

Which side of the net?

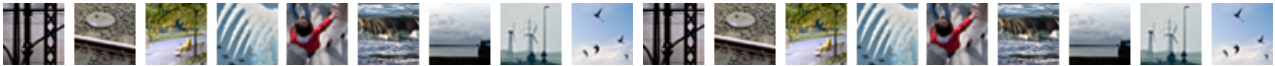
February 20, 2010/JPJ

Serendipity is such a nice word. It is easy to say, it sounds good and it has the scent of something magic. When you experience serendipity, you feel happy, relieved and grateful. You have a sense of having finally arrived at your destination – and at the same time you confidently realize that you have only just started your journey.

Thanks to Emma, Jo, Vicky and the Bulk Buy community project group serendipity struck me at full force on Friday, February 12, when I visited SILK in Kent! The moments of happiness and mental calm that I experienced Maidstone are not easily described in words.

Imagine something like a tennis court. It is a clearly marked field with a net to separate the two halves of the field. In each half numerous people are busily engaged in seemingly very complex activities. The activities are not sports activities, and certainly not tennis. Likewise, the persons who obviously keep each other busy passing numerous small and large balls passing over the net are not tennis players. This is the hectic field of public social services! The balls are carefully prepared and well-measured packages of social services. One half of the field is populated by social service staff from the public sector. In the other half of the field, you find all kinds of citizens. It is difficult for an outsider to see what goes on in the field. Administrators and analysts at the side line block the view while carefully registering each ball and the citizen who manage to catch it. A continuous flow of reports and overviews pass from the administrators' hands to invisible decision makers. Most balls are only going one way over the net – from the public sector to the citizens. Some balls are left in the field, since they are too difficult to handle. Quite a few balls land outside the field, out of reach for citizens. Some citizens have caught a large number of balls and are dragging them along as heavy burdens. Others have their hands empty. It seems as if every standardised ball they try to catch is too small, too big, too slippery or simply not handy enough. While trying to cope with the balls and positioning themselves to catch new balls thrown to them, citizens seem to be oblivious about what is going on around them. Ball budgets are tight. Gradually fewer social services pass over the net. Frustrations increase on both sides of the net.

Although this may seem to be a typical scene from the theatre of the absurd, it is not. It is not the plot of a play by Samuel Beckett or Ionesco. It is a day in the life of the service society.



What is so remarkable about SILK and their activities is that they seem to be able to break the spell of absurdity in social services. Not by applying sophisticated models which are so often proudly presented at numerous conferences, but by keeping things simple! Thus, they manage to make things look easy.

I wonder who wrote that “Complexity means distracted effort. Simplicity means focused effort. Simplicity is not natural. You have to choose to make it happen. To get simplicity you have to want it badly enough”? Whoever it was, I agree with the statements, just as I believe that Emma and the other SILK people will.

In particular, perhaps, SILK has been successful in abandoning traditional thinking which they see as barriers. A few examples which I picked up during my (all too short) visit:

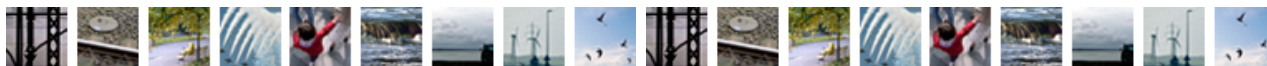
- Taking the image of current service societies described above as a starting point, you will certainly find SILK on the citizens’ side of the net. Others have done that before. There is a co-creation/co-design/co-production trend which is gaining supporters in many countries. SILK moves radically beyond that trend! They readily admit to the community groups they work with, that the public social services appear to be most suitable to service providers. This is a crucial (and courageous!) element of the SILK approach, since it allows them to enter open discussions with the groups. It is an example of what they to me described as: “facilitating must be reaching in from the inside!”
- Public funding may not be necessary in order to achieve results – sometimes funding can be a barrier. (The Bulk Buy group has not succeeded in spending the funding available to them. Jackie Pye from the group does not hesitate to claim that public funding does not make their project go round!)
- Forget about failures! If you practise “reaching in from the inside”, failures are not an issue! You will have to accept that solutions emerge along with “a shared understanding of problems”. Achievements are right at hand if you are willing to follow a track which will allow you to approach them.
- Many leaders of public sector services speak about the need for scaling up innovation. However, scaling up innovative solutions loses its relevance once you realise what the nature of your task is – it is about people and not about standardised systems.
- Instead of speaking about social innovation, you may choose to be more specific about your mission. We all need a more porous public sector and we need to explore ways of achieving it.

It is such a relief to meet people with whom you can share a dedication to exploring better ways for the public sector to develop!

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On the train back to London from Maidstone this memorable Friday, somebody had left The Economist Winter 2009 issue of “Intelligent Life” on the seat next to me. My mind was still buzzing with thoughts and ideas after my visit to Maidstone. Absentmindedly I skimmed a few articles enjoying the cool work of professional photographers – when a headline caught my attention: “Are We Too Professional?” I shall only quote the first few lines of the article:

“It’s an unstoppable buzzword. But has professionalism gone too far? As a sportsman, Ed Smith saw it backfire at first hand, now he sees this in other fields, from “The Wire” to the banks. A young nurse, interviewed recently on BBC Radio 4’s “Today” programme, was asked what she considered the two most important qualities in her job. “Being caring and compassionate”, she replied. “Not being professional?” Humphrys countered, emphasising that her answer was very unusual. “No, not being professional,” she confirmed. How did the concept of professionalism become so dominant? And why is it assumed to be innately desirable?”

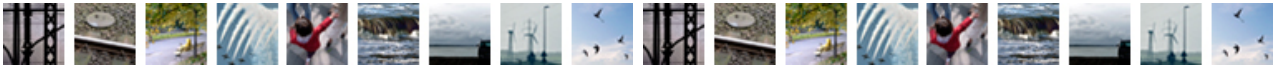
I am happy that Emma, Jo and Vicky took time to discuss with me, and I am very grateful that the Bulk Buy group had the patience to introduce me to many aspects of their activities on a busy Friday morning. At MidtLab, we look forward to expand our relationship with SILK and to act as a partner to the group in Session House in Maidstone!

Jens Peter Jensen
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