RESUME OF INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSORS RICHARD BURTON AND BØRGE OBEL

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This interview is with Professors Richard Burton and Børge Obel. Professor Burton is Professor Emeritus at The Fuqua School of Business, Duke University. Previously, he was senior editor at *Organization Science*. Currently, he is an associate editor of the *Strategic Management Journal* and associate editor of the *Journal of Organization Design*. Professor Obel is Professor at Aarhus University and Director of the Interdisciplinary Center for Organizational Architecture (ICOA) which he founded in 2011. He is co-editor of the *Journal of Organization Design*. He is the former Dean of the Aarhus School of Business. The interview was conducted in 2013 when Professor Burton was a visiting Professor at ICOA.

The interview begins with a discussion of Burton and Obel's seminal work on the multi-contingency model of organization design and the expert system, OrgCon moves on to discuss their work with simulation models to investigate organizational design issues, and concludes with their views on the major challenges for organization design research in the future.

THE MULTI-CONTINGENCY MODEL AND ORGCON

Burton and Obel's multi-contingency model was first introduced in their 1995 book, *Strategic Organization Diagnosis and Design: Developing Theory for Application*[1]. The multi-contingency model is a systems model oriented towards practice and the integration of basic elements in organization design: strategy, structure, people, and technology. Its origin rests upon earlier theories of strategy and structure and of information processing. The practical part of the model is its development of the interdependencies of the various contingencies and how they fit together. Burton and Obel's empirical research has found a strong relationship between fit and performance. OrgCon is an expert system that can diagnose organizational fit. A computer software program based on the multi-contingency model. OrgCon, is a diagnostic design tool that takes the complexity out of the design process.

Burton, DeSanctis, and Obel's recent book, *Organizational Design: A Step by Step Approach*[2], is built on the same theory and processes as their earlier work. This book presents theory and tools in a way that is easy to use in practice, particularly by MBAs and managers. Working with practitioners – being informed by and informing practitioners - is essential to Burton and Obel's work. It helps the academic world to understand better what it does and what it should do better. Working with practitioners was also part of the motivation for Burton and Obel as founding members of the Organizational Design Community (ODC).

SIMULATION MODELS

Simulation models have been central to Burton and Obel's development of the multi-contingency model. In the multi-contingency model, there is a set of rules that relates contingency variables to design variables. Many of these rules were tested in simulation

1   Burton RM, Obel B. 2004. *Strategic Organizational Diagnosis and Design: Developing Theory for Application.* Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, Netherlands.
2   Burton RM, DeSanctis G, Obel B. 2015. *Organizational Design: A Step-by-Step Approach.* 3rd edition. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

studies. Burton and Obel view simulation as a laboratory for experimentation. Simulation models also allow researchers to take the word "design" seriously – to look at what might be – and not just explain what has happened in the past.

Burton and Obel see simulation models as part of a triangulation approach that allows designers to address organizational issues using empirical, simulation, and laboratory studies. Tying different methods together, they argue, enhances and strengthens the basis for making design recommendations.

CHALLENGES FOR ORGANIZATION DESIGN IN THE FUTURE

Burton and Obel believe that organizational research in the future should put increased emphasis on design. The field of organization design has been criticized for only trying to explain what happened years ago; the field has done less well in laying out possible futures – how we might think about future design possibilities and how to create and test them. Doing so requires a different mindset, one of looking at what is possible and then making it real.

A second challenge relates to implementation. The world of design has to look at not only designing what should be in the future but also implementing it - and implementing it much faster than in the past.