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Problems and Issues in Using Computer- Based Support Tools to Enhance 'Soft' Systems Methodologies

Mark Stansfield

Abstract

This paper explores the issue of whether computer-based support tools can enhance the use of 'soft' systems methodologies as applied to real-world problem situations. Although work has been carried out by a number of researchers in applying computer-based technology to concepts and methodologies relating to 'soft' systems thinking such as Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), such attempts appear to be still in their infancy and have not been applied widely to real-world problem situations.

This paper will highlight some of the problems that may be encountered in attempting to develop computer-based support tools for 'soft' systems methodologies. Particular attention will be paid to an attempt by the author to develop a computer-based support tool for a particular 'soft' systems method of inquiry known as the Appreciative Inquiry Method that is based upon Vickers' notion of 'appreciation' (Vickers, 196S) and Checkland's SSM (Checkland, 1981). The final part of the paper will explore some of the lessons learnt from developing and applying the computer-based support tool to a real world problem situation, as well as considering the feasibility of developing computer-based support tools for 'soft' systems methodologies. This paper will put forward the oint that a mixture of manual and computer-based tools should be employed to allow a methodology to be used in an unconstrained manner, but the benefits provided by computer-based technology should be utilised in supporting and enhancing the more mundane and structured tasks.

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