The organizational operating system

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Learn about why organizations need an operating systems with a professional design.

As humans in the becoming of ourselves, we have trained our body and brain with many habits. For most of our daily activities, we can rely on them. Habits don't require our thinking and interference, and they consume little energy. Habits are very handy as they preserve our energy to deal with exceptions and unforeseen situations. As such, humans have developed strong patterns of how things get done. It's the hidden "operating system" that takes care of most of our lives.

Organizations, like humans, are complex systems that involve work, organization, management, leadership, context, and human decision-making as intertwined parts. Every organization has its own operating system that takes care of organizational habits. Operating systems are hidden. They run unconsciously as a sort of autopilot in the background. Operating systems are like culture. They glue the organization together. But culture is more like the shadow of an organization. One cannot change it, but it changes as the organization changes. It's read only. One can read the culture but like weather, as loud as we yell at it, it won't respond. Unlike culture, the operating system of an organization can be made explicit and, as such, can be modified.

An operating system is a collection of implicit and explicit capabilities that enable people to get work done and ensure seamless operations at scale throughout an organization. It functions like an organization's "DNA", persistent and deeply rooted in the culture such that we don't even notice it. A well-designed and maintained operating systems serves as:

- Autopilot: Serves as an everyday time safer, conflict resolver, teamwork enabler.
- Operations backbone: Creates consistency, uniformity, accuracy, and efficiency.
- Stability platform: Ensures speed and agility built on resilience.
- Resource manager: Helps to prioritize investments and allocate limited resources.
- Business model safeguard: Frees up operational efficiency to enable creativity and innovation.
- Scalability scaffold: Enables growth without diluting the core business.
- Decision-making guide: Ensures that decisions throughout the organization are aligned.
- Sustainability guard: Helps to balance stakeholder interests.
- Knowledge repository: Secures and protects critical knowledge.
- Culture and talent builder: Creates trust and attracts the right talents.

In many organizations, operating systems suffer due to their patchwork legacy, the lack of a grand theory, and the readiness of insular help.

Patchwork operating systems: Leaders often rely on idea, techniques, and advice from various sources that they tape together to solve a particular issue. Rightfully they draw from their experience, books, workshops, and consultants, but create a scattered approach that lacks cohesion.
The lack of a grand theory: To our great surprise, there is no proven scientific theory available that brings together the parts of an operating system for the needs of the digital economy. Many of the available models are either stuck in Taylorism or driven by ideologies. Both do more harm than good for leaders in today’s business context, where holistic, integrated, and flexible approaches are needed.
The readiness of insular help: The world is full of consultants,

methods, and models to fix specific problems in organizations. Some of their solutions are good stuff. The problem comes from the demand of fixing problems. We know that quick fixes, cheap tips, and ready best practices are of little help when the flaws are with the fundamental design of operating systems. That fix requires a different approach.

Most organizations operate under a system rooted in Taylorism, with a design for a stable, simple, and local context. But times have changed. The current reality of most operations is an uncertain, complex, and global environment. Traditional operating systems solely designed for control, predictability, and efficiency fail on the requirements for people-centric management, capabilities for a dynamic environment and strategies for successful transitions.

Dynamic leadership fills that the gap. It combines the principles of the inner game, quantum management, ambidexterity, and complementarity to reach an optimum. We have documented the approach in many of our books.

The operating system for dynamic leadership is hybrid: Purpose-driven, adaptable, self-organizing, holistic, integrative, collaborative, diverse, and evolutionary to enable creativity and innovation, and at the same time, a stable backbone, rules-based, procedural, and goal oriented for superior reliability, quality and efficiency. Hybrid operating systems combine two or more operating models as needed to fit the specifics of the context and situation. Hybrid refers to the ability of an operating system to simultaneously support both, traditional and dynamic leadership, e.g. preserving exploitation-type businesses with rules-based models and innovative exploration-type businesses with capabilities-based models.

Most of operating system’s elements are intangibles. The Organization Twin Cockpit makes all elements visible and ready for design. With the expert system, leaders can identify gaps, decide on the right design, and initiate the right development activities.

Our expert system uses artificial intelligence to support the design and the development of the operating system. With our models, survey data, standards, statistics, benchmark information, and proven patterns, it suggests the ideal design.

To read and download the entire article with insights on out Organization Twin Cockpit, register for our guest portal.

About Management Insights

Founded by Lukas Michel, Management Insights draws on more than 25 years of research and practice to help people understand how their organizations work. The Organization Twin brings organizational patterns into view for reflection, dialogue, and informed choice.

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