used by Brown and Eisenhardt (1997), which derived from Yin's earlier work (1984). Each of the ten organisations considered here was treated independently and a narrative account (Tsoukas and Hatch 2001) was prepared for each, describing both the organisational change(s) and the strategy workshop(s) that had been conducted within the organization. This formal research process might be described as 'research on' practice and, given the key role played by the academic researchers, is closer to Mode 1 than Mode 2. However, each of these narrative accounts was subsequently shared within the wider network of firms participating in the study (subject to confidentiality agreements drafted to protect any commercial or other sensitivities). This meant that the study incorporated a high degree of reflexivity (Alvesson 2003) because researchers and managers from other firms could comment critically on each of those accounts of strategic change and workshop experience. This resulted in the reflexive and iterative development of the narrative accounts and a deeper, more theoretically informed examination of the cases to which they referred.

To complement Mode 1, we conducted additional research, applying the more highly engaged Mode 2 which we might describe as ‘research with’ practice. Since Boje observes that context is essential for interpreting narratives that occur in organisational settings (1991) we believed our research needed to afford us the opportunity to participate in the organisational setting in order that we might contextualise the narratives we were examining. We were sympathetic to Hill et al.’s call for an increase in the use of research modes that require ‘closeness to, even involvement with, the objects of study’ (1999, p. 144). In our research of the ten organisations studied, two of the authors also played an active role as contributors by leading the strategy workshops that we were studying. This is a form of action research that raises a familiar debate about the relative advantages and disadvantages of such a dual role. Some question whether the access and insight gained comes at the cost of increased potential for bias and non-generalisability.

Action research has a long history in the field of management studies (see Reason and Bradbury 2001). Eden and Huxham, however (1996, p. 78), report that it can be difficult for action-oriented approaches to become accepted by researchers on the grounds that they are ‘not science’. At the same time, one might argue that recurring criticisms of management research as ‘irrelevant’ (e.g. Susman and Evered, 1978) can be attributed to a reliance on traditional scientific methods, which are based on maintaining an objective distance from the research subject. In view of the above, our ‘combined’ approach is an attempt to respond to both sets of criticism by incorporating, at least to some degree, the ‘best of both worlds’.

The data presented in this paper is drawn from ten sets of strategy workshops conducted with ten separate organisations over a five-year period. These workshops ranged from one-off events (with Pharma Co and Electronix A) to a series of workshops that ran for thirty months (with Univ Serv E). In total, the study examined ninety-nine workshops. The duration of the individual workshops ranged from two hours to three days. In those organisations where workshops involved more than one meeting we introduce the term ‘elapsed duration’ to denote the total length of time between the first and the final workshops in the series.

In all ten cases we interviewed a minimum of three managers from each organisation. In most cases we interviewed the entire management team and in two cases all members of the organisation. That is to say that, in addition to the study of ninety-nine strategy workshops, we conducted a total of sixty-three individual interviews during the study. Our direct involvement in both the research and the strategy development processes within these ten organisations also afforded us the opportunity to collect a wide range of other primary data, as well as secondary data, in the form of company documents, reports, minutes, field notes, flipchart records produced during the workshops etc., and to attend key management meetings (i.e. regular meetings held as part of the ongoing operation of an organisation). Just as importantly, our use of an engaged form of research gave us and our co-researchers a shared sense of the narrative backdrop which renders the interpretation of data meaningful in ways which would not be possible from an external perspective. We believed that the combined effect of our research activities allowed us to develop a level of familiarity with the organisations concerned and that this would not have occurred using exclusively Mode 1 approaches.

Given the longitudinal nature of the study, data analysis was an ongoing process that was led by the academic researchers but also involved the practitioners in the network at every stage. The procedure was consistent with that set out by Eisenhardt (1989), in that the construction of the individual narrative accounts initiated the within-case analysis. The focus of this within-case analysis was to establish the nature of the strategy workshops that had taken place. As each new narrative account became available for circulation amongst network members, cross-case analysis began to occur and this involved all network members. Once the first few cases were in circulation it was possible to pair cases, compare them and generate insights which were in turn refined as new narratives became available. Each new narrative was dissected and compared to other similar and dissimilar cases already in circulation.

The focus of the cross-case analysis was to establish whether strategic change was currently taking place or had been effected in each of the ten participating organisations. The presence of managers from each of those organisations during that time was invaluable, bringing richness, depth, genuine reflexivity and new insights to the process of theory development. In many ways this was far more helpful than engaging other researchers to cross-check and validate our findings. Obviously, in a paper of this scope,

there is a limit to the qualitative detail we can present for each case. However, fuller reports can be found elsewhere (interested readers can refer, for example, to MacIntosh and MacLean 1999 or MacLean, MacIntosh and Grant 2002 for more detailed individual accounts, and to MacLean and MacIntosh 2002 for a more detailed account of the research network from which the cases were drawn.

2. RESEARCH RESULTS: CRITICAL ASPECTS OF WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

In our analysis of the ten cases we first considered the extent to which the workshops had been ‘successful’ in terms of initiating strategic change. To that end, we asked each host organisation to define ‘success’ at the outset. Those statements provided a comparatively clear set of criteria, which we subsequently asked the organisations to use in evaluating the effectiveness of the strategy workshops. Such criteria ranged from processual observations (e.g. more participative decision-making in Health Org B) to specific performance improvements (e.g. increase productivity by 25 percent in Baker A), to organisational issues (e.g. a change in ownership in Sign Up). Many organisations set more than one stated objective before they began their change process. For instance, Health Org B hoped to introduce new areas of activity to its portfolio, as well as more participative behaviour at senior levels.

 Insert Table 3 about here

In our review of the data we focused on four characteristics of the self-reported outcomes, which are presented in Table 3. First, we considered the *elapsed duration*, which we defined as the elapsed time between the beginning of the first workshop and the end of the final workshop. Elapsed duration ranged from one and a half days for the single workshop held with Electronix A, to thirty months in the case of the series of workshops held with Univ Serv E. The values of elapsed duration have been grouped in the categories *long*, *medium* and *short*. Second, where more than one workshop was arranged by the same organisation, we noted the frequency of each workshop. This frequency was described as *high* when the intervals between sessions spanned no more than four weeks. *Moderate* frequency indicates that sessions took place every five to

nine weeks, whilst *low* frequency indicates that ten or more weeks passed between consecutive sessions. Third, we took into account the organisational scope of the workshops. The aim of some of the workshops was to achieve change in one part of the organisation (as in the case of Univ Serv E), whilst others were aimed at inducing change in the organisation as a whole. Furthermore, while some workshops featured high levels of autonomy (e.g. in the case of Sign Up) the autonomy of others has been described as lower because strategic decisions made in the course of the workshop had to be ratified or negotiated elsewhere (as was the case with Gas Works). Finally, we considered the participants in the workshop(s). As stated in Table 2, these were typically the directors and senior managers of the organisations concerned, and occasionally middle managers (e.g. Gas Works). In Table 3 we have distinguished between high and low levels of seniority according to whether senior managers were or were not involved in the workshops. The descriptive categories of participants, organisational scope, autonomy of the workshops, frequency of the workshops, and elapsed duration between sessions offered a set of dimensions on the basis of which it was possible to compare cases and correlate workshop characteristics with self-reported outcomes.

Referring to the criteria set out by the organisations, only three of the ten cases produced outcomes which satisfied the initial objectives of the workshop(s). In terms of successful self-reported outcomes, the shortest elapsed duration of a workshop that achieved strategic change was twelve months (in the case of Health Org B). In all cases, the frequency of the meetings never fell below what we have defined as ‘moderate’ level (e.g. Health Org B met every six weeks). In terms of the scope and autonomy of the organisation or unit concerned, successful outcomes were achieved both in the cases of entire organisations (e.g. Baker A) and of parts of organisations (e.g. Univ Serv E) but in all successful cases, the level of autonomy was high. Univ Serv E, for example, managed to effect strategic change within its own domain but the unit concerned was only one part of a larger organisational system that did not participate as a whole in the change process. However, the divisional management team that participated in the workshops held with Univ Serv E had high levels of autonomy, which meant that those concerned could set their own strategy with reasonable degrees of freedom. Although there was support and enthusiasm for the change process in the wider university, this did not translate into active interest in or control over the changes that took place with

Univ Serv E. Perhaps those high levels of autonomy are attributable to the fact that the division in question offered specialist building and maintenances services that required particular skills and did not overlap with the rest of the organisation in terms of content. Similarly, Health Org B was an autonomous unit set within a broader network of related but distinct organisations in the NHS.

Considering the ten cases in the light of our data, we can begin to build tentative explanations for the success or failure (in terms of effecting desired change) of strategy workshops. First, our data suggests that a series of workshops is more likely to succeed than a one-off event. Echoing the findings of Johnson and his colleagues (2006), our results show that one-off workshops did not produce strategic change.

On the basis of the three cases where the participants reported to have achieved the desired change, one could argue that there is a correlation between success and elapsed duration of workshop activity: each of the three successful workshops lasted at least twelve months. Other cases in our data, however, indicate that elapsed duration may be a necessary but insufficient condition for success. Eng Consult and Engineer Co ran workshops that lasted fourteen and twenty-four months respectively but did not achieve the desired outcomes. In both cases, early successes (the development of new services at Eng Consult and restructuring of the business in Engineer Co) did not produce the desired strategic outcomes in the longer term. Neither of the organisations which ran one-off workshops (Electronix A and Pharma Co) reported successful outcomes.

Similarly, the frequency of sessions per workshop seems to be significant. Our data show that none of the organisations with a low frequency of meetings achieved a successful outcome. Moreover, in cases where more than ten weeks elapsed between sessions proved problematic. Those involved in low-frequency workshops reported that the each of the workshops was individually successful and that the respective organisation 'remained committed to making the process work' (according to the director of Eng Consult). Yet, continuity and follow-through seemed more difficult in those cases and the self-reported outcomes indicated a failure to achieve the initially stated objectives. In an interview about the workshops conducted with Engineer Co., one business unit director commented 'I like the workshops. But we seem to spend most of our time figuring out why we were so excited last time we were working on this stuff

[the workshop agenda], then a bit more time figuring out why things haven't moved on, then finish off the day fixing a date in the middle distance again.'

Combining frequency of meetings and elapsed duration gives an indication of the total amount of workshop activity (see Table 2). Baker A and Univ Serv E both combined high frequency of meetings with a programme of workshops of long duration. However, comparing workshops held in Health Org B with those in Sign Up reveals a more subtle dynamic. Both involved similar numbers of participants per workshop (eight in Health Org B and seven in Sign Up) and a similar number of workshops (nine and seven respectively). Thus, Health Org B and Sign Up had roughly equivalent numbers of people involved in similar numbers of workshops for the same total length of time. Sign Up's failure to achieve strategic change might be attributed to the fact that the workshops 'came too thick and fast' (according to a sales manager with Sign Up). Within Sign Up there was real time pressure to achieve a change in ownership of the firm because the incumbent owner-director was keen 'to conclude a deal by summer time' (according to the MD of Sign Up). The project took place in April and the resulting compression of the sequence of workshops, compared to Health Org B, appears to have been counter-productive.

The seniority of the participants in the process also appeared to have some effect on the outcome. The labels *senior manager*, *director* or *senior management team* can mean different things in different industries or in different countries. In Table 3 we have used the terminology that the organisations themselves used to describe those who participated in the strategy workshops. In most cases, participants were described as 'senior managers' or 'directors' and this appeared to mean that these were the most senior staff in hierarchical terms. However, the board of directors in a private sector firm such as Engineer Co. was equivalent to the senior management team of a public sector organisation such as Univ Serv E where the label 'director' was less common.

Those who sent middle managers (i.e. somewhere between first-line supervision and directors or senior managers) to the workshops did not achieve successful outcomes, perhaps because it is not easy for middle managers execute actions which were agreed the course of workshops. Our data corresponds to that of Hodgkinson et al. (2006) in that only a minority of the workshops we studied involved middle managers. Univ Serv

E, which involved more junior staff and union representatives, achieved its objectives but these participants were introduced as the workshops progressed and were not involved at the outset.

The ten cases described here can be grouped into three sets with *positive* (Baker A, Univ Serv E, Health Org B), *transient* (Sign Up, Engineer Co, Eng Consult, CommuniCo) and *negative* (Gas Works, Electronix A, Pharma Co) self-reported outcomes. We shall now consider in more detail examples from each of these groups in order to enhance our understanding of the ways in which the descriptive characteristics of the workshops (e.g. nature of the participants, frequency, etc.) affected the contents and consequences of the workshops.

Exploring successful workshops

Of the successful cases, i.e. those where the workshops were followed by strategic change in line with the original aims, we will examine Baker A, a family-owned business that faced difficult trading circumstances for the first time in its eighty-year history. The owners–directors of the business approached us with a request to help effect a culture change within the organisation. The initial aspiration of the programme was framed as ‘creating a learning organization [...] where some of our managers actually begin to manage instead of the four of us [the four owners–directors] having to do everything [...] and where we begin to see some new products and new markets being developed – because it’s pretty clear that our traditional markets won’t sustain us’ (the MD of Baker A).

Initially, Baker A did not specifically request a strategy workshop; the idea of a workshop developed during early diagnostic conversations held with the organisation. Similarly, the idea of running a series of workshops was only framed during the first, off-site workshop. In fact, the workshops took place in three distinct phases and the design for each phase was specified as the previous phase drew to a close. The first phase of the process centred on a three-day, off-site workshop attended by the four owners–directors, and focused on reviewing the espoused strategy of the firm, the motivations and ambitions of its four owners–directors and the stated ambition to transform the firm into a learning organisation. This led to phase two, which consisted

of a series of three workshops that involved the whole management team and which mimicked what was seen to have been a successful workshop format in phase one with the directors. During this second phase, three project teams were established to deal with three related but distinct tasks: restructuring the firm, improving productivity and developing new products and markets. Also, during the second phase, third parties provided additional input on topics specified by the workshop participants (for example, the product development team expressed the desire to ‘know more about marketing’ so we arranged for a seminar on marketing techniques for that team). Thus, the content of the workshops was not prescribed and fixed at the outset. Instead, the need to cover certain themes emerged in the course of the workshops, and expert input was accordingly sourced to meet those needs.

In the third phase, the entire management team of Baker A (a total of eighteen staff members) was divided amongst the three project teams and each project team was led by one of the owners–directors. Each project team then held regular workshop sessions outside scheduled business meetings. These sessions were minuted and produced action points that provided a highly visible accountability framework. The managing director oversaw the progress of all three project teams and in particular monitored progress toward the specific targets each had developed.

It is perhaps worth pausing at this stage to consider the significance of the accountability framework mentioned above. Minutes of meetings, including agreed actions, were posted on a public notice board in order to keep the whole of the company’s staff up-to-date with the project’s progress. Every workshop started with a review of developments that were compared to previously agreed actions and a discussion of unexpected developments that had occurred in the interim. This was followed by some reflection on what could be learned from such events. At the outset we were prominent in ensuring that this practice was adhered to and promoted by the directors – particularly to ensure that the directors themselves completed actions agreed in the previous session and taking them to task if this wasn’t the case. Gradually, responsibility for this practice migrated to the team members with the aid of ‘ground rules’ that they had developed to ‘keep them learning’ (the quotes are from the members of teams at Baker A). The key point here is that the workshops had to be linked with day-to-day practices in the organisation and were planned with this specific aim in

mind. For example, one of the teams held workshops relating to the theme of production improvements and the outcomes of these strategy workshops were fed back into regular weekly production meetings within the business. Thus, it was possible to link the strategy workshops to the ongoing conduct of business through actions that were agreed in the workshop setting and communicated to the wider business setting. An action-theoretic perspective would point out that there is only *one* organisation. Hendry and Seidl describe 'strategic episodes' (2003) as self contained but this example gives some insight into the relationship between an episode and the day to day conduct of members of the wider organization.

In many ways there should be nothing surprising about the above practices; they may well be regarded as common sense or sound project management. What might be significant, however, is that they draw attention to the fact that the *successful* workshops were embedded in a strategic-development project that was managed as a series of interlinked activities combining workshops, normal business and strategic development. This was also the case in the other two projects that delivered results in accordance with the initial aim: in both Healthcare Org B and University Serv E, workshops started with a review of actions and unexpected changes that had occurred since the last session, with a view to 'keeping things on track' (quote from a director of Univ Serv E) and learning from experience. This is in stark contrast to the somewhat more confusing experience reported earlier by the director from Engineer Co, where the workshops were held six or twelve months apart and the lack of continuity was reported as a key blocker by the majority of the workshop participants. In all three cases where the self-reported outcomes were positive, the workshops were a means to an end in a high-profile transformation project; they were not an end in themselves. The broader project provided both a context and a mechanism for ensuring that the workshops were linked.

The workshops themselves had an informal atmosphere and, partly because of the longitudinal nature of our research project, in each case we developed strong ties with both the business and the individuals concerned. A recurrent difficulty in Baker A was that the MD would intervene on the shop floor when it came to operational issues and at one point we convinced him to get his work clothes embroidered with the legend 'I shouldn't be here', so that colleagues could remind him of his commitment to allow his managers to manage. This too demonstrates a senior level commitment to enact at the

workplace practices that were agreed in the workshops; in this case, the content of the workshops or strategic episodes were transferred to the wider organization via the MD's work clothes.

In the course of the workshops, Baker A posted a financial loss for the first time, as a result of the BSE crisis in the UK. Nevertheless, work on new product development and new markets eventually produced a significant rise in turnover (25 percent), a return to profitability and increases in productivity (20 percent). During the same period, HR practices improved and development plans were introduced, focusing on the individual learning and development needs of members of staff. These changes in both organisation structure and training and development processes were taken by those involved as indicative of a broader culture change within the organisation.

It is also perhaps worth noting that a 'crisis' – in this case a financial loss, and thus a threat to survival – may have emphasised the importance of the project in which the workshops were embedded: in this project a great deal was at stake. Indeed, in the other two successful cases, one organisation (Healthcare Org B) was under threat of being absorbed by another civil service agency (this may explain the desire of Healthcare Org B to move away from bureaucratic modes of organising) whilst University Serv E was the subject of rumours that its entire operation might be outsourced. Elsewhere we have used dissipative structures as an analogy to highlight and explain the role of environmental stress, crises and instability in strategic change (MacIntosh and MacLean 1999).

Exploring transient success in workshops

Of the seven researched firms that did not achieve their stated goals in the longer run, there were some where eventual disappointment was preceded by positive signs in the early stages of our project. Four firms (Eng Consult, Engineer Co, Sign Up and CommuniCo) offered extremely positive reactions to the initial workshops. This highlights the value of longitudinal research because, in those particular cases, the self-reported diagnosis in that early stage was that the change process had been successful. As facilitators, we found such positive feedback about the workshops welcome, but eventually we had to accept that this short term optimism was in fact illusory. In Sign

Up, the process was deemed to be working effectively up until about the halfway point of the project. In Engineer Co and Eng Consult, initial changes subsequently produced ‘a sense that we have reverted to type’ (quote from a production director with Engineer Co). In all four cases, the conclusion was eventually reached that the organisation had not achieved its objectives. In the case of CommuniCo, the launch workshop went extremely well – even the participants themselves evaluated the workshop as ‘absolutely first rate’ (according to a senior manager of CommuniCo), but in the follow-up workshop three months later, it became apparent that the workshop had not effected any strategic change in daily organisational life. Once the participants had left the workshop and gone back to their daily routines, they found it difficult to transfer the content of the workshop to the organisation in much the same way that Bourque and Johnson might have predicted (2007).

We will now consider the case of Engineer Co where it could be argued that the failure of the workshops to deliver the stated objectives was rooted in their intermittent nature (the same also applies to Eng Consult). The successful cases dealt with a rolling agenda of change-related issues by means of a series of regular workshops, whereas in these two cases there were six or twelve month gaps between sessions. The participants in these workshops did see them as related events and had a sense of follow-through but the long pauses in the strategic conversation had a stultifying effect.

Engineer Co was also an established business and had been operating for over a hundred years. The firm had transferred ownership to a US-based corporation some years earlier and the firm’s management team were now accountable to a corporate strategist from the US headquarters who consequently had some influence on the strategy of Engineer Co. This influence had been stronger during recent years as performance had been below corporate norms. As in the case of Baker A, the stated intention of the workshop(s) had a cultural dimension and focused on improving performance. The management team expressed a similar desire for ‘a radical transformation project, to break with past ways of thinking about the business and to begin to reinvent our future’ (from an interview with the MD with Engineer Co). The MD of Engineer Co was more focused in his request than his counterpart at Baker A and he specifically suggested setting up an off-site strategy workshop to kick-start the process of change within the firm. However, unlike Baker A, here the frequency of the

sessions was low (Table 3) and our role as facilitators was channelled through the MD to a greater extent, ostensibly because of travel logistics (he would come and see us, as opposed to us visiting the firm). We thus met with the other members of the senior team infrequently.

This project too used a clear accountability framework, but it may have been that the project's overall velocity or momentum was lower than that of successful cases because of the infrequent meetings of the team. Moreover, whilst it is difficult to quantify this observation, the quality of the relationships that were built among the members of the team and, in particular, between ourselves and the practitioners, was discernibly different – cordial and business-like in the case of Engineer Co, but friendlier and more personal in the successful cases. Thus, more robust relationships perhaps allow franker and more probing exchanges on the one hand, and a greater degree of mutual understanding of everyone's concerns on the other.

Also, after the initial round of workshops, the senior management team (the directors and heads of the SBUs) handed ownership of the change project to a 'change team' drawn from the middle-management layer of the firm. The intention was 'to allow us, the senior guys, to focus on running the business whilst the change team [would be] freed up to change the business' (in the words of Engineer Co's MD). In reality, members of the change team were somewhat confused about their remit and did not feel that they had the authority to change aspects of the organisation's structure, the product range or the markets served. Instead of focusing on the originally stated intention of full-scale transformation, the strategy workshops began to focus on operational issues under the strapline 'better, faster, cheaper'. This served to signal that the outcome of changes within the firm should produce e.g. better organisational arrangements, faster production techniques, and cheaper product designs than before. The resulting improvements, such as reductions in operating costs, were welcome but seemed to indicate that '[we] had lost the bigger picture' (according to a finance director with Engineer Co).

This illustrates a phenomenon which was common in the second category of cases, where some change was effected, but not on the scale or of the scope initially envisaged. The project was carefully planned but after it had been launched, the senior

players of Engineer Co, Eng Consult and Sign Up gradually withdrew to varying degrees – partly on the principle of encouraging others to ‘own the change by taking charge of it’ (as the MD of Engineer Co put it) and partly because they had ‘businesses to run’ (Director, Eng Consult).

One might argue that the real effect of this withdrawal was a weakening of the accountability framework, which was in turn exacerbated by a lower frequency of workshops. Indeed, these two factors may then have operated in a self-reinforcing cycle that took the steam out of the effort to see the project through, though one might equally argue that cause and effect could be reversed here.

In contrast to Engineer Co and Eng Consult, the problems experienced at Sign Up and CommuniCo seemed to lie not in the frequency of sessions (high and medium respectively), or the seniority of participants (high in both cases) but rather in the elapsed duration. In both cases the elapsed duration was only three months. We have already reported that participants in the workshops held at Sign Up felt that the process unfolded too quickly, and that workshops came thick and fast. This suggests another inhibiting factor in relation to the accountability framework that we have discussed. When the gap between sessions is as little as one week, as was often the case in Sign Up, in the interim participants have little opportunity to follow up on action points agreed during the workshop due to the pressure of ongoing business. A key figure in the Sign Up project was the sales director, who commented that ‘I’m out of the office most of the time, on the road, drumming up business. Pretty much the only time I spend with [my colleagues] is during these workshops and I just can’t spare the time in between just now to follow up on action points.’

Exploring failure in strategy workshops

Finally, the third group of cases consisted of those companies in which the workshops did not effect any changes at all. This group comprised one company (Gas Works) that conducted a series of workshops each, and two companies (Electronix A and Pharma Co) that conducted single workshops.

The workshops run for Gas Works shared many common features with those held for firms where transient change was reported, at least in terms of elapsed duration and frequency. This case is particularly interesting, however, because it was the only example where the sole participants were middle managers. Those selected to participate were given little information on the workshops and in the first session were both confused and suspicious. The workshops focused on the organisation's quality systems and the commercial impact that quality procedures had on product development and subsequent reliability. The directors of the firm hoped that by inviting middle managers to 'help shape a key part of our business, [they would] grow into more commercially astute and more proactive people in the business' (from interview with the Technical Director of Gas Works). Yet, attempts at proactivity stalled each time because permission had to be sought from directors who did not attend the workshops.

Finally, two firms, Electronix A and PharmaCo, hoped that a one-off strategy workshop would effect strategic change. The participants reported the events as a success at the conclusion of the workshops. However, follow-up interviews revealed that nothing had changed in the respective organisations and that many of the actions and intentions discussed during the workshops were never followed through. The participants in both cases were senior managers, and the workshops tackled key strategic issues relating to competitiveness and new markets. Each workshop generated lists of tasks that included further research on competitors, analysis of competences, etc. Subsequent interviews with those involved in the workshops indicated that none of these action points were followed up in any systematic way and that 'in any case, there was no forum to report them back to' (interview with the Marketing Director of Electronix A).

3. DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTION

In this section we shall discuss our findings, referring back to the 'effectivity paradox' of strategy workshops that we introduced at the beginning of the chapter. Johnson et al. (2006, p. 27) argued that the very separation of workshop activity from everyday practice, which is necessary for new ideas to emerge, prevents the transfer of ideas and plans from the workshop to the workplace. In their study, Johnson et al. referred to one-off workshops. Our observations on the effectiveness of single workshops support this view. Yet, in contrast to the study by Johnson and his colleagues, our observations on

series of workshops yielded different results. In our study, we actually did observe strategic changes as a result of workshop activities. We would argue that in the specific case of a series of strategy workshops, the effectiveness paradox can be circumvented: such series appear to separate and reconnect to occur over the course of several workshops and seem also to create opportunities for strategic episodes (Hendry and Seidl, 2003) to transfer to the wider organization. This is in line with the study of Schwarz and Balogun (2007), who also reported on series of workshops. In fact, Johnson and his colleagues too touch on this point in the concluding part of their paper: ‘it may be unrealistic to expect significant outcomes from a one-off event; a series of strategy workshops may instead be more effective’ (Johnson *et al.* 2006, p. 29). Similarly Bourque and Johnson (2007) speculate that ‘the shift from intention to realisation may benefit from a nested series of strategy workshops’.

Yet, not all workshop series are successful in terms of initiating strategic change. Our observations suggest that other critical aspects of workshops influence their effectivity: elapsed duration, frequency, and seniority of participants. In our data, the relationship between overall duration and frequency of the workshops played a crucial role in all the ‘successful’ cases which we studied. The organisations whose workshops stretched over twelve months or more and where sessions were intermittent fared no better than those whose workshops were one-off events. A number of participants spoke about the momentum of the workshops, in some cases as ‘the thing that made it work’ (from interview with a Service Manager in Health Org B). Here we see an analogy with Brown and Eisenhardt’s study of high-velocity industries (1997) but would argue that each of the successful cases had high momentum, rather than high velocity, since the participants of workshops that did possess high velocity (e.g. Sign Up) felt overwhelmed by the pressure of the workshops and ongoing organisational activities.

Our data suggest that compressing intensive work into a few months is an unsuccessful tactic. Why might this be the case? One possible argument is that genuine strategic change challenges fundamental assumptions about characteristics and nature of an organisation, and is therefore problematic. Such processes effectively challenge organisation members to reconsider the identity of their organisation (Beech 2000). This process requires a comparatively safe environment and Hendry and Seidl (2003) argue that the renegotiation of such fundamental assumptions occurs in the course of

‘episodes’, such as workshops, where customary practices are suspended. Such episodes make it possible for the members of an organisation to step out of their daily routines in order to reflect on them critically (Doz and Prahalad 1987; Roos and Von Krogh 1996). In most cases the organisations we studied made conscious efforts to suspend day-to-day practice during the workshops. This corroborates the findings of other studies on strategy workshops (Bourque and Johnson 2007; Johnson *et al.* 2006; Schwarz and Balogun 2007). Practices such as holding workshops off-site and ensuring that interactions among participants have an informal, non-hierarchical character were common.

In the three successful cases presented here, there was a sense that the organisations concerned needed a period of adjustment before becoming comfortable with the change process. Both Baker A and Univ Serv E ‘edged up to the precipice’ (interview with the Sales Director of Baker A) repeatedly before finally implementing real and lasting changes. As for Univ Serv E, the frustrations that resulted from being ‘always on the cusp of change’ were openly discussed (quote from field notes).

When asked to reflect on the project conducted with Gas Works, managers described the workshops as ‘a space and time for the management team to meet [...] in a context which was not a production meeting, progress meeting, etc.’ (interview with a middle manager from Gas Works). Those involved also commented that the workshops ‘started with a loosely formed agenda and progressively tightened up as it became clear what had to be done.’ Interestingly, participants also identified two key departures from ‘the Gas Works way of working.’ First, the project team checked with the directors less frequently than usual and second, there was input from everyone as opposed to only those responsible for the implementation of agreed action. Given that organisations ‘find it very difficult to generate higher level discourses’ (Hendry and Seidl 2003, p. 178), these managers seem to suggest that the strategy workshop represented an opportunity for such discourses to take place. Since the project at Gas Works did not subsequently produce strategic change, one might argue that in fact there was not sufficient time to make the most of that opportunity and that the organisation may have found itself under pressure to revert to its normal mode of operating (MacIntosh and MacLean 1999) particularly with regard to consulting the directors before taking action.

Finally, our observations suggested that the seniority of participants is a further crucial aspect with regard to the effectivity of the strategy workshops. This is illustrated by the case of Engineering Co where, initially, the senior management team were highly involved in the workshops but then passed responsibility on to a group of middle managers who they described as ‘the change team’. The change process eventually lost momentum mainly because of a perceived lack of interest from the top management team. Whilst the importance of involving top management in the process of strategic change has been widely discussed in popular texts on change management, it is less evident in the literature on strategy process or strategy as practice. Sillince and Mueller, for example (2008), point out the problems associated with ‘top management ambivalence’. In our study, the involvement of senior management played a key role not only in workshop activities, but also in engaging all those in the organisation who would have to adopt new ideas, plans or ways of working.

A general point that demands consideration concerns the direction of causality implied in our findings. Our argument here is that some configurations of frequency, elapsed duration and membership produce strategic change. However, one might argue that the three ‘successful’ organisations enjoyed our particular approach to strategy workshops more than others, and therefore their commitment lasted longer than that of the rest. This could mean in turn that the eventual success or failure of the workshops is a side issue. Whilst such an argument merits consideration, it ought to be noted that we explicitly agreed with each organisation at the outset that we would not seek to prolong the engagement.

Overall, our study makes three main contributions to the relevant literature. First, it contributes to the literature on strategy-as-practice, which takes a particular interest in the role of formal practices (Jarzabkowski 2003; Whittington 2003). Whilst many researchers have dismissed formal practices as ‘mere rituals’ that have no wider bearing, strategy-as-practice scholars have drawn attention to the significance of rituals as such. They have shown that a ‘ritualized event may be highly significant in and of itself’ independently of whether it has any broader effect on the organisation concerned (Bourque and Johnson 2007), and some researchers have actually analysed strategy workshops as ritualised events (e.g. Bourque and Johnson 2007; Johnson *et al.* 2006). In this paper we have gone a step further by showing that formal practices, such as

workshops, are not only significant as rituals per se but can also lead to significant changes in an organisation. This is in line with studies on other formal practices, such as administrative practices (Jarzabkowski 2003, 2005; Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2001) or meeting practices (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008) that have been shown to have a great influence on organisational development.

Second, the paper contributes to our understanding of the phenomenon of strategy workshops. We have pointed to an important distinction between single workshops and workshops that involve a series of sessions. In particular, having studied ninety-nine workshops conducted over a five-year period with ten organisations, we have been able to comment on the impact of distinct aspects, such as the frequency with which workshops are held, level of attention paid to action points, and continuity and commitment from senior managers. We have highlighted the mechanisms by means of which workshops arranged as series of meetings overcome the difficulty of translating what has been agreed during the workshop into action within the organisation at large – a problem identified by Hendry and Seidl (2003) and Johnson et al. (2006) and referred to as the effectivity paradox.

Our third contribution relates to the methodological approach adopted in this study and thus to recent debates on new modes of knowledge production (Huff 2000). Our research project provides an empirical example of what Van de Ven describes as ‘engaged scholarship’ (2007). In particular, the role of practitioners in both framing and conducting the research process represents something of a break with the conventional division of labour applied in much of the social sciences. Starbuck recently pointed to the folly of building hypotheses and theory around ‘random noise’ (2006, p.15) but in our approach, practitioners were central to the research process: they all had access to research data from all the firms that constituted the network forum which we had set up, so data from one firm could be presented and contrasted to data from other firms by members of those firms as well as by us as academic researchers. This suggests a much more active form of participation in the research process than is often the case. A number of the practitioners from this network have co-published with us on both theoretical and methodological issues. Also, at some points in the course of our study, practitioners participated in research that focused on firms other than their own. Many scholars have called for new and more engaged ways of bridging the relevance gap in

research and, indeed, forms of co-production such as the one described here attempt to respond to those calls.

Our findings have several implications for practice. First of all, this study has shown that one-off strategy workshops are very unlikely to succeed in effecting organisational change. Workshops designed as a series of meetings are more likely to be effective since this allows participants to combine maintaining a certain distance from, and at the same time a connection to, the organisation. Second, our data suggests that when designing a series of workshops, it is important to consider overall duration, frequency and seniority of participants. While this does not guarantee success, our study implies that it does increase the chances that workshops will have the intended impact. Thus, our study has implications both for those who participate in or initiate strategy workshops as a means of advancing their organisation, and for those who design, deliver or facilitate them.

We must also address the limitations of this study. A first potential limitation has to do with our role as facilitators in this set of workshops. We undoubtedly brought specific theories to the workshops. The ten organisations concerned had been informed that we were interested in developing our understanding of complexity theory, as it applied to social systems. However, during the workshops we also deployed a range of fairly standard analytical tools and techniques used in strategy studies, similar to those described by Bourque and Johnson (2007). In general, whether the facilitators of strategy workshops draw consistently on the same theories can be a source of some concern, however, we should point out that the same facilitation process and the same theories were used by the same facilitators in each of the ten cases considered here. This is not to suggest that we sought to validate our data by means of a ‘randomised control trial’ but simply to emphasise the consistency of our approach in all ten cases. It is possible that the success of workshops of longer overall duration, which our data corroborates, is, in fact, related to our style of facilitation, or to facilitation that centres to some extent on theories of emergence, or both.

In our method statement, earlier in the paper, we pointed out that the trade-off between a high degree of personal access to data on the one hand and the generalisability of outcomes on the other is significant. There is no evidence in our data to support the

hypothesis that one-off strategy workshops produce strategic change. Or, to be more precise in our claim, we have no evidence to suggest that we, as facilitators, can help to produce strategic change through one-off interventions. This calls for further research on strategy workshops – possibly even a larger-scale, quantitative study – with different sets of facilitators employing different sets of tools.

Finally, another limitation relates to the focus of our study. Motivated by the concept of strategic episodes and the idea of the effectivity paradox, we were particularly interested in the relationship between activity within the confines of the workshops and activities within the wider organisation. Because of that, it is possible that we may pay less attention to the influence of other aspects underlying the workshop dynamic, such as power games. In view of this, future research that investigates workshop activity from different theoretical perspectives is likely to yield additional insights.

REFERENCES

- Alvesson, M. (2003), 'Beyond Neopositivists, Romantics and Localists: A reflexive approach to interviews in organizational research', *Academy of Management Review*, 28/1: 13–33.
- Balogun, J., Jarzabkowski, P. and Seidl, D. (2007) (eds.), 'Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective', *Human Relations*, 60(1) [Special Issue].
- Beech, N. (2000), 'Narrative styles of managers and workers', *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 36/2: 210–229.
- Boje, D. (1991), 'The storytelling organisation: Study of story performance in an office-supply firm', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36: 106–127.
- Bourgeois, L. (1981), 'On the measurement of organizational slack', *Academy of Management Review*, 6/1: 29–39.
- Bourque, N. and Johnson, G. (2007), 'Strategy workshops and "away-days" as ritual', *Oxford handbook of organizational decision making* (Oxford University Press), 552-564.
- Brown, S. and Eisenhardt, K. (1997), 'The art of continuous change: Linking and time-pacing evolution in relentlessly shifting organizations', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 42: 1–34.
- Dalton, M. (1959), *Men who manage: Fusions of feeling and theory in administration* (New York: Wiley).
- Doz, Y. and Prahalad, C. K. (1987), 'A process model of strategic redirection in large complex firms: The case of multinational corporations', in A. Pettigrew (1987) (ed.), *The management of strategic change* (Oxford: Blackwell), 63–82.
- Eden, C. and Huxham, C. (1996), 'Action research for management research', *British Journal of Management*, 7: 75–86.
- Eisenhardt, K. (1989), 'Building theories from case study research', *Academy of Management Review*, 14: 532–550.
- Gibbons, M. et al. (1994), *The new production of knowledge: The dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies* (London: Sage)
- Hendry, J., and Seidl, D. (2003), 'The structure and significance of strategic episodes: Social systems theory and the routine practices of strategic change', *Journal of Management Studies*, 40: 175–196.

- Hill, T., Nicholson, A., and Westbrook, R. (1999), 'Closing the gap: A polemic on plant-based research in operations management,' *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, 19/2: 139–156.
- Hodgkinson, G. P. *et al.* (2006), 'The role of strategy workshops in strategy development processes: Formality, communication, coordination and inclusion', *Long Range Planning*, 39: 479–496.
- Hodgkinson G. P. and Wright G. (2002), Confronting strategic inertia in a top management team: Learning from failure, *Organization Studies*, 23/6: 949–977.
- Huff, A. (2000), 'Changes in organizational knowledge production: 1999 presidential address', *Academy of Management Review*, 25: 288–293.
- Huff, A. and Huff, J. (2001), 'Re-focusing the business school agenda', *British Journal of Management*, 12: 34–46.
- Jarzabkowski, P. (2003), 'Strategic practices: An activity theory perspective on continuity and change', *Journal of Management Studies*, 40/1: 23–55.
- Jarzabkowski, P. (2005), *Strategy as practice: An activity-based approach* (London: Sage).
- Jarzabkowski, P. und Seidl, D. (2008), 'Meetings as strategizing episodes in the social practice of strategy', *Organization Studies*, 29: 1391–1426.
- Jarzabkowski, P. and Wilson, D. (2002), 'Top teams and strategy in a UK university', *Journal of Management Studies*, 39: 355–383.
- Johnson, G. *et al.* (2007), *Strategy as practice: Research directions and resources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Johnson, G., Melin, L., and Whittington, R. (2003), 'Micro strategy and strategizing: Towards an activity-based view', *Journal of Management Studies*, 40/1: 3–22.
- Johnson, G., Prashantam, S., and Floyd, S. (2006), 'Toward a mid-range theory of strategy workshops', *AIM Working Paper Series*, 35-March-2006.
- Kotter, J. (1982), *The General Managers* (New York: Free Press).
- MacIntosh, R. and MacLean, D. (1999), 'Conditioned emergence: A dissipative structures approach to transformation', *Strategic Management Journal*, 20/4, 297–316.
- MacLean, D. and MacIntosh, R. (2002), 'One process, two audiences: On the challenges of management research', *European Management Journal*, 20/4: 383–392.

- MacLean, D., MacIntosh, R., and Grant, S. (2002), 'Mode 2 management research', *British Journal of Management*, 13/3: 189–207.
- Mintzberg, H. (1973), *The nature of managerial work* (London: Harper and Row).
- Mintzberg, H. (1994), *The rise and fall of strategic planning* (Prentice Hall: London).
- Nowotny, H., Scott, P., and Gibbons, M. (2001), *Re-thinking science: Knowledge and the public in an age of uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (2001) (eds.), *Handbook of action research* (London: Sage).
- Roos, J. and Von Krogh, G. (1996), *Managing strategy processes in emergent industries: The case of media firms* (London: Macmillan).
- Schwarz, M. and Balogun, J. (2007), 'Strategy workshops for strategic reviews: A case of semi-structured emergent dialogues', *AIM Research Working Paper Series*, 54-February-2007.
- Sillince, J., and Mueller, F. (2007), 'Switching strategic perspective: The reframing of accounts of responsibility', *Organization Studies*, 28: 155–176.
- Starbuck, W. H. (2006), *The production of knowledge: The challenge of social science research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Susman, G I and R D Evered (1978) 'An assessment of the scientific merits of action research' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 23: 582-603
- Tranfield, D. and Starkey, K. (1998), 'The nature, social organisation and promotion of management research: Towards policy', *British Journal of Management*, 9: 341–353.
- Tsoukas, H. and Hatch, M.J. (2001), 'Complex thinking, complex practice: A narrative approach to organizational complexity', *Human Relations*, 54: 979–1013.
- Van de Ven, A. (2007), *Engaged scholarship: A guide for organizational and social research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Whittington, R. (1996), 'Strategy as practice', *Long Range Planning*, 29: 731–735.
- Whittington, R. (2003), 'The work of strategizing and organizing: For a practice perspective', *Strategic Organization*, 1: 117–125.
- Yin, R. (1984), *Case Study Research* (London: Sage).

TABLE 1

Organisation	Case overview	Contextual factors
Baker A	<p>A family owned firm, Baker A had operated successfully for most of its eighty-year history. However, recent trends in the market had led to a decline in sales as customers began to shop in large supermarkets (which Baker A did not supply) instead of small local shops (which were Baker A's primary distribution channel). The firm recorded a substantial financial loss for the first time, and as a result pursued a change programme to reduce costs, introduce new products and penetrate new markets. This change process occurred over an eighteen-month period.</p>	<p>The gradual changes in consumer behaviour were accentuated by the BSE crisis in the UK. This had the effect of destroying demand for meat-based products which, at the time, represented 40% of the company's turnover.</p>
Univ Serv E	<p>This large, non-academic unit in the administration of an long-established UK university, sought to transform its working practices when informed that its services might be under consideration for open tendering in the near future. Being responsible for the maintenance of the university's estate, the organisation employed several hundred staff, ranging from cleaners to architects and chartered surveyors. The process extended over thirty months.</p>	<p>Potential outsourcing of services, as part of a value-for-money drive in the public sector in general and in the University's senior management team in particular.</p>
Health Org B	<p>Provided a form of quality assurance service to the rest of the National Health Service in Scotland. A small core team of staff was augmented by a much larger group of reviewers and a specific range of health services were audited on a rolling basis. During an audit one member of the core staff would work with a team drawn from the group of reviewers and this audit team would visit a</p>	<p>The need for reform was prompted by changes in the political system (as a new Scottish parliament was established) and the fact that a new health inspectorate was set up, which covered a far broader range of health services.</p>

particular site for a one week period. Health Org B felt the need to transform the way it operated in the light of the changes in its operating environment. This process extended over twelve months.

Sign Up

A small independent manufacturer based in the UK and selling signage exclusively to the local market. The owner and founder of the business was approaching retirement and wanted to hand the business over to his employees. Recent attempts to professionalise the sales force had proved somewhat difficult and the firm recognised the need to tackle potential markets beyond its immediate geographic territory. The process lasted three months.

An impending change of ownership, prompted by the decision of the owner and managing director to retire.

Gas Works

An SME that manufactured testing equipment for the gas industry wanted to expand its current activities, growing in both size and scope. The incumbent management team felt that the business was being stifled by a relatively dormant layer of middle managers. The intention of the programme was to adopt a proactive and participative approach to the management of the firm, so as to increase its capacity to tackle new products, technologies and markets. The workshops ran over a three-month period.

Dissatisfaction with a relatively stagnant market position, despite the absence of real commercial or financial pressures to change.

Engineer Co

Engineer Co is a UK-based subsidiary of a US engineering firm that manufactures complex products for the energy industry. Originally an independent company founded in the nineteenth century, it was now under increasing pressure from its US parent to improve performance in financial terms or run the risk of disposal and possible closure. A new MD was appointed and he instigated a change programme that ran over a period of twenty-four months and was aimed at restructuring the business and restoring profitability.

Trading difficulties had been exacerbated by exchange rates, which effected the firm's competitiveness in export markets. The key trigger, however, was the appointment of a new MD.

Eng Consult	<p>A small, independent group of highly qualified structural engineers who offered consultancy services to major clients in the construction of large-scale infrastructure such as bridges, dams, etc. The firm had been the subject of a management buy-out when the founder reached retirement age. Now, a few years into the new ownership of the firm, the management team felt a strong desire to develop new markets as well as change the culture of the business. The process lasted fourteen months.</p>	<p>A recognition that the head-office (in London) was not financially viable unless it attracted major new business or reduced costs, or both. At the time of the study, losses in the London office were being offset by profits from overseas activities.</p>
CommuniCo	<p>This study took place within the UK division of a global IT services organisation which employed over 100,000 staff world-wide and had an annual turnover of \$15 billion. Several years of rapid expansion had come to an end, and as the business stabilised there was increasing pressure to reduce costs in order to maintain the kind of margins that shareholders had come to expect. The change process studied related to the development of new ways of delivering a key-service contract. The new contract was to be arranged on a rolling basis, valid for three years but revised every year. Two workshops took place over a three-month period.</p>	<p>The driver for this change process was a corporate plan to improve productivity and profitability. This was generated by the 'head-office' and operationalised by the various divisions.</p>
Electronix A	<p>Electronix A supply a variety of components for use in a range of electronic devices. This US-based organisation had decided to establish a manufacturing plant to service the European mobile phone industry. The change process studied here concerned the establishment of a new manufacturing facility. A single workshop was held, which lasted for one and a half days.</p>	<p>Whilst the initial trigger for change was external (i.e. the decision by the parent company to establish a new site), ongoing changes, once the plant was opened, were driven internally.</p>
Pharma Co	<p>A sales organisation which sold and distributed pharmaceutical products to the</p>	<p>Relatively poor performance in comparison to key competitors who were now</p>

health sector in the UK. The head of the sales operation wanted to see a far more actively targeting markets and customers of Pharma Co. dynamic approach to market development. The intention was to transform the culture of the organisation. A single workshop was held over two days.

Background data on each organisation

TABLE 2

Organisation	Whole / part of organisation?	Strategy workshops	Location(s)	Number of workshops	Typical duration of workshops	Elapsed duration (number of months)	Participants
Baker A	Whole	Monthly, then fortnightly workshops	Off-site launch, then on-site	34	Ranged from three days (off-site) to two hours (on-site)	18	Owners–directors plus management team
Univ Serv E	Part	Monthly workshops	Off-site	32	Typically three hours	30	Senior management team plus union representative(s) from month five
HealthOrg B	Whole	Six-weekly workshops	Off-site launch, followed by alternating pattern of on- then off-site	9	Two days (first workshop) then half-day workshops	12	Senior management team
Sign Up	Whole	Weekly, then fortnightly workshops	Off-site launch, then on-site	7	One day (first workshop), then two hours	3	Owner–director plus all organisation staff (total of nine)
Gas Works	Part	Weekly, then fortnightly workshops	Off-site launch, then on-site	6	One day (first workshop), then two hours	3	Middle managers
Engineer Co	Whole	Annual two-day workshops plus intermittent shorter workshops	Two off-site workshops, followed by on-site workshops	4	Two and a half days (off-site), one day (on site)	24	Directors plus change team (made up of middle managers) from month twelve

Eng Consult	Whole	Three-day workshop plus two shorter workshops	Off-site launch, then on-site	3	Three days (off-site), half-day (on-site)	14	Owners-directors
CommuniCo	Part	Initial workshop with follow-up workshop	Off-site launch, then on-site follow-up	2	Two days (off-site), three hours (on-site)	3	Senior management team
Electronix A	Whole	Single workshop	Off-site	1	One and a half days	1.5 days	Directors and senior managers
Pharma Co	Part	Single workshop	Off-site	1	Two days	2 days	Senior management team

Overview of data set

TABLE 3

Group	Organisation	Elapsed duration	Workshop frequency	Seniority of participants	Self-reported outcome
1	Baker A	Long	High	High	Strategic change achieved
1	Univ Serv E	Long	High	High	Strategic change achieved
1	Health Org B	Long	Moderate	High	Strategic change achieved
2	Sign Up	Medium	High	High	Some initial change but failure to achieve stated aims
2	Engineer Co	Long	Low	Only initially high	Significant early success but eventually reverted to former pattern
2	Eng Consult	Long	Low	High	Some initial change but failure to achieve stated aims
2	CommuniCo	Medium	Moderate	High	Some initial change but failure to achieve stated aims
3	Gas Works	Medium	High	Low	Failed to achieve stated aims
3	Electronix A	Short	Single workshop	High	Failed to achieve stated aims
3	Pharma Co	Short	Single workshop	High	Failed to achieve stated aims

Critical aspects of workshop activity and self-reported outcomes