

Introduction

Organisations as Worlds of Management Tools

Let's imagine an ordinary employee, Smith, a member of the marketing team of a fictional company whose name, Tools Ltd, echoes the theme of this book. On a Monday morning after a pleasant weekend Smith goes into the entrance hall of a multi-company building in a business district on the outskirts of a large city. It is 09.10 when he presents his smart card at the doorway. In doing this he encounters a technical arrangement that does not give him any more pause for thought than the turnstile on the underground, his usual mode of transport. The door opens obligingly for him, but of course if it hadn't done so Smith would have had an anxious moment. Then again, the security guard would have come and put things right. It would have been just one of those little vexations of modern life.

Smith now approaches the array of lifts that will take him up to his company's offices, on the twentieth floor. In Tools Ltd reception, he smiles at the receptionist, and, looking up, glances absent-mindedly at the Charter of Company Values displayed behind the reception desk. It comprises the commitments to which each 'Toolsian' should subscribe. These amount to ten points ('Like the Ten Commandments', Smith says sardonically to himself): ethics, clarity, professionalism, timekeeping, transparency, a devoted project team, responsiveness, safety, follow-up, traceability. At the Chairman's invitation, each of the workers in the company has signed the charter 'to demonstrate his or her commitment'. How far does it commit them? It is difficult to say exactly. We would have to examine carefully how the document is used, the view management and employees take of it, and any potential sanctions for failing to respect its values. At all events, 'The Charter' at Tools Ltd is not insignificant. Less material than the automatic door, it has no less regulatory

2 INTRODUCTION

function, and numerous deciding factors relate to it. It aims to embed in employees a vision of reality that is profitable for the company's management and to stimulate conduct that corresponds to that vision. From this perspective it appears to be a genuine 'management tool'. However, it could be seen very differently: far from being an effective instrument, it could be doing little more than flagging up a vague ambition in a public place. This is because the quality of a management tool depends on its context.

As he goes on, Smith submits to being checked by a different smart card from the one that gave him access to the lifts. This one has greater significance. With the exception of the management team, everyone at Tools Ltd scans this particular smart card; there is guaranteed working time, plus flexible time, and by the end of the week all employees must have completed their contracted hours. It is possible to be credited with hours and pool them to take half-days off. Now and again Smith tries to take a Friday afternoon off in order to extend his weekend, which he has just done. This 'smart-carding' also constitutes a management tool. It defines work periods and checks and interprets time with reference to regulations associated with labour law and internal constraints (operating rules). It covers a broad spectrum. It has an influence not only on Smith's professional life, but also on the organisation of his private life – those Friday afternoons he is fond of – and his relations with those around him. And with many Smiths benefiting from similar arrangements, every Friday afternoon it adds to the volume of traffic on the roads and to the demand on public transport.

Our hero makes his way into the open space, thinking nostalgically of the time when individual managers had their own office. He remembers the arguments the management team made at the time to justify the new-style workspaces, which, they said, 'allow for more conviviality and collaboration between teams, and improved circulation of information, and in this way foster transparency'. He greets his colleagues Sophie and Chris, already at their desks. They get up and invite him to go with them to the coffee machine area. They

tell him that there will be a delay in developing the new customer relationship management (CRM) application. Smith is not an IT expert but he understands clearly that this could be a potential source of problems for him: he is responsible for the quality of the information about customers' characteristics supplied to the sales force. There are all kinds of customers: good ones, who generate a substantial amount of business, help think up new products and are loyal to the company; and bad ones who pay late or not at all, complain all the time, demand information before buying from the competition and end up costing more than they bring in. Smith's role is to make the most of this information and disseminate it. To do this he relies on customer categorisation. CRM and the analysis of customers are tools used to inform the company's commercial policy.

Back at his desk Smith settles down in front of his computer, presses the start button and a few seconds later enters a password (his daughter's date of birth). Following an unvarying procedure he then consults the shared diary and discovers with alarm that he has a staff meeting from 10 a.m. to 12 noon – and he had planned to spend the morning thoroughly reorganising his files! His expression darkens: 'They might have warned me!' He goes to his message-board, which requires a new password (the last six digits of his mobile phone number). He finds a message from his boss, marked top priority, detailing the aim of the meeting ('Setting up a continuous improvement approach in the marketing department') and inviting everyone to consider what contribution they could make. An attachment specifies the nature of the approach and presents a schedule. Smith notes that the message was sent to everybody on Saturday morning. 'That's just not on!' he growls.

Smith gets to the meeting room a few minutes before 10 a.m. Prominent on the back wall are 'The Principles of a Good Meeting' (Responsiveness, Synergy and Innovation, Interaction, Group decision-making based on consensus and commitment). Tools Ltd is very keen on valorising effective conduct. Each principle is illustrated with amusing cartoon-type images. At the other end of the meeting

4 INTRODUCTION

table an unfamiliar figure is busying himself with his tablet and the video-projector. A small group of colleagues begins to arrive, including Sophie, who sits next to him.

The head of department enters around 10 a.m., greets those present with a slight nod and grumbles about latecomers. Then he opens the meeting and hands over to the unfamiliar figure, who turns out to be a consultant. He details the 1–2–3 method on which the continuous improvement approach will be based. He explains that this pragmatic method, perfected in the 1980s in the USA, is acclaimed by today's top companies, to which it has brought considerable increases in productivity. A short training period will ensure success. 'Any questions?' 'Yes, what are the cost implications of the proposed training, which has not been allowed for in section budgets?' 'How do we keep track of the return on investment?' 'Will it be necessary to use scorecards [an array of indicators associated with objectives]?' The consultant gives perfunctory replies ('ROI calculations are integrated into the 1–2–3 method'), as does the head of department ('As for the implications, we'll see'; 'Scorecards, excellent idea – make a proposal'). Hands go up, with more questions, but it is already 12.05 and the time for discussion is over. The head of department closes the meeting: 'I must stress the seriousness of this approach, which will be shown in the performance appraisal system.' Sophie turns to Smith, 'Well, what do you make of that?' 'Typical Monday morning', mutters our hero, who is given to sarcasm.

At this point we begin to get an idea about what sorts of things are called 'management tools' (charter of values, staff card, continuous improvement approach, principles of a good meeting, 1–2–3 method, cost implications, return on investments, scorecards, performance appraisal system, and so on). We notice the kinship they share with other technical facilities (controlled access, computers, message-boards, video-projectors), forms of time organisation (flexible timetable), space (open space), and company context (Tools Ltd, aptly named, loves all kinds of rationalisation). We also see the diversity of human agents caught up in their use to various degrees and concerned

with their effects both inside and outside the organisation. And we begin to see how we might fill a book dedicated to management tools and their deployment.

It is probably clear from this introduction that management tools interest us in relation to individuals, groups and human society in general. We approach the subject from a social analysis perspective.

This approach takes management tools out of the practical and utilitarian context to which they are often consigned and maintains that management techniques warrant close examination. Both management and management tools are important to understand for social scientists: we cannot disregard their significance to organisations and the economy. Moreover, we cannot understand organisational behaviour if we fail to pay attention to management tools and techniques. The stakes are also theoretical: taking an interest in management tools beyond the narrow field of their use enables us to see things that are not otherwise apparent.

The social analysis of management tools and techniques considers those as social facts. Social sciences – sociology in particular – allow us to avoid a strictly rational consideration of management actions and to re-embed them within social relationships and structures: social representations, value systems, rules of the game, and power relations can illuminate and even explain management actions. But the conceptual foundation of social analysis of management techniques is anthropological, in the sense that it puts to work all of the human and social sciences. The history and philosophy of techniques provide the core understanding of the relationship between people and techniques. Psychology and ergonomics offer analytical frameworks for systems of instrumented activities. Institutional economics prioritises the influence of rules in individual agents' decision-making. Lastly, management science itself has amassed a series of research results that call the classic vision into question.

Academic work in the disciplines we have mentioned is substantial but highly disparate: we miss a structured synthesis enabling students and researchers to go deeper in the field. Our aim is to fill

6 INTRODUCTION

that gap. This book has been conceived as a methodological and reflective work that will give the reader an extensive, detailed and systematic review of the literature in the field, while taking care to locate each element in the context of a broad interrogation.

We hope that our approach will facilitate the development of a body of research in various social science disciplines (management science, sociology, political science, social psychology) that will embark on an analysis of social and organisational phenomena through an attention to the tools of organisational activities. Our book focuses on the 'management tools' used to coordinate the activities of organisations (mainly companies) and to check their results. We believe that it can also provide inspiration and a methodology for the study of what we call 'political instruments' – that is, tools that aim to manipulate actors and situations outside the organisation, not for profit but to enhance the well-being of individuals (in terms of education, health, safety, social participation) and the natural world (protecting biodiversity, managing natural resources), or to regulate and arbitrate between conflicting interests in diverse fields.¹

There are three parts to this book.

The first is devoted to broad issues and to establishing a conceptual basis for considering the instrumentation of management. First (Chapter 1), we introduce the big questions that we address throughout the book: What is the discussion of management techniques based on? What is a management tool? How do management tools relate to management techniques? We then (Chapter 2) examine traditional approaches drawn from organisation theory, viewing them both as departure points and as frontiers to be challenged.

¹ The state can use both 'management tools' (for managing its finances or personnel) and 'policy instruments' (for example, aid procedures for certain populations, mechanisms for authorising certain activities, quality norms or obligatory safety practices). The 'new public management' tends to blur the frontiers between the instrumentation of public policies and the management of the services that put them into effect, for example through the development of evaluation practices as it is often a short step between the evaluation of public policies to the performance of those enacting the policy.

The second part of the book addresses the analysis of management tools through ten theses emerging from a full review of the literature. These theses are grouped into three categories of approach. The first (Chapter 3, critical approaches) examines management tools as instrumentalising and fostering the phenomena of domination and exploitation. The second (Chapter 4, institutionalist approaches) examines the role played by institutions in the development of management tools. The third (Chapter 5, interactional approaches) looks at the interaction between management tools and actors. These approaches are studied systematically using the same analytical framework that aims to reveal their particular contributions.

The third part (Chapter 6, the agency of management tools) provides a synthetic framework that draws on the theses discussed above to answer two theoretical questions, which are also practical ones: How do tools act and influence situations? What are their real functions beyond those officially stated?

We conclude by elaborating a synthesis of our social analysis perspective and demonstrating the contribution this approach can make to some classic questions in social sciences.

By the end of this book the reader will judge whether we have fulfilled our aim. We hope that at the very least he or she will have acquired an overview of all the recent theoretical advances on the subject of the instrumentation of management and will be equipped with an array of approaches associated with theoretical frameworks. While these approaches differ, they all challenge traditional approaches and open up new research perspectives, constituting highly effective instruments for analysing numerous phenomena.