

I have finished my doctoral studies. I am continuing my research project on organizational governance. More specifically, my objective remains to develop general design principles that allow for governance that is systemic and not predictive. In this short essay, I outline the highlights of my research project in four areas: context, preliminary findings, research avenues and current design of my inductive study.

### **1. Context**

I am using an inductive approach that dictates an anchoring of the theoretical to the practical; thus the field represents the starting point. In the past year, I started my study with the Commission des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail (CNESST). The CNESST "promotes labour rights and obligations and ensures that Québec workers and employers respect these rights and obligations." (CNESST, s.d.) It therefore works in the insurance sector. This is a large organization that deals with major governance challenges.

In 2015, CNESST introduced the program called *Réseau pour la prestation électronique de service* [electronic service delivery network]. The objective is to improve expertise and reduce the use of paper forms that are very costly. The program includes three projects: Employer, Supplier and Worker.

The development projects for electronic service delivery are over budget and do not meet the expectations of users. Therefore, the conversion rate of users to electronic forms is below expectations. However, the web service development team is larger and has more resources than in comparable organizations.

To improve its development process, CNESST called in a group of consultants. They encouraged CNESST to review its method of developing its web services by focusing development on the end user (UX) and moving away from cascade development. They also recommended adopting a prototyping approach to improve quality and effectiveness.

CNESST then approached me to assess the outcomes of this new prototyping approach in the Worker and Employer projects. The issue seemed fertile to me with respect to governance: the coordination of independent teams that work in an unpredictable and complex environment. For me, it is an opportunity to better define my research problem.

## **2. Preliminary findings**

Involving the client at the heart of development could result in greater participation of users in electronic services. Analog approaches, widespread in the industry, have proven their worth. However, observations have highlighted barriers to implementing the new method.

When difficulties arise, teams tend to resort to old work habits. At CNESST, the use of internal expertise still tends to take precedence over the viewpoint of the end user. Moreover, major shortcomings in change management were raised by participants. Therefore, it is likely that the project is triggering extra costs and delays.

It is true that CNESST must deal with many specific and complicated constraints. Small organizations appear to benefit from more flexibility when it comes to innovating. This is especially true with respect to governance and the obligation to provide accessible products. Nevertheless, other public organizations, in the world and even in Quebec, have already adopted innovative development methods.

Successful organizations draw inspiration from philosophies, not methods. In practice, methods sometimes obstruct the most effective solutions. For example, it is not always desirable to be agile. When the parameters are more stable and predictable, cascade methods remain effective. This means being agile with its context.

Uncertainty is big in the design of electronic services. The goal is to develop a method tailored to the context through experimentation and borrowing from existing methods. To foster collective learning, priority must be placed on learning from experience and asking the right questions. However, while experimentation is the most effective path, it is certainly not the easiest. It requires a good dose of perseverance.

## **3. Research avenues**

Palpable tensions between unpredictability, desire to innovate and control make CNESST a perfect anchor for the research problem. Moreover, the information technology sector is fertile ground for studying governance. The innovation for which this sector is known appears to give it the ability to catalyze the unpredictability: preparation of evolving products and services developed by iteration, less mechanical work organization and continuous adaptation to a highly volatile industry.

The first contacts with the field helped uncover several shortcomings in the scientific literature with respect to organizational governance. For example, the conventional approaches to governance focus on control and predictability to counter the unpredictability. However, volatile and unpredictable environments do not appear to be conducive to such approaches. By their own admission, the managers and leaders lack the approaches and tools to face these challenges.

#### **4. Toward an action-research project**

What was supposed to be a short stay to help me define the problem turned into an action-research project. CNESST asked me to help it transform two aspects of governance: 1) establish governance principles for the independent software development teams; 2) reflect on the coordination of all departments involved in electronic service delivery (security, infrastructures, customer service, etc.).

The action-research project will help me bridge the gap that exists between theory and practice. This research approach will help me generate useful scientific knowledge while attacking a managerial issue. Therefore, I will go beyond a simple description, explanation or understanding of the phenomena often associated with conventional research to work closely with the organization to develop new theories through practice. Thus the research is conducted with the people, not on the people. In the end, I hope that my research will help outline principles for governance that is systematic and not predictive.