Public managers need to see their primary task as systems design and abandon magical thinking about technology

Drawing on recent research, **David Wastell** *argues that public managers need to adopt design attitudes and rethink their relationship with technology such that it can become a tool to configure the workplace optimally for service performance and delivery.*

What do managers do, or rather what *should* they do, is a simple enough question. But answers abound: to be "strategic", to provide charismatic leadership, to make decisions, to command and control, to "manage performance" through targets and indicators, to motivate staff, and so on.

In my recently published book, *Managers as Designers in the Public Services: Beyond Technomagic*, I offer a different formulation of the primary role of the manager. Not a novel definition I grant, but equally, not one which most managers would spontaneously use to describe their practice. I argue that managers should see their primary task as "systems design".

Design as the antidote to technomagic

Rethinking the managerial role is important, not least because it enjoins a different relationship with technology. Design-minded managers don't need to concern themselves with the implementation of technological "solutions" spawned elsewhere, but with the potential of technology to configure the workplace optimally for service performance and delivery. They do not need to be technical specialists, but they do need to understand this potential and engage as designers.

In the book, I show through a series of cautionary tales how important it is that managers embrace the design role and the consequences of abdicating this responsibility. Most of my recent research has been in children's social care, and I have drawn extensively on the vicissitudes of the Integrated Children's System (ICS), a top-down attempt to reform child protection in which technology played a central part, to make my case for design.

But the ICS is just one recent example in a long dismal litany of failed efforts at IT-based innovation in the public services. The root causes are always the same, of managers abdicating their responsibility for systems design. Technology is seen by many in senior positions as a "magic bullet". The antidote to such "magical thinking", which I dub *technomagic*, is design.

Managers and the prevalence of IT failure

Technology is the most important design tool at the disposal of managers, but it can also create some wicked problems if a "design attitude" is not adopted. There is a body of research evidence which has accumulated over nearly 30 years on the miscarriage of "IT initiatives", with failure rates as high as 80 per cent reported at one time or another.

Research has sought to tease out the "critical success factors" which predispose projects to achieve the desired benefits. It is striking that the success factors are predominantly managerial prerogatives, not technical ones. There is general agreement that users must be engaged in the development of systems, and that strong leadership at the top of the organisation is required, as is effective project management based on clearly defined objectives aligned with strategic goals. Failed projects typically represent *management* failures, of flawed decision making and lack of engagement; technology *per se* is seldom to blame.

Defining systems design

It is important to define the term "system". By "system", I mean "the work system", defined as "a system in which human participants and machines perform work using information, technology, and other resources to produce specific products and/or services". The definition is critical. Often "system" is used colloquially to refer narrowly to the "computer system". In modern organizations, "work systems" will include IT components, and indeed IT is often an integral part, as it was for the ICS. But the ICS was much more than a computer system; it was an all-pervasive "system of work".

So-defined, it should now be clear why I assert the design of such "sociotechnical" systems to be the manager's primary task, i.e. to configure the work-system under their jurisdiction as efficiently and effectively

as possible. What else could “management” possibly mean?

Doing design: principles and exemplars

Design is a collaborative process, inherently involving managers at all levels, and a common vocabulary and understanding of roles and responsibilities is critical if design work is to be done well. A formal methodology can help create such a “design culture”, and the book outlines one such approach (SPRINT), which I co-developed over ten years ago with Salford City Council.

Key design precepts of SPRINT include: the need for a user-centred approach, for in-depth ethnographically-informed understanding of work practices, for systems thinking, for rigorous evaluation of benefits following a process-outcome approach. The need to build sustainable internal capacity for design within the organization is also emphazised.

SPRINT has been used by Salford as its primary tool for service redesign and innovation over the last decade or so, and has been widely adopted further afield in the local government community. The book provides examples where notable success has been accomplished, balanced by critical reflection on counter-examples. The failure of the ICS, where managers played little part in its design, with examples of successful innovation, shows the importance of managers pitching themselves into the thick of design, getting to grips with the potential of technology to make a positive difference.

Evidence-based management

Another key theme is evidence-based management (EBM). The need for an evidence-based approach is intrinsic to the design attitude. Unlike the hurly-burly of everyday decision-making, when organizations embark on major change initiatives, time and space are available to consult the evidence-base, including academic research and theory furnished by the management sciences. This include disciplines like my own – Information Systems – which has a particularly rich knowledge-base.

EBM goes both ways, offering benefits to both Research and Practice; as Marx quipped: “practice without theory is blind, theory without practice is sterile”. The quality and relevance of management science can only be enhanced by closing the gap, which should be self-evidently important as the social value of publicly-funded research finds itself more and more in the spotlight.

Design in the age of austerity

In the times ahead, the design attitude will become ever more pertinent as public managers, and the value they add, are apt to come under increasing scrutiny, and the pressures grow to do more with less. Let designing be the “day job”, be it radical innovation, or the continuous improvement of existing services. To a degree, designing can be helped by following certain disciplines, but it is a matter of ingenuity too, of improvisation and resourcefulness, driven by the ethic to increase “public value”. It is the design attitude which ultimately counts.