

INTEGRATING MEETING RESULTS IN ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract: Electronic Meeting Systems have the potential to improve meeting processes and outcomes. However, success depends on many factors, one of them being the level of organisational integration that can be attained. Our view is that current EMS offer very weak integration, especially in what concerns the post-meeting phase, when meeting results should flow to the organisation and induce the production of goods and services or influence people's opinions. In order to tackle this problem, we developed a framework, based on the concept of meeting genre, specially tailored for EMS support. The paper illustrates the application of the model to a specific organisation, based on a sample of 214 decisions taken in meeting sessions of a management team.

1. INTRODUCTION

Meetings are the most widespread and – possibly – the most expensive way of coordinating teams of people in organisations. We have seen in the literature that a meeting may cost up to US\$1000 per hour in salary costs; and that there are more than three billion meetings per year just in the United States (Nunamaker, et al., 1997). Because of this huge potential market, Electronic Meeting Systems (EMS) have been viewed since the beginning of the 1980's as the Holy Grail to improve meeting processes and outcomes (Fjermestad and Hiltz, 1999).

The role of EMS can be broadly defined as facilitating two fundamental aspects of group work: content and process (Miranda and Bostrom, 1999). EMS change the static contents of traditional meetings (e.g. data in a flip chart) into dynamic contents, which people

can easily manipulate, model and share. EMS have also the potential to change traditional meeting processes, either by increasing participation, stimulating collaboration, guiding individual and group tasks to assure coherent results or avoiding conflicts.

Unfortunately, the success of EMS seems to depend on too many factors. For instance, Dickson et al. (1996) found out that some types of process support decrease group effectiveness (in particular, inflexible types of process support). Miranda and Bostrom (1999) also found out that some types of content support have a negative impact on meeting outcomes while others have positive impact (e.g. anonymity).

To complicate these matters, the role of EMS may not be confined to support meetings. They can extend their support to meeting preparation (Antunes and Ho, 1999a, 1999b), for instance with the purpose of defining an

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agenda or clarifying preliminary positions that people may want to bring to meetings. EMS can also extend their role to the post-meeting phase, for instance to support evaluating the outcomes or increasing commitment.

But how to characterise post-meeting processes? They primarily deal with organisational integration and effectiveness. In fact, independently of the quality of the outcomes produced by a meeting, they must flow to the organisation and induce the production of goods and services or influence people's opinions. If a decision is a consequence of a question or request, a response must be sent to the ones who made the request. If it was decided that somebody would execute a task, so this person must be informed and instructed. During the meeting, participants may notice that there is not enough information to take a decision. In this situation, information must be requested to other internal or external entities. At the same time, all these events must be organised and orchestrated. This paper describes such a framework.

2. RELATED WORK

Few researchers have discussed EMS support to the post-meeting phase. One of them is Milan Aiken, who has for some time been experimenting the integration of expert systems with EMS (Aiken and Carlisle, 1992; Aiken and Govindarajulu, 1994; Colon et al., 1994; Aiken et al., 1994; Aiken and Vanjani, 1998). Among the proposed systems, there is an Expert Session Analyser (ESA) imposing structure to meeting outcomes such that they can be used as inputs to other systems. Later, a data retrieval agent (Aiken and Govindarajulu, 1994; Colon et al., 1994) and a natural language translation agent (Aiken et al., 1994) were also proposed. These new systems organise the results of brainstorming sessions (Aiken and Carlisle, 1992). Another tool, designated idea consolidator, was proposed to automate the process of organising ideas (Aiken and Carlisle, 1992). This tool condenses text, by identifying key words and matching them with users' comments.

Raikundalia and Rees (1995) proposed a system named LoganWeb, which is an electronic meeting document manager for the World Wide Web. LoganWeb tools provide meeting transcripts with information in various readable and navigable forms.

3. FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING POST-MEETING PROCESSES

Post-meeting processes primarily deal with organisational integration and effectiveness of meeting outcomes, which ideally will flow to the organisation and induce the production of goods and services or influence people towards positive emotions and constructive relations.

One recent research attempt to characterise organisational communication in concrete terms is based on the concept of genre. The concept of genre was imported from the literature (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992), but was generalised to the organisational context (see, for example, Crowston and Williams, 1999). A genre of organisational communication is an institutionalised communicative action (e.g. memo, report, resume, enquiry, letter, meeting, announcement, expense form, training seminar).

Genres are characterised by their purpose and form. The purpose is not a private motive, since the community members must socially recognise it. In an empirical study examining the communication exchanged by a group of workers that relied on electronic mail for coordination, Orlikowski and Yates (1994) identified the following purposes: informational message; comment on group process or use of medium; proposed rule, feature or convention; request for information, clarification or elaboration; reply to previous message or messages ; and residual category. The form of the genre refers to observable aspects of the communication, such as medium, structural features and linguistic features. In the previously cited study (Orlikowski and Yates, 1994), several forms were also identified: embedded message, graphical element, heading, opening, sign-off, sub-heading, subject line and word or phrase emphasis.

Genres may be linked together in a way that constitutes a communicative process. This circumstance creates a genre system; with interdependent genres that are enacted in some typical sequence. Orlikowski and Yates (1998) presented such a genre system intended to characterise meetings. According to these researchers, a meeting is a composition of four genres: meeting logistics; meeting agenda; the meeting itself; and the meeting minutes.

Of course, this genre system is so broad that it is hardly useful to describe post-meeting processes in detail. However, it provides a starting point for studying the issue. One way to proceed in this subject is either by decomposing or specialising the genre system (Malone et al., 1997). Through decomposition, we can “divide” the system in a set of components. The meeting may be divided in a set of issues (or decisions). The agenda may be decomposed in agenda topics and the minutes may also be decomposed in communication statements. Typically, each agenda topic has a direct relation with a meeting issue and communication statement.

We should note however that decomposition rapidly reaches a point where the notion of genre is void, because social recognition is lost. So, we may try to specialise the genre system instead. Specific logistics, agenda, meeting and minutes genres may come together to form specialised genre systems, such as strategic meetings, operational meetings, brainstorm meetings, etc. Contrary to the decomposition approach, specialisation preserves social recognition.

We thus arrive to a framework for analysing post-meeting processes based on the communication of socially recognisable communicative acts – genres – which, combined together, assemble communicative processes – genre systems. Genre systems may then be decomposed and specialised. Finally, the post-meeting process comprises agenda topics, meeting issues, communicative statements, all combined in different manners to form specific genre systems. In the next section we will show how this framework can be used in practice.

4. USING THE FRAMEWORK

Genre analysis is not an abstract categorisation exercise, but closely tied to the situated activities in the community using them. It is what the community members (or at least the most skilled ones) recognise as genres, that counts. The situated nature of genres makes it difficult to develop post-meeting support without analysing how the communities of people do their meetings and transfer outcomes to the organisation.

As an attempt to understand these matters and, at the same time, assess the proposed framework, we analysed a long collection of outcomes produced by meetings of directive members of a public organisation. This list was composed by 214 decisions taken in 30 meeting sessions, which have taken place during a period of 4 year (from 1996 to 1999).

The genre analysis followed these steps: (1) Identify logistic genres; (2) Divide each meeting in decisions; (3) Identify genres of decisions; (4) Identify genres of agenda topics; (5) Identify genres of meeting minutes; (6) Identify genre systems.

Only one logistic genre was found, because decisions have a high level of formalisation and the regiment of this organisation establishes date and time.

The minutes from the 30 meetings were analysed and decomposed in decisions. The number of decisions per meeting was very irregular, from 3 to 16 decisions. The decisions were then grouped again by similarity, which produced the following genres: “decide actions”, “decide unitary plan”, “postpone decision” and “decide continuous plan”.

“Decide action” is a genre that groups all decisions that require a specific action to be performed by a specific actor, in the organisation or outside the organisation.

“Decide unitary plan” is a genre of decision that results in planning one activity.

“Postpone decision” it is the situation where there is not enough information available to decide, or there is a particular reason not to decide at the present moment.

“Decide continuous plan” is a genre that results in the production of politics, rules and

regulations that have a certain level of continuity or frequency of use.

The following genres of agenda topics were then identified: occasional requests and repetitive requests.

Occasional requests are those topics which appearance was not programmed by the organisation.

Repetitive requests are those requests which appearance depends on a pattern, e.g. the annual budget.

Finally, it was time to categorise communication statements in genres. All these genres, including its purposes, forms, and receivers are presented in Figure 1.

Genres	Purpose	Form	Receiver
Response	Respond to some formal request	Decision value: Y/N	Who requested the response: -External entities -Other services
Instruction	Order/Instruct formally some action	Task definition	Explicitly defined (Individual workers or departments)
Document approval	Approve some document	Decision value: Y/N	Not explicitly defined (Only by content)
Agenda	Schedule for later Postpone decision	Agenda	Meeting
Rule, regulation, explanation	Define an organizational rule		Not explicitly defined (Only by content)
Document transfer	Transfer document (Approve transfer)	Attached document	Explicitly defined
Information request	Ask information		Explicitly defined
Delegation	Delegate power to a person or a commission	Must indicate the mission and name of commission or person	People involved
Information	Inform/clarify		Explicitly defined

Figure 1 – Communicative statement Genres

Having accomplished the decomposition of genres, we carry on to the specialisation phase, analysing the correspondences between agenda topics, decisions and communication statements. The obtained genre systems are compiled in Figure 2.

Those genre systems were named according to the decision genre: decision for actions, decision to create unitary plan, decision to create continuous plan and postpone decision. The lack of reference to the logistic genre is because there is only one such genre. Note also that the information genre is not connected, because it can be attached to any of the genre systems analysed.

In the Figure 2 it is also shown the relative usage of each genre system. 10 decisions were

classified in more than one decision genre. Then, the most used genres were the decision action and decision-continuous plan.

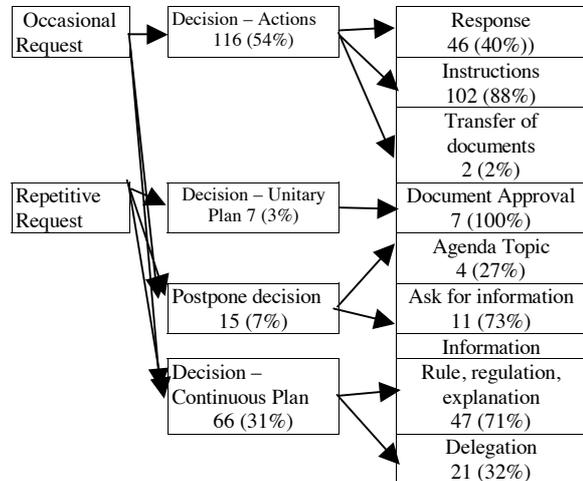


Figure 2 – Genre systems

This process of classification and the final results obtained showed us some characteristics of genres:

- There is a need of a relatively small number of genres. For example, in the case of communication statements, a large percentage of usage corresponds to “instructions”.

- Some decision genres may produce more than one genre.

- Each genre can be decomposed in sub-genres with very slight differences (different receivers, different forms). For instance, responses can be sent either to users, employees or external entities.

5. DISCUSSION

Our final aim is to develop EMS technology capable to support the post-meeting phase, where meeting results should easily and efficiently flow into the organisation.

In this context, which are the contributions of the framework proposed in this paper? We believe that there are two contributions. First, the framework characterises the post-meeting process, making the logical division of meetings in logistics, agenda topics, decisions and communicative statements and, at the same time, establishing associations between these components.

Second, the framework characterises post-meeting processes using genres that the community involved can recognise and share. This is important because it allows developing EMS that are potentially closer to the ways people use to disseminate results to the organisation.

Furthermore, genre analysis has the potential to highlight organisational inefficiencies.

The results obtained from this work are now being used in the implementation of an EMS.

6. CONCLUSION

The problem analysed by this paper is the process of integrating meeting results in the organisation.

To solve this problem, we use a framework where the concept of genre is a central one.

In order to assess the applicability of the framework, we analysed a long collection of outcomes produced by meetings of directive members of a public organisation. This list was composed by 214 decisions taken in 30 meeting sessions.

The obtained results are a collection of 16 different genres that characterise the types of decisions made by the organisation and the types of communicative actions that result from these types of decisions.

With these results, it is possible to subsequently develop technology that is potentially closer to the ways people use to disseminate results to the organisation.

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