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THE PALMA PROJECT ON EUROPEAN COOPERATION: HOW IT-APPLICATIONS LEAD TO COMMUNICATION

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1 Scope and context

1.1 Scope

This is a series of observations about a project in action, not a report on its findings. With the project in full motion, the following observations could stand for findings from action-research..

1.2 Context

The hypothesis behind the PALMA¹ project is that telecommunication could - and hence should - help to improve the performance of three nationally organized police forces, cooperating within the Euregion Aachen, Liège, Maastricht. The partners in the PALMA project have committed themselves and each other to provide citizens in the region (about five million inhabitants) with a multinational police corps that shares know-how and resources; actually, the three national forces (Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands) should act as one, rather than as three, against crime. This implies a shift of focus on each of the three police forces, from being part of their national organizations, to being part of a multinational, European regional organization in the first place.

2 The PALMA project

- Users: civil service organizations e.g. police in Euregion Aachen-Liège-Maastricht (Germany, Belgium, Netherlands);
- Contractors: Information Science Departments of the Universities at Maastricht and Liège and the Institute of Technology at Aachen;
- Problem: that a practical approach for shared, international operations of civil service is missing, while constituencies require there should be one; the five million or so inhabitants of the region see how criminal injustice spreads internationally, while authorities have no alternative but to deal with problems in a national context; the “Goldene Dreieck” seems ailing;
- Key barriers for finding solutions: different communication systems, languages and administrative cultures;
- Goals:
 - to apply creativity in design and organization of applications;
 - stimulation of (preferably new) firms to market applications.
- Initiator: PTT Telecom (Netherlands);
- Contextual variables:
 - availability of know-how with universities and operator;
 - prime actors: cooperating universities; arm’s length-position of operator;
 - budget cuts and reorganization within each of the three police forces: the German police is very limited by lasting national priority for the “Neue Ländern”, the former East Germany;

¹ Acronym for ‘Police Aachen Luik MAastricht’

- administrations say they want to work together but have not decided on a working administrative entity in which they place authority to address indigenous problems; developments of such nature appear to be far away.
- Method: a 'growth model', inviting management at the police departments to react on an implemented application, thus inciting indications on which application/version comes next;
- Desired side-effects: learning how transfer of knowledge works; having new firms offering practical applications emerge out of local community; proving that advanced telecommunication application may overcome language differences and different currency; creating market for internationally working applications; supporting administrative experiments;
- The project lasts for one year; it started on January, 1, 1995. Depending on the results, other firms will be invited to participate, with a view on their internal communication needs;
- The project should deliver at least one working application, some three months before ending, to have time to test it in practice and to apply the growth model;
- The project leads up to another, already assigned by the EU, expected to run some four years; this project requires active participation by essentially the same partners. Problems arising out of the PALMA project could damage its successor.

3 Observations underway

3.1 How to make an application work in the field

E-mail - the obvious place to start - preferably combined with groupware and working at a certain moment, stimulates the initial provider to make more information accessible from the opening screen.

The finding to report here as an observation that requires more and close attention, is that more information may not at all help to improve a business process. More important, it seems to enable the addressee to react on the information he got access to, provided that message and reaction have something to do with the purpose for which the facility was set-up in the first place. Rather than a documentalist, the provider needs to behave as a moderator for discussions. 'Edited Exchange' may prove to be of great potential for the organization and sets it apart from any one-way or two-way interaction that cannot grow into the communication.

3.2 Project and target group; a recursive relationship

Hearings, research reports and other necessary communication for organizing decision-making processes, including for instance processes leading to acts and laws, will not shed any of their relevance but may overcome more 'richly joined'. This term, introduced in the early seventies by Cyert and March to describe what happens if the central values of an organization do not live beyond the ruling elite, seems to hint exactly at a desired future state. Any process in a firm, an organization, an institution or society at large may become more richly joined if communication through edited channels is possible. Cost of infrastructure may limit this potential, e.g. the super highway will be necessary indeed for society at large. Another limitation may be the ingenuity required to link computers and to edit exchange. There are some examples of organizations who had the correct vision but could not get around the complicated type of resistance when organizations expand the number of communications through their network. One is most obvious; the boss may appear not to be the strong leader he so successfully made his environment believe. Manipulation with time is much harder too; to keep an issue from the agenda is nearly impossible: if it arises, it is richly joined.

The PALMA project on European co-operation: How IT-applications lead to communication

The PALMA project, a complicated project to run, will profit from communication facilities; it is yet unclear how policemen from different nationalities will internalize the communication with their colleagues. As with many communication-experiments, the result only seems to be achievable, meaning understandable, if the initiator starts to do some learning with and about himself. Learning how advanced communication works in nowadays organization life is a 'recursive' process: you only know when you have done it yourself. If not you cannot share and participate.

