Repeatable Collaboration Processes for Mature Organizational Policy Making

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Abstract. Organizational policy making processes are complex processes in which many people are involved. Very often the results of these processes are not what the different stakeholders intended. Since policies play a major role in key decision making concerning the future of organizations, our research aims at improving the policies on the basis of collaboration.

In order to achieve this goal, we apply the practice of *collaboration engineering* to the field of organizational policy making. We use the *thinklet* as a basic building block for facilitating intervention to create a *repeatable* pattern of collaboration among people working together towards achieving a goal. Our case studies show that policy making processes do need collaboration support indeed and that the resulting policies can be expected to improve.

1 Introduction

In order to regulate organizational processes, organizations use policies as an instrument to guide and bound these processes. A policy [1] is a guide that establishes parameters for making decisions; it provides guidelines to channel a manager's thinking in a specific direction.

Policies are created in a policy making process, which involves an iterative and collaborative process requiring an interaction amongst three broad streams of activities: problem definition, solution proposals and a consensus based on selection of the line of action to take. The core participants of a policy making process must be involved in complex and key decision making processes within the organization themselves, if they are to be effective in representing organizational interests. Explicit policies are a key indicator for successful organizational decision-making.

The complexity of policy making processes in organizations may be described as having to cope with large problems. Examples include: information technology (IT) procurement, Information Systems security, software testing, etc. These problems may be affected by *(i)* unclear and contradictory targets set for the policy goals; *(ii)* policy actors being involved in one or more aspects of the process, with potentially different values/interests, perceptions of the situation, and policy preferences. This is in line with [2] who also describe complex problems to involve many actors due to the need to mobilize many resources; disagreement about the nature of the problem and the desired solutions due to the many actors involved; and complex decision making because mostly different networks and institutional structures are involved. Policy makers and

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others involved in the policy making process need information to understand the dynamics of a particular problem and develop options for action [3]. A policy is not made in a vacuum. It is affected by social and economic conditions, prevailing political values and the public mood at any given time, as well as the local cultural norms, among other variables.

A policy making process is a collaborative design process whose attention is devoted to the structure of the policy, to the context and constraints (concerns) of the policy and its creation process, and the actual decisions and events that occur [4]. We aim to examine, and address, those concerns that have a collaborative nature. Such concerns include the involvement of a variety of actors resulting in a situation where multiple backgrounds, incompatible interests, and diverging areas of interest all have to be brought together to produce an acceptable policy result. Due to the collaborative nature of a policy making process, its quality is greatly determined by a well-managed collaborative process. We look towards the field of collaboration engineering to be able to deal with such concerns. Collaboration engineering is concerned with the design of recurring collaborative processes using collaboration techniques and technology [5].

The collaboration technologies that are used to support group work in collaborative problem-solving processes are based on and contain fundamental assumptions (for example, meeting processes should be: open; rational; fair) with regard to how people work together [6]. More examples and details of the assumptions can be seen in [6]. To determine successful application of collaboration technologies, the correctness of these assumptions is a vital aspect. Group Support Systems (GSS) is an example of collaboration technologies that have offered added value in terms of anonymity, and parallel communication, among others, to people working together towards achieving a goal [7]. Inter-organizational policy making networks are an environment where GSS have been applied. It was found out that GSS are most effective in creativity tasks than for preference tasks and mixed motive tasks in such an environment [6]. Our study deals with an exploration of usage of collaborative processes for the realization of good policies in organizational policy making. We use thinkLets to design the collaborative policy making process. To safe guard the GSS principles (assumptions) in the thinkLets we use in this study, we adopt the work of Vreede and Bruijn [6]. For instance, we use GSS principles such as anonymity and parallel work in creativity tasks, while for preference and consensus tasks we apply group-oral discussions.

The main purpose of our paper is to offer a repeatable collaboration process for the realization of good policies in a collaborative policy making effort; and to investigate how this process can be improved by the support of collaboration engineering. The standard repeatable collaborative policy making process presented in this paper is originally designed using a modular approach based on given motivations (see section 5). Nonetheless, we use one standard process due to the constraints in size of the sample population, and the levels of stakeholders involved in implementation of the repeatable collaborative policy making process (see section 4).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly explains the concepts of collaboration engineering (CE), policy, policy making processes and the collaborative concerns that may arrive from these processes. We then continue in section 3 with an exploration of the potential role of collaboration engineering in addressing