

## 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

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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

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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

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## PART I    **Theoretical Foundations for Thinking about Management Instrumentation**

The purpose of Part I is to lay the groundwork for the analysis of management instruments by positioning the study of management tools in the broader perspective of the study of techniques and the analysis of classical management tools. In so doing, this Part clarifies the historical and anthropological foundations for the study of management tools and provides the liminal definitions of the notions used in the remainder of the book (e.g., objects, techniques, tools). Part I is composed of two chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the debate on views of management tools, as they relate to the technical field, and as they relate to the social field. We identify three habitual attitudes to the technical field: denial of the technical, technophilia, and technophobia. These ideal-type stances translate the behaviours most often adopted in response to management tools, which are considered as autonomous objects cut off from social reality. They are closed-ended and cannot grasp the full complexity and relevance of these tools. Drawing on the anthropology of techniques, and thereby stressing the specific nature of management techniques applied to human interactions, we intend to break away from the indifference/attraction/repulsion triptych. This reflection leads to a proposed description of management tools and their various aspects.

Chapter 2 continues this reflection with a presentation of the traditional approaches to management tools in organisation theory. These approaches oscillate between rationality and normativity (Barley and Kunda, 1992). For rational theories, the stance is generally technophile. Normative theories, which were constructed as an alternative to rational theories, adopt a stance that is sometimes technophobic, and sometimes in denial of techniques, pointing up the role of



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informal factors in the organisation. Based on this reading of the foundations of thought in management sciences, we describe how the theory has evolved as increasing attention has been paid to management tools. In its time, the socio-technical approach instigated at the Tavistock Institute in the 1950s, which opposed the prevailing technological determinism of the period, marked a significant shift in the way techniques are considered in organisational change. Behavioural organisation theory then contributed further pioneering work, taking an interest in the formal rules that are the very essence of management tools. This paved the way for an expanding body of research at the intersection between management tools and social behaviours which has been ongoing since the 1980s as reflections have broadened out. In France, the initiative was taken by the top engineering schools' management research laboratories. Elsewhere, most particularly in the United Kingdom and primarily in accounting, sociology-inspired research began to develop. By the turn of the twenty-first century, social science research had multiplied, and the following parts of this book are mainly devoted to this more recent work.

Part I thus circumscribes our approach and highlights the specific contribution of the work, which is presented from Part II onwards. Chapter 1 closely defines our proposed social science-inspired perspective on management tools, which makes them into remarkable analysers of the contemporary world. Chapter 2 reviews the way they have traditionally been approached by social sciences and organisation theory, underlining the gaps and blind spots in these approaches, and the path beyond that is proposed in the rest of the book.

## I Theoretical Foundations

### *From the Study of Technique to the Analysis of Management Tools*

The need to take into account technique in analyses of social phenomena now seems obvious, given the place that it occupies in our industrialised societies, which George Friedmann, one of the founders of the sociology of work, said arises within a ‘technical civilisation’ (Friedmann, 1964). And technique does not exist on its own without the technical objects that the tools constitute. However, for a long time, objects considered as something belonging to the natural order, appeared as intruders in the human sciences (Blandin, 2002, p. 7).

Denaturalisation of objects began in the course of the 1960s, in France, with the semiotics of objects by Roland Barthes (Barthes, 1972) and his successors, particularly Baudrillard (1996) and in the 1980s in Great Britain with the emergence of material culture studies (Buchli, 2002; Lemonnier, 1986), and their interest in the relationships between objects, culture and power. A radical change took place at the beginning of the 1990s with researchers focusing on studying the role of objects in social arrangements (Conein et al., 1993) or even in endowing objects with real social agency (Callon, 1984; Latour, 2000). We identify ourselves as part of that movement.

What is the specific role of a tool among objects? François Dagognet (1989, 1996) supplies the groundwork for a clarification. As a philosopher of technique he first proposes to distinguish objects from things. He explains that if a thing (a lump of wood, a stone or a leaf, for example) relates to nature, then the object relates directly to the subject, by way of the human intervention that created it and the technique that allowed it to be produced. Dagognet then points out that the tool fits into a particular category of objects: it is an ‘object of the object’ (1996, pp. 20–2), which is used to intervene with other objects.