Seminar 3: Data gathering — with a focus on documents

Seminar Objectives

- Why are we doing this again?
- Documents ...
- ... and how to read them
- What else is needed?

Studying the system

involves asking questions such as:

- How does the current system function?
- What kinds of reports are generated?
- Is the system manual or automated?
- What are the system's boundaries?
Documents are:

representations of knowledge
and/or
recorded evidence of actions
and/or
captured communications

Document purposes

• To inform
• To authorise
• To control or regulate relationships between people
• To provide evidence

Documents matter

because they offer insight into goals, policies and practices.

For example, what can the following tell us?

• Policy manuals
• Forms
• Flowcharts
Analysing the documents

• What are we looking for?
• In large part, answers to the same kinds of questions we use in our interviews concerning how the present system functions, and how it might be changed
• We will find some answers, but also leads elsewhere

Studying the system

Questions to ask, according to Blethyn & Parker (1990: 69), include:
– What is done?
– Where is it done?
– When is it done?
– Who does it?
– How is it done?

Determining the logically required tasks

Questions to ask, according to Blethyn & Parker (1990: 69), include:
– Why is it done? Is it a necessary task?
– Why is it done there?
– Why is it done then?
– Why that person?
– Why is it done that way?
Determining the most appropriate solution(s)

Questions to ask, according to Blethyn & Parker (1990: 69), include:

- What should be done? Can the task be altered or eliminated?
- Where should it be done?
- When should it be done?
- Who should do it?
- How should it be done?

Documents come first?

‘A good analyst always gets facts first from existing documentation rather than from people’

(Whitten & Bentley 1998: 624)

Documents come first?

You’ll need to be quite familiar with relevant documents before you begin the bulk of your interviews

You may also use certain documents (eg forms or files) as reference points for discussion during your interviews
Begin by seeking out:

- Explanations of organisational structure
- Descriptions of what is proposed to be changed
- Accounts of business functions
- Documents from previous systems projects

(Whitten & Bentley 1998: 624)

Documents that can be useful include

- Mission statements, strategic plans, annual reports
- Organisational charts, workflow charts
- Policy manuals
- Forms and files generated by the system
- Reports (both routine and otherwise)

The scope of document gathering

Sometimes knowing when to stop gathering documents can be as difficult as defining a system’s boundaries.

Then again,

‘with systems crossing organization boundaries more and more, external sources are an important source of systems requirements’

(Satzinger et al. 2004: 128)
Analysing documents — take 2

We know what we expect from reports

- Succinctness
- Clarity
- Overview

but will we necessarily find it?

Try to learn the lingo

Make yourself familiar with

- the technical terms associated with the organisation’s business functions
- local dialects and idioms

Electronic documents

- Present particular challenges
- Can also offer useful leads
- Fluidity
- Metadata as clues
Understanding document limitations

The storage and classification of the documents you encounter in your data-gathering may be disappointing

Because the documents are someone else’s attempt to represent their knowledge/beliefs, you may not always be provided with the full context

Organisational goals and practices are not always consistent (‘work to rule’)

Practices (and broader functions) change

Policies change

Documents can lie

Verify the sources you have gathered

Ethical issues

Like all other aspects of analysing systems that are entwined with paid work, handling system-related documents can raise important questions for practitioners
A different means of gathering data

• Observation

Observation entails...

• monitoring a system in use, by watching others using it
  - and perhaps using it oneself as well

'This technique is often used when the validity of data collected through other methods is in question or when the complexity of certain aspects of the system prevents a clear explanation by the end-users'.

(Whitten & Bentley 1998: 628)

Pros and cons of observation

According to Satzinger et al. (2004: 133),

- 'More than any other activity, observing the business processes in action will help you understand the business functions'
- But does that tell you much about what a new system will look like?
- In addition, 'observation often makes the users nervous'
Placing observation in context

Consider the following exchange between apprentice and baker in a Parisian patisserie (Bertaux 1982: 106):

Once, the boss looks at me, and says to me:
– What, you’re left-handed then?
– Why, no, I say.
– So, why are you holding the blade in your left hand?
– Well, I’m doing it like you do!
– Yes, but, I am left-handed!

Next week

Project Management

References


