The System Psychodynamics of E-Mail:
A Case Study

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Abstract

This thesis reports on a case study of e-mail related organisation dynamics in a medium sized, Australian consulting services organisation. The research explored the extent to which e-mail supported or inhibited the organisation's work, e-mail's application to management of the business and e-mail's use for purposes that were not obviously related to the business. The case is rendered particularly interesting because, for the nine-month duration of the fieldwork, the founder of this privately owned organisation was in the process of selling it to a much larger, publicly listed corporation and because, just after the fieldwork started, a restructure that related to the sale of the business was announced.

The approach taken in the study was to regard the organisation as a complex system of interrelated parts, some human and some non-human and to consider e-mail as an integral component of its various sub-systems, as a means by which sub-systems were linked to each other and as a system in its own right. Understanding about e-mail's involvement in organisation dynamics was obtained through the experience of a group of eleven members of staff, who agreed to participate in the study and via my own experience of the organisation.

The study was informed by the prior work of others in the fields of socio-technical systems, system psychodynamics and psychoanalytic concepts applied to organisations.

Data was generated and analysed using psychoanalytically informed, action research based methods, involving individual and group interviews, field observations and access to e-mail messages, and through a cyclical process of hypothesis generation and testing, reflection, interpretation and feedback processes.

The study revealed that the case study organisation, which had survived and grown successfully for many years, was being undermined by degenerative processes resulting from the changing ownership. As a result of the research process, which explored beneath the surface of observable behaviour and rational explanations to probe the effect of unconscious organisational processes, e-mail was found to have supported the sustaining dynamics associated with the organisation's success as an entrepreneurial endeavour, and to have fuelled the disintegration associated with the sale.
Preface

This thesis and the research on which it is based are a component of the Professional Doctorate in Organisation Dynamics program at Swinburne University in Melbourne, Australia. The production of a thesis fulfils fifty percent of the requirement for written submissions, the other fifty percent comprising a combination of coursework, private reading units and a practicum, 'focussed on the development of high level practical and theoretical skills through action learning'.

For the thesis component, a candidate is required to:

*Carry out a program of research, investigation or development involving the submission of a substantial major thesis of 40,000 to 60,000 words, embodying the results of that program and presented as a coherent whole work. The program should be one which will make a distinct contribution to knowledge and, in the execution of it, the Candidate should demonstrate a substantial degree of originality and independence as well as a substantial degree of creativity and demonstrated ability to address practical situations.*

(Swinburne University Policy for the Degree of Doctor of Organisation Dynamics 1997 page 5)

It has been suggested to me that this thesis is actually two theses; one about e-mail and the other about an organisation in the process of being sold and that an entire thesis could have been devoted to either topic. I chose to incorporate both these facets into one thesis and to aim to produce an integrated whole, on the basis that it would enable me to report authentically on what really happened in the case study. Apart from reporting on what was learned in the research, I wanted to also report on what I learned about doing research and the usefulness of that for professional practice as an organisational consultant.

The outcome of this decision is that the focus of the thesis is fundamentally different from what I had imagined it would be when I began the research project. A combination of circumstances, which are discussed in detail in the thesis, led to my hope for a small work group based exploration of e-mail being frustrated.

However, by staying with the negotiated research setting and attending to the data that was being generated, I came to realise that there was much to be explored around e-mail use in this organisation but that in order to do so, I would need to broaden my attention to incorporate the organisational system as a whole.
I also want to recognise here that, if the work had been taking place, not in a research context but as a piece of funded consulting work, then I would have acted differently. In a consulting arrangement, my decision-making would have been driven by client expectations and the need to either meet or renegotiate respective contractual obligations. Here, my decision was to balance loyalty to contracted research arrangements with attention to what the data was saying to me. As the case will illustrate, the consultant in me was also present in the research and, whilst requiring the attention of self-management, her desires did not ultimately prevail over the needs of the research student.
Acknowledgments

My commitment to confidentiality precludes mention of the case study organisation or individual participants other than by the pseudonyms used throughout the thesis. Nevertheless, I wish to record here that this study would not have been possible without the generous cooperation of the case study organisation in general and the eleven members of the participating group in particular. To everyone who was involved, thank you.

I also want to express my gratitude to Professor Susan Long, course director of Swinburne University's Professional Doctorate in Organisation Dynamics programme, whose insights, thoughtfulness and guidance have been invaluable in supporting both my academic endeavours throughout the programme and my professional development in general.

Thank you to Dr Lynette Willshire, from whose teaching I benefited during the first two years of the programme and to whom I am particularly grateful for encouragement to undertake interviews without detailed note taking, and from whom I have learned much about the value of trusting and working with my own experience.

Throughout the production of this thesis and the preparation and fieldwork that preceded it, Dr John Newton has been my primary academic supervisor and I am deeply grateful for his support. At various times, he has provided helpful reading material, creative ideas, thoughtful reflections, useful advice, wise suggestions, careful proof reading, much needed containment (a matter I discuss at some length in the body of this work) and a sense of humour. Above all, I am indebted to John for somehow knowing which of these elements to contribute and when!

Thank you to all my colleagues, past and present on the Doctoral programme for their support, both in terms of the subject matter of the thesis and the work of the programme in general. Equally, I have greatly valued my involvement with ISPSO, the Institute for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organisations, membership of which has provided rich learning experiences and access to the vast wisdom of its worldwide membership. Locally, in Australia, the development of this thesis has also benefited from my association with AISA, the Australian Institute of Socio-Analysis.

My friend, Adrian Jobson and my father, George Nash have both been generous with the time and meticulous attention each has given to proof-reading at various stages and I greatly appreciate their efforts.

Finally, thank you to my husband Henry, on whom I have depended for support and encouragement throughout the production of this document and the research that preceded it.
Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award to me of any other degree or diploma. To the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. The thesis is not based on joint research or publications and has not been professionally edited.

Janet E. Fitzell
27th September 2002
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Chapter 1. Introduction and Overview

1.1. Introduction

In this thesis I report on an action research project, the purpose of which was to explore the effects of e-mail on group dynamics in an Australian business. The project comprised a single in-depth case study, conducted over a nine-month period, within a consulting services organisation. It drew on the experience of a group of eleven staff, who agreed to participate in the research work.

Three main aspects of the situation studied combine to render this both an interesting case and one that is particularly relevant to contemporary business life. First, the case study organisation, which had been privately owned, was in the process of being acquired by a much larger, publicly owned corporation. Second, the fieldwork took place during the period immediately following a major restructure within the case study organisation. Finally, in addition to dealing with anxieties associated with the provision of expert consulting services, staff were facing additional uncertainties associated with the organisation's changing identity, the impending loss of the founding entrepreneur and their own uncertain futures. E-mail use therefore, came to be explored within an organisational setting characterised by turbulence and multiple sources of anxiety. This is reflected in the body of the thesis, where, in order to do justice to the case, I have attended both to the original subject of interest, e-mail, and to the fascinating dynamics of an organisation in transition, as they emerged in the research work.

I investigated e-mail use from three perspectives, two of which were incorporated into the original study design and the third which emerged as a significant factor once the fieldwork was underway.

First, I was interested in the extent to which consultants used e-mail in their consulting work; to enable communication both with colleagues and with parties outside the organisation, to support collaborative work between them and to facilitate knowledge work in general. Second, inasmuch as it affected the participant group, I was also interested in the application of e-mail to management of the business as a whole and as a system of interrelated parts. The third perspective, which had been in mind as a possible additional perspective for exploration, emerged as an equally important factor in the case study situation. This was the use of e-mail for purposes that were neither related to the organisation's work nor to management of business processes, and included messages between colleagues about matters as diverse as emotional
For reasons that are explored in detail in the body of this thesis, participants in the case study made some very specific and conscious choices about their use of e-mail, and in some respects, they were surprisingly cautious in its use for work related purposes. For example, very little e-mail mediated discussion took place between consultants. On the other hand, e-mail was used extensively by senior managers, to debate with each other, to facilitate informal communication between them and with staff, and to convey messages to staff. As the fieldwork progressed, it became apparent that the manner in which issues relating to the sale of the business and to the reorganisation and associated changes in roles and responsibilities were managed, involved extensive use of e-mail. That is; e-mail was used to send messages from management to staff about those matters, sometimes but not always supplemented by face to face communication.

It is the impact of this on the organisation, as it emerged through my work with the study participants, rather than the use of e-mail in the work itself, that became the main focus of the research. It also led to my decision to pay detailed attention in the thesis to the organisational context of change and uncertainty, in order to strengthen the analysis of e-mail use.

1.2. Background to the Research

Overall, e-mail technology is assumed to be beneficial for business. The exponential rate of adoption bears witness to this and it is now ubiquitous in contemporary business (Civin 2000). E-mail, like other technology based systems introduced to the workplace, has replaced much manual work and in some instances, eliminated it (Keen 1991a). It has led to transformations in the way people and groups in organisations work, enabling access to an ever expanding smorgasbord of data and information, which can be conveyed to more people and places than ever before. In combination with other rapidly developing Internet related technologies, it has allowed businesses to build vital communication linkages with customers and suppliers; to form virtual teams, to more effectively manage the supply chain and to compete and operate in global markets. It has been a major contributor to the 'virtuality dimension' of many organisations (Handy 1995 p.41), in which people can work together on projects without being physically in the same place. Very quickly e-mail has become essential for economic survival in today's business world and is therefore an integral part of many aspects of contemporary business life (Hallowell 1999).

E-mail has also generated vast amounts of new work, arising in part from its ease of use (Williams 2000). As I explored the potential value of an e-mail focussed research project, I
came across people at all levels in organisations, spending several hours per day dealing with e-mail messages. E-mail is said to have led to a distancing of colleagues from each other and to emotional responses that escalate out of proportion with the originally intended message (Aram 1998). The latter phenomenon is so commonplace that the term 'flaming' is used to describe it (Turkle 1995 p.217) and this now features in the standard business lexicon.

The darker aspects of this big picture appear to stand in sharp contrast to the business benefits. E-mail can deliver an overwhelming volume of information to the user (Williams 2000, Civin 2000), it provides an easy alternative to face to face or telephone communication (Handy 1995) and, in combination with other Internet related technologies, presents users with opportunities for time-consuming distractions away from the work they are paid to do, during the time they are paid to do it. It could be said that many of these effects are not disadvantages for business but that they are facets of the new way of working. For example, the time cost to the organisation because a person is reading a joke is more than compensated for, because the same staff member takes her notebook PC home in order to extend the working day.

Many of the difficulties associated with e-mail have been reduced to a combination of technical or legal risks that are managed via a proliferation of administrative tools and legislative responses. E-mail policies and standard disclaimers enable managers to mitigate the legal risks and a variety of technological tools such as fire-walls, virus checkers and password protection serves to address technical risk. Also, difficulties associated with the sheer volume can now be addressed with technology based tools that assist the user in their management of e-mail traffic.

The effect of the technology on the work of organisations has been quite extensively researched and Williams (2000) has assembled a comprehensive review of this work. On the other hand, Civin (2000), in his in-depth, psychoanalytically based, exploration of e-mail's effect on individuals and organisations has examined the ways that people have been affected by and have adapted to, e-mail technology.

The response to the social implications has often been a push for behavioural change. As I prepared to embark on this study, I discovered in a series of framing interviews, that individuals and organisations have adopted informal rules to guide e-mail use. One respondent told me 'I never reply to an e-mail if it came from someone in the same office. If the matter is important they will come and see me'. Within the series of framing interviews, I explored the extent to which managers have reflected on the issues associated with e-mail usage and it emerged that, as with other applications of technology in business, there are seen to be sound economic reasons for implementing e-mail technology; for example, access to essential business intelligence,
staying ahead of the competition and ensuring optimal worker productivity are all powerful motivators. However, the question of whether and how e-mail impacts on the social fabric of business seems to have received much less attention in the business community.

I became interested in whether, when the psychological implications are taken into account, e-mail can still, on balance, be said to be good for business. What is the social effect of this technology that contributes to the blurring of the boundary between home and work? What are the implications of its use as a substitute for face to face communication? Given that it can be used to send or receive a message from or to anyone, anywhere, at any time, does it disadvantage organisations as well as bring benefits? What actions can be taken to mitigate against the psychological 'down-side'? Are new ways of organising called for, in an e-mail connected business world?

As I thought about the contribution I might make to a more in-depth understanding, it seemed to me that the impact of e-mail on the business world, as it is experienced by those working in it, could not be adequately understood by looking only at the big picture. In the same way that a photographer would need a close-up view of ground level in order to obtain the detail missing from an aerial photograph, I sought a grass roots view of the impact of e-mail on business. I was interested to discover how e-mail is used in practice and the manner in which its use impacts on those who use it and on the business.

1.3. Research Aims

Within this field of inquiry, I had three overarching objectives:

First, I wanted research findings that said something about e-mail in context. Just as an anthropologist enters the world of their subjects, I wanted the setting for the study to be a real business, going about its day to day work, so that I would be looking at e-mail in an environment where it was an integral part of the overall business system. My focus would be on the day to day working lives of organisational members and on the impact of e-mail from their perspective. In this respect it would be important to seek data that would capture the underlying factors that could help explain managerial and organisational behaviour (Kets de Vries 1991).

Secondly, and in support of the first objective, I sought to learn something about the social impact of e-mail and this meant focusing on a group of people rather than on the impact of e-mail use on individuals. My preference to focus at the group level supports the first aim noted above and stems from the simple fact that, with the exception of an e-mail which one might
send to oneself as a reminder, e-mail is part of the complex web of systems that links people into groups in the workplace, and work is ultimately accomplished through group functioning. A group in the workplace may be as temporary as a task force, set up to achieve a certain purpose, after which it is disbanded; it might include members from multiple organisations as with some project teams, and it is as large or as small as the work requires. I began with a broadly defined objective, which was to study the impact of e-mail on a work group, which I defined as a group of people with a common task or set of tasks.

Third, I had embarked on the study with a nascent understanding, of and a growing fascination with, the application of psychoanalytic theory to the study of organisations in general and group dynamics in particular. The field of psychoanalysis centres on unconscious motivation (Kets de Vries 1991) and when applied to organisational life, seeks to interpret events and behaviour in organisations by looking beneath the surface of the rational explanations that dominate much contemporary management thinking, to explore the unconscious processes that so powerfully influence group dynamics (Gabriel 1999).

A psychoanalytically informed approach to organisational research depends on the interplay between the experience of the subjects to be studied and the experience of the researcher for its outcomes. I therefore sought a method that would enable me to draw on my own and the group's experience during the research process.

1.4. Research Setting

In order to pursue these aims, I undertook a case study, which focussed on a group of staff within a medium sized commercial organisation, operating in the Australian marketplace. The organisation provided consulting services to public and private sector organisations.

E-mail was in regular use by all staff for a variety of both job-related and private purposes. Over a period of about nine months, with the collaboration and support both of members of the case study group and other staff who were not members of the case study group, the research questions were explored through an iterative process involving observation, inquiry, hypothesis testing, reflections on what was being learned, and actions that took place both in response to what was being learned over the course of the study and as a consequence of events occurring independently of the research.

The case study took place against a backdrop of major change for the case study organisation. Originally it had been privately owned but, prior to the start of the research project, it had been sold to a much larger, publicly listed organisation. For the duration of the case study therefore,
staff were involved not only in doing their consulting work but also, either directly or indirectly, in the process of becoming part of the acquiring organisation. Some staff, who had been shareholders, were anxious about financial performance, since the final price they would be paid for their shares in the company was directly related to financial performance during a period of 'earn-out'\(^1\). In order to achieve the full earn-out, the organisation needed to achieve revenue and profit goals that were higher than had ever previously been achieved. In the midst of this turbulence, staff were attempting to continue with business as usual.

The case study organisation was in the business of providing expert consulting advice in response to customers' problems. Much of the core work took place outside of the formal office space, often in the customer's premises, resulting in staff being isolated from each other for much of the time. When not working in the customers' premises, staff shared desk space in what they described as a 'hot desking' arrangement, or, when a quiet working space was needed in order to concentrate on a critical piece of work, the practice of working from home had been sanctioned.

When the study began, the participant group comprised all the members of one organisational group, designated a division, and included the division manager. All staff were provided with a notebook personal computer (PC) and an e-mail address, which could be used both while they were physically in the office and from remote locations, thus providing all staff with the facility to stay connected to others, via e-mail, wherever and whenever they felt it to be necessary.

As the researcher, I became involved in the life of the organisation in several ways. I was included in the organisation's e-mail system by being provided, via my private e-mail service, with copies of all messages inbound to group members, a facility set up for the purposes of the study by the case study organisation's systems administrator. In addition, I met with participants in individual and group interviews, attended the office for periods of observation and engaged in e-mail mediated discussion with group members. For the duration of the study, I kept a research diary, recording both events as they occurred and my own responses to the material I was encountering.

I contracted with the organisation as researcher only; an important distinction, since I was earning my living as an organisational consultant and the case study organisation was in the consulting services business. As the research progressed, the distinction between research work

\(^1\) Earn-out is described in Appendix 1
and consulting work became more significant than I had imagined, and I elaborate on this in the body of the thesis.

1.5. Derivation of the Conceptual Framework

Both the conceptual framework, which is explained in detail in Chapter 3 and the study design and method, described in Chapter 4, flowed from the aims set out in 1.3 above.

In order to study the impact of e-mail on, and within, a real business, in a way that would enable the complexities of organisational life to be recognised and worked with, the organisation is conceptualised as a system of interrelated parts, some human, some non-human. The system as a whole comprises a number of interrelated sub-systems. Both the system as a whole and the component sub-systems are defined as 'open'; that is, able to take in 'inputs' and generate 'outputs' as a result of the work taking place within the system or sub-system.

This 'open system' based view of the organisation is derived from the socio-technical systems approach, first developed by Trist and Bamforth in their exploration of the impact of mechanisation in the coal mining industry (Trist and Bamforth 1951) and more recently applied to office based work (Pava 1983). The value of a socio-technical approach here is that it recognises the complex interrelatedness of human and technology based systems; what Trist and Bamforth referred to as the 'psycho-social whole' (Trist and Bamforth, ibid. p. 5).

The socio-technical systems approach has provided the basis for a framework in which the case study group, the organisation, its systems of work, its social fabric and the external environment in which it operated, could all be represented and differentiated from each other. At the same time, a holistic view that recognises their relatedness is also maintained. E-mail messages can be thought of as an integral part of the various sub-systems and as linkages between the various sub-systems, enabling many of the inputs and outputs involved in knowledge based work. E-mail can also be thought about as a separate system, part of the World Wide Web of e-mail, enabling anyone inside the organisation to make connections with anyone inside or outside the organisation, independently of any other formal organisational system. In systems terms, anyone with access to e-mail is part of the World Wide Web e-mail system and anyone without such access is outside of the system.

Each system and sub-system in the open systems model is bounded; that is, a boundary separates what is inside from what is outside the system or sub-system. In contrast with the view of a manager as a position in a hierarchy, in socio-technical systems terms, management is conceptualised as a boundary function. In Chapter 3, I provide a more detailed review of open
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systems theory as it applies in this study, illustrated by examples from the case study organisation.

In addition to open systems theory, the conceptual framework draws on the application of psychodynamic theory to organisational systems. Here, the idea of an individual as a bounded system is incorporated into the model, recognising the internal world of the individual and its contribution to their external environment (Rice 1969). The relevance of what is in the mind of the individual as they participate in group life is explored, with particular attention to the significance in e-mail mediated group life.

Finally, as noted in the overview of the case study, both the work itself and the transitional state of the organisation generated much anxiety for both staff and management. In the case study in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I have explored in detail the approach to dealing with this emotional side of organisational life. I draw on both system psychodynamics and socio-technical systems theory in a discussion of the idea of 'containment' (Bion 1985); that is, the idea that an individual, a group and an organisation can all comprise both good and bad parts and productive work occurs when both are accommodated in a 'facilitating environment' in which 'immediate and local reality' is worked with (Long 1999 p. 265) through effective communication and negotiation. E-mail's potential to both support and inhibit a containing organisational environment, is important in the findings.

1.6. The Study Design

The choice of a case study based design allowed the project to be located within a real business system and therefore for e-mail to be viewed in a specific context. Action research based methods, which are explained in Chapter 4, have enabled the study to proceed as what I described to potential case study organisations as 'an exploration of the unknown'.

Two key characteristics of action research underpinned its suitability for this application. First, although I was able to describe the project's focus in broad terms, I did not know exactly what I was looking for. Action research enables a start to be made, with a hunch that there is something useful to be discovered about a particular topic, but without a clear map of how to get there. In addition, the cyclical nature of the research process, which will be described in detail in Chapter 4, meant that data could be generated in an iterative process, with each stage of learning facilitating further data generation. Actions to be taken are determined partly by the learning along the way.
Second, as I will also discuss in detail in Chapter 4, action research methods recognise and can benefit from the researcher's presence in the research. This contrasts starkly with those other research methods, where the effect of the researcher is seen as error to be eliminated. Chapter 5 (The Case Study), Chapter 6 (Case Analysis) and Chapter 7 (The effects of e-mail on members of the organisation) reveal the results of this facet of the chosen approach.

The action research approach taken here is differentiated from alternative forms of action research, in that it had a system psychodynamic orientation. A psychoanalytic approach to organisational research enables exploration of the effect of unconscious processes on individuals, on group behaviour and on the organisation as a whole, through processes of interpretation. Interpretation depends on accessing unconscious material through its conscious manifestations and outcomes must be considered provisional (Gabriel 1999). The process is cyclical in that interpretations are explored and refined as the research progresses. In Chapter 4, I discuss the nature and sources of the data in this project that provided input to the psychoanalytically informed approach. In combination with the action research framework, my clinical stance enabled engagement with participants in an iterative process, in which interpretations could be regarded as provisional and could therefore be discussed and modified as the project progressed.

1.7. A note about literature references

The case study, action research based nature of this project rendered it unsuitable for an exhaustive literature review prior to the fieldwork, since, by definition, it set out to be an exploration of the unknown. Rather, the literature search was inter-woven with the fieldwork and the subsequent analysis, driven by findings from the field. Inherent in the study's aims was the need to locate prior work that informed emergent findings, rather than the project steps being designed around existing theory. The work of others has therefore been referenced throughout the thesis, with the objective of locating each item where its contribution to the evolving project can be best represented.

1.8. Broader relevance of this research

Since the final decade of the twentieth century, three interrelated themes concerning the nature and purpose of organisations have been dominant in the business press, in both academic and popular management literature and in management training programmes. I draw attention to them here as each puts new demands on the enterprise's ability to communicate and collaborate effectively and e-mail is seen to be an enabling tool for these three imperatives in contemporary business.
First, globalisation, frequently presented as an aspiration in the early 1990’s, is now seen as a necessity in many business sectors. The removal of former trade, technology and other barriers means that business must now compete globally in order to survive and thrive. Globalisation is accompanied by the need for organisations to operate in diverse cultural settings and in different time zones, resulting in new challenges around how to collaborate across these boundaries. It has been argued that no Australian company is immune from the forces of global competition (Karpin 1995).

Second, as organisations strive to remain commercially viable in the global marketplace, they become larger, often through mergers and acquisitions (Karpin, ibid.), presenting leaders and managers with the challenge of creating a global identity that preserves and builds on acquired assets, at the same time achieving the economies of scale on which future success is dependent. The drive to build a larger and larger business in terms of turnover and profit is often accompanied by the belief that rationalisation must also take place. In order to satisfy short and longer term shareholder expectations, managers in the expanding business are faced with the demanding task of running a cost effective business, that concurrently satisfies both customers and shareholders.

Third, the economic transition from an era of competitive advantage based on information to one based on knowledge is underway (Lang 2001). This has been enabled by rapid advances in information technology and telecommunications (IT&T), which have permitted formerly labour intensive operations to be replaced by technological innovations. IT&T enables workers to access the information needed to do their job, wherever that information may be located. In the same way that manufacturers have historically focussed on machine utilisation, efficiency and productivity, thus optimising the return on their investment (ROI) in the capital equipment, the knowledge based economy demands that managers focus on obtaining the best possible return on their investment in employees, information access and knowledge utilisation. Drucker (1992) argued that knowledge has become the primary resource for the modern economy, displacing land, labour and capital to secondary importance.

The decision making challenge associated with IT&T investment is compounded because IT&T innovation has proceeded at an exponentially increasing rate, presenting business managers with the on-going dilemma of choosing between reaping the rewards of early adoption (Keen 1991b) and the possible safety of delayed adoption.

The description in 1.4 of the organisational setting in which I conducted this research is not intended to spotlight exceptional circumstances. On the contrary, as I have noted here, mergers
and acquisitions are familiar territory for leaders and managers in today's business world. They are characteristic of our times. So is the pressure to deliver business outcomes to increasingly demanding stakeholders, in an environment which is commonly referred to as turbulent (Gould 1993, Krantz 1998). The entrepreneur opportunistically selling out to a much larger organisation; the departure of the entrepreneur from the organisation once the sale is complete, the restructure that was designed to address a serious organisational deficiency and the process of merging one organisation into another all seem familiar scenes in these turbulent times.

The expectation that they will constantly improve productivity and performance sits firmly on the shoulders of managers at all levels in commercial organisations and they are expected to commit to this goal by efficient utilisation of the resources available to the organisation. As I will illustrate in the body of this thesis, managers and staff in the case study organisation faced the range of pressures that are commonplace in contemporary business life. The research focussed on how those pressures were dealt with in parallel with the core work of the organisation and in particular on the impact of e-mail use in dealing both with the work and with the stresses.

My focus in this study and in the analysis set out in the thesis, has been on the particular combination of circumstances that I encountered in the study. Aspects of this project and its findings may help throw light on the use of e-mail in other organisations, but it has not been my intention to produce results that are generalisable to a broad set of circumstances; indeed to aim to do so would have diminished the purpose of an in-depth case study. However, I hope that the findings will resonate with some of the experience of my readers and thereby have a broader relevance, given the many familiar characteristics of the case study setting.

Seven key problem areas relating to management and leadership in Australian business have been identified (Karpin 1995). These are customer orientation, entrepreneurship, functional skills, global orientation, quality commitment, soft skills and strategic skills. It has been found that in order to meet the challenges of the next century, major improvements are needed in all key areas, with ‘soft skills’ (Karpin, ibid. p. xvii) being one of the areas needing the greatest improvement, particularly for large enterprises. Karpin defines ‘soft skills’ as ‘the ability to communicate, the ability to motivate, the ability to lead and delegate and the ability to negotiate’ (Karpin ibid. p. 25).

Communication, nominated as one of the elements of soft skills, is a key component of the other skills deemed deficient in Australian managers by the Karpin report. Since e-mail is used to facilitate communication between individuals, among groups and between organisations, this
research has the potential to contribute to greater understanding in most of the Karpin report’s key areas, and therefore potentially to be of value to any organisation that is keen to achieve the organisational improvements advocated in the Karpin report. The deficiencies in soft skills are defined in the report as self knowledge, self discipline and self-management.

The individual can also be thought of as a bounded system (Freud 1940, Miller and Rice 1975), with a conceptual boundary around the inner world of the individual (Rice 1969), separating it from the individual's environment. A psychoanalytically informed approach to thinking about individual functioning can lead to improved understanding of self and others, more effective management of self in relation to others and of management of self in organisational role (Lawrence 1979). A psychoanalytically informed approach to system dynamics can lead to improved understanding of group behaviour, inter-group relationships and overall organisational functioning (Hirschhorn 1988, Gould 1993, Stapley 1996). A psychoanalytically informed approach therefore holds the potential to address the management inadequacies defined in the Karpin report.

Finally, a statement about my aspirations concerning the usefulness of this project's outcomes would be incomplete without reference to a call by Neumann and Hirschhorn (1999) for contributions to the integration of psychodynamic and organisational theory. In arguing for the usefulness of this particular intersection of specialisations, they nominate several specific forms of potential contribution, including the application of a systems psychodynamic framework. They refer to its original formulation by Miller and Rice (1975). Another suggested contribution is the use of a case study to explore specific psychodynamic concepts concurrently with specific organisational concepts. It is my hope that the broader relevance of this thesis will include its contribution as a case study exploration of system psychodynamics.

1.9. Overview of Research Findings

In preparing to undertake this research, I came to hold the belief that commercial organisations use e-mail in similar ways and encounter similar problems. Therefore I imagined that, wherever the case study was undertaken, the case was likely to be typical of many other organisations. As it turned out, there were some unusual aspects to the manner in which e-mail was used in the case study organisation and these are summarised here.

This is followed by a summary of the findings and interpretation, which will be presented in detail in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. There, in the detail of the case study, I tease out the interrelatedness between the findings summarised here and the changes taking place in the business.
1.9.1. **E-mail use**

1. The organisation imposed no formal restrictions on staff's use of e-mail, encouraging both private and business use. There were informal but no formal rules about content.

2. The overall volume of e-mail was much less than I had expected and less than participants estimated.

3. A relatively small proportion of e-mail messages related to the core consulting work of the business.

4. E-mail was seldom used for communication between case study group members about their consulting work.

5. E-mail was used extensively by staff to connect with external parties, involving jokes, news groups and other content that had no obvious bearing on work.

6. Staff expressed emotional content on e-mail that was not expressed elsewhere in the business.

7. Senior managers used e-mail extensively to provide information to staff and to anticipate their questions about the material.

8. Senior managers used e-mail extensively for discussion between them.

1.9.2. **Findings**

Factors are noted below as discrete findings, only for overview purposes. The analysis in Chapters 6 and 7 is holistic, exploring the compounding effect of the various elements.

1. Characteristics of the organisation's founder were expressed through the organisation, to the extent that it seemed to be an extension of himself. E-mail supported this dynamic.

2. The founder influenced most aspects of organisational functioning and e-mail supported his involvement.

3. During the transition to the new ownership, the working environment, which had been experienced by staff as safe because they had felt to be cared for by the founder, came to be viewed as unsafe and anxiety provoking, as his focus shifted during the period of the sale. In contrast with the dependable father figure of the founding entrepreneur, the new owner was experienced as an object of fear and derision. E-mail contributed to the shaping of these perceptions.
4. Organisational change was dealt with in a mechanistic way, including extensive use of e-mail to convey information to staff on issues relating to change. This led to staff being flooded with information that served more to fuel unresolved anxiety than to usefully inform.

5. E-mail provided a vehicle for the expression of emotions that could not be expressed elsewhere in the business. The anxiety underlying those emotions remained largely unresolved and this was ultimately a significant cost to the business.

6. During the takeover period, attention to the organisation's stated purpose was adversely affected by senior management's attention to another task, in which only former shareholders had a stake. The financial goals associated with the acquisition process consumed management effort that had been available for the organisation's primary purpose. This led to a split between those with a financial stake in the sale of the business and those whose focus remained unchanged. E-mail served to reinforce the split and to fuel anxiety.

7. Repeated restructuring involving reassignment of roles and responsibilities, in combination with an imbalance of personal and organisational authority, compounded with other factors noted here, to weaken the organisation. E-mail contributed to the erosion of organisational stability.

1.10. Overview of the Thesis

This introductory chapter is followed by Chapter 2 (The Case Study Organisation), which provides contextual background to the case study, including a description of the circumstances surrounding business operations during the research period, a review of the organisation's work, the structure and positions occupied by participants in the case study and the contribution of e-mail to the organisation's overall functioning.

This leads into Chapter 3 (Conceptual Framework) in which I define a conceptual view of the human and business process systems, against which e-mail related dynamics are discussed. Where the conceptualisation depends on particular theories, these are explained and some applied examples provided.

Chapter 4 (Design and Method) begins with the rationale behind the key elements of the study's design; that is, my decision to undertake a single, in-depth case study, the suitability of action research and the value of a psychodynamic approach within the action research framework.
Then Chapter 4 describes the methods used to collect data and the manner in which it was interpreted and analysed.

Chapter 5 (The Case Study) reports in detail on the findings which emerged from the study. Chapters 6 (Case Analysis) and 7 (The effects of e-mail on members of the organisation) interpret the findings from two related perspectives. In Chapter 6, I focus on system psychodynamics with extensive reference to the transitional state of the organisation. Chapter 7 provides an analysis of e-mail’s effects on staff.

In Chapter 8 (Reflections) I provide some concluding remarks under three related headings. First I assess the contribution made by this thesis to the body of knowledge on organisation dynamics and understanding of psychoanalytically informed action research methods in practice. Second, I review the design and method, reflecting on the experience of implementation. Finally, as this project has been the research component of a Professional Doctorate in Organisation Dynamics, my concluding remarks discuss the value of my own learning experience in this project to my professional practice.

1.11. Conclusion

In this introductory chapter I have defined the aims of the research, explained the rationale behind my choice of topic and argued for its importance to contemporary organisations. I characterised the approach commonly taken in commercial organisations to dealing with e-mail related dynamics and substantiated my belief that valuable insights could be gained by drawing on ideas emerging from a system psychodynamic approach to the study of organisations, through an in-depth case study, undertaken using a psychoanalytically informed, action research based method.

In Chapter 2, I provide background information about the case study organisation.
Chapter 2. The Case Study Organisation

2.1. Introduction

This chapter provides background information about the organisation in which the research project was conducted. It provides context for the case study findings in Chapter 5 and the case analysis in Chapters 6 and 7. Those chapters presuppose that the reader is familiar with the material presented here.

In the sections that follow, I describe the organisation, the work that sustained it and the external environment in which it was operating during the period of the study. As noted in my introductory remarks in Chapter 1, the fact that the organisation had been sold, the fact that a restructure took place shortly after the project started, and the existence of much associated anxiety at all levels, became defining characteristics of the case study. Within the body of this chapter therefore, I have aimed to depict that background with sufficient detail for the reader to make sense of the events of the case study and for the associated analysis to be thought about in context.

The concept of an organisation as an open system with inputs flowing into it, conversion processes taking place within it and outputs being exported to the environment, as introduced in Chapter 1, is reflected in this chapter (Miller and Rice 1975). Detail here will be used to illustrate and explain the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 3.

I provide three perspectives on the organisation. First, a brief history is presented, starting with the organisation’s entrepreneurial beginnings, through the successful growth that led to acquisition by a much larger organisation. Second, I sketch a view of the public image, documented in its marketing material and projected by staff in their dealings with customers and other external parties. I include in this view some reflections on the internal implications of this public image. Third, I provide a view of the inside, describing the working environment and the formal organisation structure and its component roles and responsibilities, including the group that agreed to participate in the case study. The nature of the restructure and the implications of this for the business are described.

The organisation’s work is explained with the aid of a flow diagram, which begins with the resources and information sourced from the external environment. An overview of the work itself is provided, including a description of the flow of work through the organisation, culminating in services being delivered to the customer.
The external business environment in which the organisation operated, is described. This includes customers and prospective customers, suppliers, competitors and the many other parties with an interest in its business.

This chapter is followed by the conceptual framework in Chapter 3.

2.2. Identification and confidentiality

My contract with this organisation entailed a commitment on my part to confidentiality. The formal agreement with participants and with the organisation as a whole, provided that neither the organisation nor any of the participants would be mentioned by name. Although not explicitly stated in the contract, I have extended this commitment by aiming to avoid revealing any combination of facts that would facilitate identification of the organisation. At the same time, I have aimed to strike a balance between identity concealment and providing enough information for the reader to make sense of this report.

Throughout this thesis I have used the pseudonym Information Solutions Pty. Ltd. (ISPL) to represent the case study organisation. Pseudonyms have been substituted for the real names of individuals.

The purchaser of ISPL's business is referred to as Global Technologies Corporation (GTC).

2.3. The Organisation

2.3.1. History

The organisation was originally privately owned, with the majority of the shares held by one person, who was also one of the founders. Staff had been given the opportunity to take up minority shareholdings, against which dividends were paid out of profits. On ceasing employment with ISPL, a staff member could no longer remain a shareholder. During the study, a relatively small number of employees were also shareholders. Although these shares carried voting rights, the combined votes of the staff involved would be insufficient to outvote the primary shareholder. These employees were referred to collectively as 'the B team'.

ISPL was founded during the 1980's when the Information Technology industry in general was growing rapidly. Demand for the firm's consulting services was strong, and it quickly became established and started to grow successfully. The firm's beginnings were described to me as a time when members were a group of 'peers'. There was no formal hierarchy and matters
relating to the business would be 'thrashed out' in open forum. Everyone was 'equal', including
the founders and the colleagues all had a 'loud voice' when necessary, ensuring that, as they saw
it, their views would be heard.

As the business found its niche and gained reputation, success and aspirations for further
business growth led to the need to hire more consultants, to the point where it was determined
that a more formal reporting structure was needed, including the creation of additional
functional management roles. In addition, and in line with prevailing industry practice, a
hierarchy of seniority evolved, in which some consultants were designated 'senior consultant'
(SC). Inexperienced consultants were labelled 'associate consultant' (AC) and those with several
years experience, as 'consultant'. Consulting staff were hired both with consulting experience
and as graduate recruits, the latter being hired into AC roles. The AC's were employed on the
basis of a one year 'internship', during which they were involved in a supervised professional
development programme. After a year, unless there was a suitable vacant position for a
consultant, they left the organisation.

Business growth also led to the creation of an additional layer of management. During the time
when I was negotiating entry to the organisation, all consultants had been assigned to a group of
consultants, reporting to one of several division managers. This structure is shown in Figure
2.1. The consultants in any one division could be located in two or more states of Australia.

The entrepreneur who had started the firm continued throughout to be actively involved in the
business, both in the formal role of Managing Director as well as personally undertaking
consulting assignments and marketing the organisation to Australian businesses and to the
academic and public service sectors. He was well known and respected in the business
environment in which ISPL operated, and there were occasions when customers specifically
requested that he undertake a particular piece of consulting work. It was also said that he was
'the best salesman in the company'.

Prior to the start of the research, a contract had been signed to sell the business to a much larger
corporation, which had, around the same time, contracted to buy several other relatively small
firms, as it implemented its general business growth strategy. Although ISPL remained an
autonomous business unit for the duration of the study, it carried revenue and profit obligations
to the new owner, and therefore certain members of the new owner's senior management group
took a keen interest in the financial aspects of ISPL's business performance. The terms of the
contract of sale included that the ultimate sale price was dependent on financial performance
during the first few years under the new ownership. This meant that all former shareholders in
ISPL would not realise the full return on the sale of their shares until these 'earn-out' conditions had been met. A more detailed explanation of the term 'earn-out' is provided in Appendix 1.

Much anxiety surrounded the organisation's changing circumstances. It was expressed by staff in the case study as anger toward the new owner, contempt for the new owner's staff and criticism of members of ISPL's management. The uncertainty, confusion and worry around what the future might hold, generated extreme comparisons between ISPL and the new owner, in which ISPL would be seen in a positive frame, against which GTC compared unfavourably. Tensions associated with perceptions of disparate cultures, uncertainties about intended roles and responsibilities under the new ownership and individual concerns around job security and career paths received scant management attention. Instead, during this earn-out period, senior managers were involved in a battle to secure sufficient consulting work to enable earn-out targets to be met within the agreed timeframe, and hence to ensure an adequate return on the shareholders' investments.

2.3.2. The Public Face

ISPL had built its reputation on what it described as 'providing solutions' to customers. It was in the field of specialised business consulting services, offering 'innovative techniques' to solve 'complex business problems', particularly those requiring the use of Information Technology (I.T.). The promoted image, in advertising material and on the Internet, was of a dependable expert. Internally, much significance was attached to following procedures and to building a database of accumulated knowledge for use in the provision of such solutions to customers.

ISPL derived its operating income from consulting fees, and these were earned from engagements lasting a few days to a year or longer. Services were offered in a marketplace that was crowded with others promoting similar and competing products and inevitably survival depended on successful differentiation from competitors. ISPL had sought to achieve this by claiming to be different from its competitors, as a result of its espoused organisational values of creativity, innovation and 'constant re-invention'.

Clients contracted with ISPL for its specialised expertise and it was routinely assumed that the client expected the consultant to solve problems for them. The expertise was applied via a range of services including business problem analysis, strategic planning, project management and specialist training courses. ISPL claimed that the outcome for clients from engaging its services was that their businesses would 'perform better'.
Staff were hired for their expertise, and were expected to apply it to the business of 'providing solutions' in exchange for their agreed salary and associated employment benefits. Accumulated experience and capabilities were rewarded with promotion through the hierarchy of consulting and management levels.

2.3.3. The Internal View

2.3.3.1. Organisation Structure

Here, I will first describe the structure that existed when I first contracted with the organisation and then, the organisation structure that was in place for most of the case study. A new structure was announced shortly after the study started and the manner in which this was implemented and its implications for the organisation will be discussed in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

At the time I contracted with the organisation to undertake this research project, the case study group comprised an entire division. The role of division manager reported to the Managing Director and carried responsibility for performance of the division, for personally delivering consulting services and for business development, as well for line management of staff. The division with which I had contracted, was designated 'V1' and the eleven members, which included Richard, the Division Manager, all specialised in what was referred to as 'the business end of I.T. consulting'. This was defined as the provision of consulting services in 'strategic I.T. planning', 'facilitation' and 'project management'. V1’s work was different from that of other divisions in its focus on 'business first and I.T. second', whereas the work of other divisions was more technically oriented. This organisation structure is shown in Figure 2.1.
When the reorganisation occurred, it meant that V1 no longer existed, and its members were moved to other groups in the new structure. The three levels of seniority for practising consultants; that is, senior consultant, consultant and associate consultant existed in both structures. However, in the restructure, the role of division manager was removed and two new consulting titles were created; Principal Consultant (PC) and Managing Consultant (MC). PC’s, some of whom had been division managers, now carried responsibility for sales but were not responsible for any line management of staff. All consultants, SC’s and AC’s were assigned to one of several new groups of consultants, each of which included one MC. The new structure is depicted in Figure 2.2.

Two reasons for the restructure were cited. First, there was seen to be a need to split responsibility for sales from line management of consulting staff, because company performance was seen to be compromised when sales and line management were combined in the same role. This was because the role of division manager was seen to be an 'impossible' one, at a time when the organisation had a desperate need for new contracts for work, with both existing and new customers. The second stated reason for the restructure was that 'pastoral care' of consulting staff was being neglected under the old structure, and the idea of smaller groups of consultants working with an MC was seen to be a more workable solution. An exploration of what was meant by the term 'pastoral care' will be found in the case study in Chapter 5.
Figure 2.2  The new organisation structure

Figure 2.2 shows the new organisation structure and the bracketed numerals show the new locations of the original members of V1. The case study group now comprised three PCs, two MC’s and six consultants and senior consultants. The case study discussion in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 notes the reasons behind my decision to leave the composition of the case study group unchanged.

Other roles, not yet mentioned, also feature in Figure 2.2 and their responsibilities are outlined now.

The senior management group comprised the Managing Director, who also referred to himself as the 'Principal', the National Consulting Manager, to whom the PC's reported and the National Manager (Consulting Staff) to whom all other consultants, including the MC’s, reported. In addition, there were a small number of functional management positions, such as the Financial Controller. For certain purposes, such as discussions around business development and revenue generation, the senior management group was expanded to include the PC’s.
The National Manager, Consulting Staff (NMCS) was responsible for ‘resourcing projects’. In practice this meant ensuring that staff skills were matched with project requirements and that staff utilisation was as high as possible. Utilisation had a similar meaning to that term’s use in a manufacturing context, where 'machine utilisation' means the proportion of available time in which the machine is producing output. Optimal utilisation occurs when ‘set-up time’, that is, the time needed between jobs to set the machine up for a new job, and maintenance time, are minimised. The NMCS maintained detailed records of staff commitments to revenue generating work and of their capacity, recorded in time units, to undertake additional work.

2.3.3.2. The Work Place and Time

The physical workplace was a combination of enclosed offices occupied by two or three people and an open plan arrangement divided into individual work-stations, each comprising desk space and facilities for a desktop or mobile computer. A policy of 'hot-desking' had been established, whereby most consulting staff did not 'own' desk space and were expected to use any available desk when they were in the office. In practice, an informal system of work-station ownership prevailed. Only the Managing Director had a private office.

Once a contract for work had been won, consultants undertook much of the work on the client's site, returning to the ISPL office for scheduled meetings and at times when they were not required to be physically on the client's site and when they were waiting to be assigned to new jobs. The demands of client projects meant that sometimes consultants would spend much more time on clients' sites working alongside the clients' staff, than with their own colleagues. Consultants involved in longer term client work would sometimes be provided with office space at the client site for the duration of the project and sometimes even with an e-mail address within the client's system.

In addition, as a result of their mobile access to e-mail communications, the place of work for consultants could be located wherever they and their PC connection happened to be. This facility enabled staff to work from home, which was accepted occasional practice when an important deadline had to be met or when a piece of work requiring uninterrupted attention must be finished. It was generally recognised that this was not feasible in the common office space where interruptions could not be avoided. However, it was also said by senior management that, unless there was a good reason for working from home, then, when not working on a client's site, consultants were expected to attend the office in order to 'contribute to the life of the firm'.
The organisation was therefore geographically dispersed, with consultants routinely away from
the formal office space doing the work of the organisation. Also, during the project, staff were
observed to be doing ISPL work while on holiday, while officially on sick leave and at most
hours of the day and night. It seemed that the place and time of work for this organisation was
wherever and whenever it needed to be for the work to get done.

About six months after the project started, all staff were moved into shared accommodation
with the new owner's staff. The combined ISPL and GTC office facility occupied an entire
floor in a city high rise building, sharing a reception area, behind which the office space was
divided into the 'GTC end' and the 'ISPL end', reminiscent of the segregation of football or
cricket supporters. I comment on this and other aspects of the coming together of purchaser
and seller, in the case study.

2.3.3.3. The Case Study Group
When the study began, there were eleven members of the case study group; comprising the
whole of Division V1. The group comprised six men, including the division manager and five
women. Of the original eleven, two were located in another state.

Four members resigned at different times during the study and two others left the organisation
under other circumstances. Out of the five remaining at the end, only one was a woman. The
departures and the circumstances leading to them will be discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

In Chapter 4, which covers the project design and methods used in this study, I explain the
process by which I negotiated arrangements both with senior management and with individual
members of the group. In that same chapter, I discuss the manner in which I both worked with
these people and observed the organisation at work during the study.

2.4. Work and Organising Systems

2.4.1. The Work
ISPL was an Australian business, which specialised in supplying business consulting services to
public and private sector organisations. Within this broad field, it positioned itself in the market
relative to potential competitors, as an organisation that understood the application of
Information Technology to business. It also asserted that it kept up to date with emerging
technologies in order to help clients take advantage of them and claimed that it could be relied
upon to advise and guide clients on matters relating to the design, redesign and implementation
of business processes, in technology enabled environments. In addition, promotional material
indicated that ISPL had the skills and experience to support clients at all stages of the
technology acquisition process from tender preparation to project management, as well as being able to support them in business development processes such as strategic planning, performance measurement and 'change management'. It also offered a range of IT related education programmes. In practice, the consulting projects undertaken were as diverse as the above description implies, although ISPL's reputation with individual clients tended to be narrower. For example, having redesigned some business processes for a client, ISPL would be more likely to be called upon to do more business process design for that client than to undertake strategic planning or any other service not previously delivered to that client.

Over the years ISPL had built a client base, which regularly called on it to undertake projects. These engagements varied in duration from a few days to many months and often involved just one individual, and sometimes a group of consultants, to deliver the services. In addition to these regular clients, the organisation was constantly on the lookout for prospective new clients, and would often tender for consulting work in its field, in competition against other potential providers. As revenue targets increased, it became increasingly important to pursue these new opportunities in parallel with servicing existing clients. Of particular relevance to this research, revenue targets were increased during the earn-out period, to levels significantly higher than they had ever been before.

The perpetual management challenge facing the organisation was that the time consuming tasks associated with the sales process were a cost to the organisation that needed to be funded out of revenue generating consulting activities. The search for new sales opportunities, tendering for business, selling to prospective clients and negotiating contracts, could consume many months for any one potential contract, which might ultimately be lost to a competitor. Recognising that there were no easy answers to the dilemma, a variety of systems had been implemented over the years, in an attempt to both streamline the selling process and to minimise the cost of selling activity that was unlikely to result in a sale. A quality management system, a bid planning process and review of lost bids are examples. In addition, much attention was paid to marketing the organisation and its services, in the belief that broadcasting a clear message about the organisation's capabilities would result in prospective clients approaching ISPL, as well as ISPL having to canvass for business. Responsibility for sales was shifted during the reorganisation, from division managers, to the newly appointed PCs, following an assessment that it would be advantageous to separate responsibility for selling from line management of staff. Notably, some of the newly appointed PC's had been division managers.

Figure 2.3 shows the same organisation chart presented in Figure 2.2, this time with superimposed, enclosed areas, representing responsibility for undertaking revenue generating
consulting work. The line intentionally dissects the PC role, since those staff were expected to spend a proportion of their time undertaking some revenue generating work. A smaller proportion of the MC role is outside the boundary of the consulting system, representing the line management responsibilities attached to this role. It is important to note that the MC role holders were expected to generate revenue at the same level as an SC. AC's were seen to be 'trainees' and were therefore assigned lower revenue targets.

In Chapter 3, I present a different perspective on the organisation, depicting it not as a hierarchy of roles but as a system of interrelated sub-systems. In that view, selling and consulting are shown as two separate, but related sub-systems, each with a defining boundary, serving to differentiate what is in that sub-system from what constitutes its external environment.

Figure 2.3 Responsibility for Revenue Generating Work

The fragmentation evident in figure 2.3 is not present in the systems model of ISPL that will be discussed in Chapter 3. It will also be noted that the reporting lines between the consultants and the NMCS is shown differently from Figure 2.2. This is reflective of the ambiguity revealed by the case and is discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

The work itself varied from one contract to the next. Indeed ISPL prided itself on the provision of unique solutions to the problems brought to it by clients, depending on its collective
experience to produce an outcome that would add value to the client's business, greater than the professional fees paid for the service.

The following are some generic examples of projects:

- Review of business systems and processes based on 'gap analysis'; that is, an assessment of the gap between what exists and what is needed.
- Review of I.T. related contracts with a view to helping clients to improve contractual arrangements with suppliers.
- Business case development for clients assessing new product commercialisation.
- Business process review to improve business performance or to suit changing circumstances.

Figure 2.4 represents the flow of work in ISPL starting with an identified opportunity to secure a new contract for work, flowing through to the selling activity, which sometimes led to a contract for consulting services. ISPL's business survival depended on the effective functioning of two interrelated sets of activity; sales and consulting.

Figure 2.4  ISPL workflow - from opportunity to contract
Sales activity could be very time consuming, particularly when it included preparation of detailed tender responses. Fierce competition from other consulting firms meant that not all bids were successful so much time and effort could be expended on a losing bid. In order to ensure that the lessons of the loss were incorporated into future activity, ISPL would conduct a 'loss review' on losing bids to ensure that the reasons for the loss were, as far as possible, understood. A process of 'qualification' was employed prior to submitting a bid, in which a decision would be made on whether or not to bid, depending on the estimated probability of a successful outcome.

Consulting work would begin once a contract had been finalised. Results of ISPL's work were sometimes tangible in the form of reports or other documentation for the client to keep but were equally likely to be intangibles such as discussion outcomes, skills acquisition by the client or new processes within the client organisation.

2.4.2. Organising systems

Most contracts were negotiated on the basis of a 'fixed price'; that is, the scope of work would be defined and the price fixed at an absolute dollar figure. If the scope did not alter but the work took longer than had been estimated in calculating the price, this would be to ISPL's cost. Equally, a windfall gain for ISPL would arise if the work could be completed using less resource than estimated.

Consultants were assigned to projects by the National Manager, Consulting Staff, according to a combination of availability, experience and personal preference. Apart from time for scheduled annual leave and other allowable forms of leave, it was expected that consulting staff would be 'billing' which meant producing revenue generating work, for eighty percent of the assumed forty hours per staff member, per week that constituted available time. In practice, this meant that, on average, for four out of every five days, they must be earning revenue for the firm. Twenty percent of available time was therefore left for administration and other non revenue generating activity, including, in the case of the MC's, their newly assigned 'pastoral care' responsibilities.

To staff who were involved in long term projects, the eighty percent requirement seemed reasonable enough in that on average, as they saw it, one day was left out of each week for administrative, self educative and other non-billing activities. However, for staff who were working with multiple clients concurrently or were working on shorter term projects, this was thought, by some of the consultants who participated in the study, to be an unreasonable and unrealistic expectation.
The NMCS maintained the 'availability spreadsheet'. This was an electronic spreadsheet, over seventy pages long, which was used to keep track of and to analyse staff commitments and availability. Provided the spreadsheet was kept up to date, and this involved a complex administrative process, managers could see how many 'billable hours' had been booked by customers for each individual consultant and how many hours out of total working time were still 'available' to do more work. Consulting staff were expected to provide regular and accurate forecasts of committed work, in order that projections about likely revenue for the period could be calculated.

Apart from the availability spreadsheet, a range of other documented management systems was in place to guide and support the work. A quality assurance system had been designed for the purpose of ensuring that both selling and consulting work complied with defined standards. A 'bid preparation' system was there to ensure that any formal proposal to a client or prospect would draw on the appropriate skills and experience, wherever that existed. In addition, the physical bid document would be produced by a small team of specialists, ensuring compliance with content and document presentation standards. Detailed instructions had been recorded so that staff knew where to file electronic copies of all the documentation they produced in the process of undertaking work for a client. The organisation prided itself on thorough record keeping and its ability to locate an earlier piece of work that might help a colleague undertake a new assignment.

2.4.3. E-mail facilities

All consulting staff were provided with a notebook computer as part of their salary 'package' and this included the computer hardware and software necessary to enable them to use the computer both in ISPL's offices and when they were away from the office and able to make an Internet connection. All staff were provided with an ISPL e-mail address. In addition, all staff had unrestricted access to the World Wide Web so were able to access whatever Internet pages they chose. Standard e-mail facilities enabled the sending and receipt of e-mail messages containing hyperlinks to pages on the World Wide Web.

The company placed almost no restrictions on staff about their use of e-mail. Both private and business uses were sanctioned. Staff were expected to exercise appropriate judgement in terms of e-mail content. E-mail traffic could enter and leave the organisation with border control limited to virus detection and elimination. This was a business in which anyone, anywhere, provided they had access to an e-mail address, could send a message to one or more staff members and anyone with an ISPL e-mail address had equivalent message sending scope. I explore how this facility was taken up in practice and the implications for the business, in the
case study detail in Chapter 5. The technical information about how I was able to observe the group's e-mail messages is provided in Chapter 4.

2.5. The External Environment

Although ISPL aspired to undertake consulting projects in both the public and private sectors, in reality its reputation had been built largely in the public sector, where it had built a client base comprising both state and local government organisations. The Australian marketplace is served by a large number of consulting businesses, ranging in size from the large multi-national multi-disciplinary consulting organisations to sole practitioner businesses. ISPL recognised the importance of differentiating its service offerings from those of other consulting practices and had sought to do this by defining itself as a business consultancy 'that understands I.T.'. The high dependence on government contracts rendered the selling process more time consuming and costly than it might have been in the private sector because of mandated public sector practices such as competitive tendering. The implication of this for the organisation was that it led to the need for reliable market intelligence; that is, awareness of the effect of the political and economic environment on existing and potential customers, thereby enabling the company to be in a position to anticipate customers' requirements. In practice, this meant constant effort to maintain a network of connections with influential stakeholders in the external environment; a task that the Managing Director undertook with much relish.

2.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described an organisation that was in transition, within several frames of reference. The sale led to a privately owned Australian business becoming part of a publicly owned, international one. The founding entrepreneur, who had been the dominant shareholder, was now reporting to other senior managers and under a great deal of pressure to achieve an earn-out target. A familiar structure had been removed overnight, and new roles had been created in response to pressing problems, partly relating to the sale of the business. In the midst of this turmoil, staff were expected to perform at unprecedented levels of achievement.

This was a professional services organisation, employing highly skilled, well trained individuals, who were provided with all the technical facilities necessary to do their work, including an e-mail connection that would operate from wherever they happened to be. This enabled them to maintain contact with colleagues and customers alike; indeed the firm's open policy on e-mail use meant that they could make and maintain contact with whomever they chose.

The work itself was challenging and rarely routine, resulting in staff facing the challenge of providing solutions in situations they had not previously encountered. Well developed
administrative and work-flow processes provided a degree of certainty, and a disciplined approach to record keeping enabled consultants to access prior work whenever it might help them deal with a new piece of work.

Nevertheless, for the period of the study, consulting staff were dealing not only with the uncertainties and challenges of business as usual but also with their individual responses to the organisational change happening around them. The events of the case study will be presented in detail in Chapter 5. I will now turn in Chapter 3 to the conceptual framework around which the analysis will be structured and then in Chapter 4 to the study design and methods.
Chapter 3. Conceptual Framework

3.1. Introduction

This chapter provides a framework for thinking about e-mail in a way that I believe to be appropriate given the aims of the study; that is, looking at e-mail as an integral part of the organisation as a whole, its work and its environment. The conceptual framework assembled here draws on only a very small proportion of available theories and potential conceptualisations from the broad field of system psychodynamics and psychoanalytic thinking applied to organisations. I am confident that the selection made is helpful because it was largely driven by the data that emerged from the case rather than the case being driven by theory. The significance of this framework for the study design and method, which are covered in Chapter 4, is explained in the body of the chapter.

The framework described here underpins the report of findings in Chapter 5 and the case analysis in Chapters 6 and 7.

In Chapter 1, I explained the background to my interest in exploring e-mail use in a commercial setting and the significance of the specific organisational setting in which the study took place.

In Chapter 2, I provided contextual background about the case study organisation, a consulting services business. This included its history, an overview of the work itself and the environment in which the organisation operated. When the research project started, the company had been sold, an earn-out\(^2\) period had begun and much associated anxiety was being expressed by participants in the study. Also in Chapter 2, I described the facilities that enabled e-mail use and, in broad terms, the significance of e-mail to a business in which much of the work took place away from the formal office environment. I described the organisation as it described itself, as a hierarchical structure, noting positions in the hierarchy and the location of case study participants before and after a significant restructure. I foreshadowed that in the conceptual framework I would be presenting an alternative view of the organisation that centres on work, not structure.

The body of this chapter begins in 3.2 with an elaboration of the idea of an organisation as a system, using a conceptual view of the organisation as a system of interrelated sub-systems. Parts of each sub-system are human and others are processes or procedures or any of the other

\(^2\) A definition of earn-out is contained in Appendix 1.
non-human components of an organisational system, including technology based systems such as e-mail. This 'socio-technical' systems framework (Trist and Bamforth 1951, De Board 1978, Wiesbord 1987) provides one basis for thinking about the interdependencies between people and systems, between systems within the organisation and between the organisation and its environment. The concept of a boundary, separating what is inside from what is outside each system or sub-system, is included in this discussion.

Within the socio-technical systems framework, e-mail is conceptualised as occurring in three forms. First, it is part of the organisational system and of its sub-systems. Second, it provides a means of linking between systems and third, it manifests as a separate system, that can both impinge on, and be hidden from, the organisational systems.

Then, the theoretical model is extended to explore the concept of management as a boundary function, operating to regulate interactions between a system or sub-system and its environment. This conceptual view of management is contrasted with the hierarchical view, presented in the description of the case study organisation in Chapter 2, and the relevance of the boundary-centred view to this thesis is explained.

Next, the idea of a boundary is considered from another perspective. The concept of the individual as a bounded system is explored, centring on the idea of the person, set in, separated from yet interacting with, their environment. The potential for disparate realities to exist within the one organisation, as a result of differences between people's individual life experiences, is explored through the concept of 'in-the-mind' (Armstrong 1991, Hutton, Bazalgette, and Reed 1997), first as a general concept, and then in the context of specific examples to illustrate its relevance to this study.

The relatedness between the person as a whole and their involvement in the organisation is then incorporated into the framework, in a discussion of the concept of organisational role. I refer again to boundaries; this time to the boundaries that are seen to separate what is inside the role from what is not, and the boundary separating the capacities brought by an individual to the role and those capacities that remain unused in a role at a particular time.

At this point, discussion will turn to a particular type of individual as a bounded system: the entrepreneur. The study revealed that the founding entrepreneur influenced many facets of organisational life. A discussion here of one particular set of views on the influence of the inner world of the typical entrepreneur, on his management and leadership style is intended to provide
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useful background for the case analysis in Chapters 6 and 7. Some psychoanalytically based theory that helps explain the organisation's dependency on the entrepreneur is included.

The discussion then returns to systems, now in the context of the links that are assumed to form, both in the service of, and independently of, the work of the organisation, between people with similar realities or common bonds. The potential for tension between these 'sentient system' (Miller 1998 p.9) dynamics and the core work of the organisation is discussed.

The part potentially played by emotions in a person's interactions with the world around them is discussed, recognising that emotions are thought to arise both in the individual and in group settings. Particular reference is made to the possible sources of anxiety in organisational life and the manner in which individuals and groups may respond. Alternative states in which an individual is either able to deal with difficult emotions or seeks to get rid of them in some way, are considered in a discussion of the psychoanalytic concept of containment (Bion 1985). This is then extended to some ideas about the capacity of the organisation as a whole, to contain and deal with difficult emotions.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the concept of 'counterstructure' (Hirschhorn 2000), which will be used in Chapter 6 to link the idea of an organisation as a hierarchy of roles with the open systems view presented here.

Throughout this chapter, I use background information about the case study organisation, presented in Chapter 2, for illustrative purposes. I also point to the significance of e-mail for various aspects of the framework.

3.2. The organisation as an open system

3.2.1. Systems and sub-systems

Open systems theory is predicated on the belief that an organisation is analogous with a living system, in that it depends on its environment for survival (Lewin 1947). As human beings take in air and food and process them in order to generate the energy needed for survival, so an organisation is seen to 'input' the raw materials and resources necessary for its production processes, which convert the inputs into products or services; the organisation's 'outputs'. The notion of inputs and outputs flowing across the boundaries of an 'open system', to and from the external environment is fundamental to the differentiation of an 'open system' from a 'closed' one (Von Bertalanffy 1969) and to the idea of organisations being thought about as living organisms rather than inanimate objects (Emery and Trist 1965). This dynamic view of the
organisation is appropriate to this study because it places the organisation within, connected to and interacting with its environment. E-mail also connects the organisation with its environment. An enterprise can be thought of as an open system because it 'can only exist by exchanging materials with its environment' (Miller and Rice 1975 p.43). The organisation takes in inputs, converts them in conversion processes and exports the product of the conversion, the output, into the external environment (Miller and Rice ibid.).

As I described in Chapter 2, ISPL was not in the business of manufacturing tangible products; its primary source of income was the supply of consulting services, a form of what Pava (1983) refers to as office work. Most of ISPL's outputs were intangibles, such as the effects of the consulting work on the client system. Tangible outputs from the consulting work included reports, work-flow diagrams and discussion documents. However, as this chapter will illustrate, although the concept of the organisation as an open system was originally developed in factory and mining settings, the open systems model can also provide insights into the dynamics of an organisation that produces largely intangible outputs. According to its published statement of purpose, ISPL imported customers' 'complex business problems' and converted them into 'business solutions' through the application of 'innovative techniques'. The outcome for clients was that ISPL was 'helping businesses perform better'. Figure 3.1 illustrates this macro view of ISPL as an open system.

![Figure 3.1 ISPL as an open system](image)

Figure 3.1 shows ISPL in its simplest form, with the core work of the enterprise represented by a single enclosed area. In reality, the enterprise was a complex system, with multiple interrelated sub-systems, each with its own inputs, conversion processes and outputs. For example and as
noted in Chapter 2, ISPL's business incorporated a sales sub-system, which is represented as an open system in figure 3.2.

Some of the inputs to the sales sub-system enter the organisation from the external environment, for example, a tender document from a prospective customer; other inputs enter the sales system from other sub-systems within the organisation. For example, information about ISPL’s track record with completed projects would be input to the sales sub-system as it prepared proposals for new consulting work. These internally produced testimonials would have been stored in ISPL’s extensive electronic database of information and kept up to date by consultants as projects were completed.

Conversion processes within the sales system, included 'qualification' of the prospect, a process in which staff made an assessment of the probability of winning this particular contract; estimated the likely cost of submitting a proposal, and made a decision about whether or not to bid for the work based on the risk of losing the contract, weighed against the potential return. The 'hit rate' was the proportion of bids that were converted into contracts for work.

![The sales sub-system](image)

Conversion processes within the sales system, included 'qualification' of the prospect, a process in which staff made an assessment of the probability of winning this particular contract; estimated the likely cost of submitting a proposal, and made a decision about whether or not to bid for the work based on the risk of losing the contract, weighed against the potential return. The 'hit rate' was the proportion of bids that were converted into contracts for work.

Outputs from the sales system were primarily destined for the environment external to ISPL; for example, a proposal document; although some outputs from the sales system remained within ISPL; for example, new knowledge about the business environment, obtained through participation in a tender process. The most significant output from the sales sub-system was a
contract for consulting work. Consulting work rarely began without a contract having been negotiated.

The case study in Chapter 5 focuses predominantly on the two major sub-systems in this organisation; the sales sub-system and the consulting sub-system, their relatedness to each other and the entrepreneur's involvement in both. Consulting organisations of all sizes are familiar with the perennial challenge of balancing sales and consulting activities, the most concerning issue for management being the extent to which sales activity, from which no fees are derived, can be supported in the business. At the same time, sales activity is essential for economic survival.

3.2.2. Activities within the sub-system

In the socio-technical systems model, each sub-system comprises multiple activities, which fall into three broad categories; operating activities, maintenance activities and regulatory activities (Miller and Rice 1975) and a sub-system is likely to involve a combination of all three.

Operating activities have been classified as the activities that directly contribute to the import, conversion and export processes (Miller and Rice ibid.). An example of an operating activity in ISPL's sales system was proposal preparation; that is, the gathering together of all the information necessary to respond to a prospect's formal expression of interest in ISPL's services, culminating in preparation of the physical tender document.

Open systems theory posits that maintenance activities source and replenish the resources that produce operating activities (Miller and Rice, ibid.). In a professional services firm, the resource requiring the highest maintenance is the human resource; that is, the organisation's employees. Maintenance activities for staff include recruitment and training, as well as the many other tasks necessary to maintain an effective workforce.

Regulatory activities link operating activities with each other, maintenance activities to operating activities and link the enterprise to its environment (Miller and Rice, ibid.). ISPL had specified the form that many of its regulatory activities were to take. For example its quality assurance (QA) system had been designed to ensure that outputs from the firm met specified standards and the 'availability spreadsheet' was used to match resources with jobs and to record specific measures against both.

E-mail and other IT&T technologies supported activities within each of these three categories. Curriculum vitae for prospective employees entered the organisation from recruitment agencies,
proposals were sent electronically to prospective customers and the availability spreadsheet, used to track deployment of consulting resources was updated weekly and e-mailed to each of the senior management team. Underpinning the e-mail system, was an organised 'warehouse' of files and databases, collectively referred to as 'the knowledge bank', any item from which, could be sent as an e-mail attachment.

The conceptual framework is now developed further for the purpose of further conceptualising this extensively computer mediated working environment.

3.2.3. The organisation as a socio-technical system

In the decades since Lewin (1947) first applied open systems theory to organisations, a vast array of technological advances has been incorporated into organisational systems, replacing labour-intensive work with automated machinery and in more recent years with computer technology. My decision to base this framework on open systems theories draws on the work of many others, some of whom are cited here, who have argued for the enduring value of this approach and its derivatives.

Open systems theory was applied by Trist and Bamforth (1951) in a method they labelled the 'socio-technical systems approach' in their work in the British coal-mining industry in the late 1940's. At that time, the flow of work to take coal from an underground seam to the surface was being radically altered by the introduction of mechanisation. Although mechanisation of itself brought about dramatic improvements in productivity and efficiency, the benefits were compromised because the introduction of the new technology upset what had been a state of equilibrium in the underground work systems prior to installation of the new machinery. For example, the new coal-mining machinery resulted in workers being distanced from each other, sometimes never meeting other workers face to face, even though their work depended on successful completion of co-workers work. Trist and Bamforth (ibid.) applied the concept of open systems to the situation in the coal mines by conceptualising the organisation as a composite of correlated social and technical systems; that is, a socio-technical system.

In their terms, the technical system, also referred to as the task system, includes both the work of the conversion system and the instruments used to produce the system outputs. It also includes the knowledge used to engage in the conversion work (Czander 1993). In ISPL's sales sub-system, processes of qualification and proposal preparation are examples of activities within this technical or task system. In addition to the technical system, work in organisations also involves social interactions between people undertaking the work. The socio-technical systems model conceptualises the social and emotional bonds between organisational members as
sentient system' functioning (Rice 1969). A consulting project for example, would depend both on successful performance of tasks within the project and effective sentient functioning of project team members. The socio-technical systems approach to organisational analysis seeks misalignments between task and sentient functioning within the organisation and between the socio-technical system and its environment since they are seen to be the indicators of sub-optimal functioning in the organisation (Susman 1983). The introduction of a change to the technical system, as in the example of mechanisation in the coal mining industry can, it is thought, lead to such mismatches.

Pava (1983) showed how the socio-technical systems approach could be adapted for application to a diverse range of office based work. He classified office work along a continuum, with routine office work at one extreme and nonroutine office work at the other. Routine office work, which he found to be most like the factory work on which socio-technical systems theory had originally been based, is characterised by 'accuracy of detail', and involves 'information with consistent formats'. Nonroutine office work involves dealing with unstructured problems, variable information formats and the application of 'fairly broad discretion' (Pava ibid. pp. 47-48). Pava argued that the socio-technical systems approach could be applied to nonroutine office work by taking account of (1) 'environment effects and their management as an integral part of work', (2) 'complexity of work' and (3) 'maintenance of variety through redundancy of functions' (Pava, ibid. p. 57). His reference to redundancy of functions draws on the work of Emery and Trist (1973) who argued that when individuals have complex roles, at any one time only some of their skill and experience is used in their work. Some functions they are able to perform are, at a given time, not utilised.

Although Pava's work predates the extensive use of e-mail in contemporary organisations, his characterisation of nonroutine office work is still relevant in the ISPL case. He differentiates the flow of nonroutine work from that of routine work by describing the 'deliberations' (Pava ibid. p. 49-73) in which people engage in order to do their work. Deliberations are 'encounters, exchanges and reflections in general that help resolve an equivocal topic at work' (Pava ibid. p. 59). They are not, he argues, decisions, although they may lead to decisions, and they are not the same as meetings, although these may provide a forum for deliberations. I will refer to the nature of the deliberations that took place at ISPL in the case study in Chapter 5 and the analysis in Chapters 6 and 7.

The conceptual framework is now extended to incorporate e-mail technology both as a system in its own right and as an integral part of the work systems mentioned so far.
3.3.  **E-mail and the socio-technical system**

E-mail is represented in the conceptual framework in three forms.

First, e-mail can be thought of as an integral component of many of the socio-technical sub-systems in this organisation. The sales sub-system for example, utilised e-mail in the preparation of a tender document, enabling several members of staff to contribute to its preparation, by e-mailing a shared document back and forth between them. Equally, it was used in the recruitment process, in interactions with external agencies and internally, between managers involved in the task of hiring a new staff member.

Second, e-mail enabled many linkages between sub-systems and between sub-systems and the external environment. A consultant, for example, updates a document containing her professional profile and e-mails it to a PC who is compiling a tender response. Linkages between systems extended to the external environment; for example, e-mail enabled links with external organisations such as customers.

In both these contexts, e-mail provided a means by which ISPL staff who were not physically in the same location but were working on the same task or a related task, could effect communication between them. This potential was particularly significant for ISPL consultants, who, as noted in Chapter 2, frequently worked 'on site' with the customer or, when necessary from home. In addition, e-mail facilities enabled staff, who were on vacation or on sick-leave, to continue with some aspects of their work. Indeed, as Chapters 5, 6 and 7 will explore further, it seemed to be an expectation that staff would do this.

Third, e-mail operated as a system which was independent of any of the systems of organisational work described to date, in that it enabled social interactions between ISPL staff members and their friends and relations outside the business, interactions on any other matter relating neither to the business nor to social contacts, and it enabled access to a vast range of material on the World Wide Web. Effectively, when staff were accessing this dimension of the e-mail system, it was as if the boundary between the organisation and its environment did not exist. Subject to clearance by security systems such as a virus checker and firewall, e-mail could pass freely from outside to inside the organisation and vice versa. Paradoxically, this openness did not extend to visitors to the organisation's offices whose identity and purpose would be checked at reception before entry was granted.
This third form of e-mail is illustrative of what Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1992) have referred to as the 'boundarylessness' of contemporary organisations. I will refer to their definition of this term in the case analysis in Chapter 6 but will now return to the socio-technical systems model in order to explore the meaning of system boundaries and their implications for business management.

3.4. The significance of Boundaries

3.4.1. Management as a boundary function

A system is said to be separated from its environment by a boundary (Miller and Rice 1975). In a complex organisation comprising many sub-systems, the environment external to the boundary of one system includes other sub-systems so that its outputs become inputs to another sub-system or department. For example, a contract for work was an output from the sales sub-system at ISPL and an input to the consulting sub-system. The boundaries of some organisational sub-systems interface with the environment external to the whole organisation (Stacey 1996). This was true of both the sales and consulting sub-systems in ISPL. Staff involved in selling work routinely interacted with prospective client organisations, and consultants also operated across the boundary between ISPL and the client systems. At a more detailed level, each consulting project could be thought of as a sub-system within the consulting work, its boundary managed by the project manager, usually one of the consulting staff.

In order for the organisation as a whole to function effectively, the work of the various sub-systems must be coordinated so their combined efforts result in the work of the organisation as a whole being performed effectively and efficiently. This means that the flow of inputs to the system and to its sub-systems and the equivalent output flows, all of which occur across boundaries, must be managed.

When the organisation is viewed in this way, it follows that definition and management of boundaries is a prerequisite for effective organisational functioning (Zagier Roberts 1994). This view of management as a boundary function offers an alternative perspective from management being thought of as a position on an organisation chart and from the idea that a manager is a 'people manager'.

Miller and Rice (1975) asserted that the boundary of a system or sub-system is more accurately described as a region with two boundaries, one separating the boundary control function from the system of operating activities and the other is located between the boundary function and the external environment. It follows that the manager's role involves attention to what flows
into the sub-system from the external environment and to outputs from the sub-system, on their way to the external environment. As illustrated already in earlier examples, these inputs and outputs can relate directly to the sub-system's work. In addition, as a result of e-mail use, material can flow into and affect the sub-system for which the manager is responsible, independently of any boundary control function. For example, information about the sale of the business, about the office move and about the earn-out all entered the consulting and selling sub-systems via e-mail, impacting on the staff and on their work.

Figure 3.3 shows the two main sub-systems of work within ISPL; sales and consulting, each with its own boundary control function. The consulting sub-system in ISPL was dependent on the sales sub-system for work. If an insufficient volume of orders for consulting work was flowing into the organisation, the consulting sub-system became starved of the inputs needed to do its work, even though staff working in that sub-system were expected to be undertaking revenue generating work for eighty percent of the time.

![Figure 3.3](image)

**Figure 3.3 Management as a Boundary control function in ISPL**

The inner boundary of the sub-system is significant as it denotes what it contained within the sub-system; that is the routine and nonroutine work of the sub-system, the people who do the work and the emotional and social consequences of engaging with the work.

Finally, the organisation as a whole can be thought of as a bounded system, separated from its environment by a region of control. It is the responsibility of the organisational head to manage this boundary. The organisational head may be a group of people. The boundary surrounding ISPL has an additional significance in the case study in that it also separated the business entity.
that was sold from the purchasing organisation. As the case study will illustrate, perceptions of ISPL as an entity, distinct from the acquiring organisation, bore much significance for staff, as did seemingly irrational fears about what might permeate across the boundary and contaminate the ISPL environment.

3.4.2. E-mail and boundaries

Boundaries can be relatively easy to define. The boundaries of a self contained production line in a single factory or of a retail outlet in a shopping mall could be defined in terms of physical space, a department in an organisation may be defined in terms of the members of the department, that is, who is inside versus who is outside the department. However, it has been said that new technologies such as e-mail have changed the shape of organisations. Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1992) have argued that technological capability renders organisations 'boundaryless' in that physical location, departmental functioning and hierarchical position no longer define the boundaries that are important in organisational life. They concur with the basic tenet of management as a boundary function but advocate that boundaries created by hierarchy, function and geography be replaced with four 'new' types of boundary; the 'authority' boundary, the 'task' boundary, the 'political' boundary and the 'identity' boundary. The authority boundary is said to occur where responsibility for providing direction, held by 'superiors' meets up with responsibility for execution, held by 'subordinates'. The identity boundary is seen to separate groups from each other, to define what is 'us' versus what is 'them' and to offer employees a 'common identity'. It is said that 'people acting at the identity boundary trust insiders but are wary of outsiders'. The task boundary is deemed important in complex work environments where work is specialised and separate efforts must be coordinated and negotiated in order to get the job done. Finally, the political boundary is involved where diverse interests must be negotiated in order to attend to the interests of the organisation as a whole (Hirschhorn and Gilmore ibid. pp. 107-109).

The relevance of the distinction between traditional and 'new' boundaries is explored further in the case study.

3.5. The Individual and Bounded systems

3.5.1. The Individual

The idea of a boundary separating the inside from the outside, explored in the previous section in the context of organisational systems and sub-systems, can be said to be equally applicable to the individual as a thinking, feeling, sentient system. A conceptual boundary, the ego (Freud 1940) is hypothesised to separate the inner world of the individual, that is their accumulated
The role of the ego in individual functioning is seen to be management of the processes of exchange between the individual and their environment. Ego psychoanalytic theory holds that effective ego functioning lies in knowing the boundary between the self and the outside world and in differentiating between what is inside and what is outside (Stacey 1996). External reality is believed to be distorted when a person assigns attributes of himself to another, an unconscious process in which the ego protects itself from an internal threat using one of a number of ego defences, in this case projection. When projective processes are operating, feelings are said to be split into 'good' and 'bad' thus providing temporary relief from internal painful conflicts (Halton 1994).

In order for work to be done effectively, both the good and the bad parts must be contained within the individual's inner world and dealt with as an integrated whole. In this state, the individual is functioning from the depressive position (Klein 1985) in contrast with the condition in which splitting occurs, which Klein (ibid.) has called the paranoid-schizoid position.

The significance of psychoanalytic theories to this study is that they enable both rational and irrational thinking processes to be thought about and dealt with. Irrational thinking is seen to stem from the impact of the unconscious on thought processes and to be a major factor in the manner in which anxiety is dealt with both by the individual and by groups and entire organisations. In Chapter 1, I differentiated the approach taken in this study to potential alternatives by describing it as an exploration of the system as a whole, and by the expression of my desire to look at the complex system as a whole, rather than make any attempt to reduce it to component parts and variables for the purpose of analysis. It therefore follows that the people who participated in the study need to be incorporated as whole systems, including therefore both the conscious and unconscious aspects of their individual and collective contributions to organisational life. Hidden forces are believed to operate in all human social systems but are generally ignored in the causal/behavioural approach to organisational analysis (Czander 1993), yet unconscious processes in the individual may influence his or her thought patterns and behaviour.

Individual psychoanalysis seeks, in the relationship between analyst and analysand in part to interpret conscious experience by exploring unconscious, hidden meaning. In order to engage in this work, the analyst 'takes up a listening position on the boundary between conscious and unconscious meaning' (Halton 1994 p. 12). The majority of people may never experience individual psychoanalysis but all will experience the effect of their own and others' unconscious processes (Obholzer and Roberts 1994). Extending these ideas to thinking about
psychoanalytically informed research Gabriel (1999) has suggested that the researcher approaches their work like a detective, searching for and following up clues, teasing out meaning through the interpretive processes of action research that will be discussed in Chapter 4. He posits that the psychoanalytically informed researcher generally aims to understand the unconscious processes in individuals, in groups and in the organisation as a whole, that contribute to its manifest functioning.

3.5.2. 'In the mind' of the individual

An individual's inner world greatly influences their view of, their responses to and their behaviour in the external environment. An organisational setting and events occurring in that setting are experienced differently by individuals as a result of the influence of their differing inner worlds. What is in the mind of one individual about a particular situation or issue may be very different from the mental model (Senge 1992) held by a colleague about the same situation or issue. It has been argued that people routinely construct organisational models within themselves that reflect their own personal reality (Hutton, Bazalgette, and Reed 1997). As Stapley (1996) has pointed out, we classify, categorise and name things, in order to deal with the infinite variability of the world around us, in order to try and make sense of it. It seems that successful organisational functioning necessitates that private mental models be brought into view through language and other forms of human interaction and distinguished from any other reality. Hutton, Bazalgette et al. (ibid.) discuss the concept of the 'organisation-in-the-mind', specifically. Here it is useful to extend the notion to incorporate any mental model relating to organisational life, which is 'in the mind' because it is what is 'in the mind' of the individual which influences their interactions with others and therefore with e-mail content. Furthermore, what is 'in the mind' of the individual is a part of the overall experience of the organisation, that is, the 'inner psychic space of the organisation' (Armstrong 1991 p. 4).

3.5.3. Organisational role and the Individual

Within this conceptual framework, I also want to make a distinction that is often not explicit in mainstream management theory, between the individual and their organisational role or roles, that is, the 'person-in-role' (Armstrong 1991). The taking up of an organisational role requires the individual to use particular skills, experience, feelings and attitudes and to exclude other attributes; indeed their inclusion might adversely affect the individual's performance in a particular role (Miller and Rice 1975).

Often, individuals are required to take up multiple roles in organisations. Each role may call on a common set of attributes in the individual but may also require the person to engage a different set of skills and to call on diverse sub-sets of their overall life experience. An example
of this concept is represented in Figure 3.4, and uses a role combination from the case study in depicting an individual who is both a consultant and therefore expected to perform revenue generating work and a team leader with the title Managing Consultant, with certain line management responsibilities. Figure 3.4 shows the individual, the ego function mediating between their inner world and the external environment and the two roles of consultant and manager, drawing on attributes of the individual. The role of consultant expects certain characteristics and skills, some of which are also necessary to performance in the role of team leader, for example, the ability to produce high quality business documentation for provision to clients. However, it is suggested that each role would also call on some skill and experience that was not needed in performance of the other. For example, the team leader would need to be familiar with the staff performance appraisal system and have developed the necessary interpersonal skills to be able to discuss a consultant’s professional performance in a constructive and helpful manner. In this regard, a consultant need only be familiar with the techniques involved in self assessment. The two roles shown in Figure 3.4 therefore overlap somewhat, but are also somewhat separate. Each role leaves redundant functions (Emery and Trist 1973), which may be called on by the other role or may not be called on at all in the organisation.

The distinction between role and individual is included here in the conceptual framework to emphasise the importance of boundaries in the taking up of organisational role, the presence of boundaries between roles and the impact of the individual's inner world on the taking up of their organisational role, and its ultimate effect on the business. Role boundaries define what is to be managed by role holders and relate roles to each other and to task. Lawrence (1979 pp. 235-249) coined the term 'management of self in role’ to describe the work involved.
The manner in which a role is taken up is thought to be influenced as much by unconscious processes as by conscious choices. When the individual holds a powerful position in the organisation, the effects of those influencing factors can be far reaching, as was the case with the entrepreneur who founded the case study organisation. His influence over the evolving dynamics in this organisation is discussed in the next section.

3.5.4. The entrepreneur

The entrepreneur has been defined as the individual who is instrumental in the conception and the implementation of an organisation, fulfilling many functions - managing, coordinating, innovating and risk-taking, often finding difficulty in 'letting go' and allowing others to take up aspects of organisational authority (Kets de Vries 1996), to the extent that entrepreneurs typically surround themselves with 'yes men', as the business grows. Greg, the entrepreneur in this case, had historically maintained tight budgetary and operational control, and as the business grew, he surrounded himself with a number of lieutenants, who were assigned responsibility for aspects of the business. The entrepreneur also assumes responsibility for dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity. In Greg's case, this involved much attention to managing the boundary around ISPL and its relatedness to the external environment. Over the years this had meant taking a lead role in positioning the company in the competitive marketplace described in Chapter 2, and more recently attention to issues relating to the sale.
Kets de Vries (ibid) also found that the experience of feeling 'different' has an important influence on entrepreneurs. Notably ISPL had built its brand image around the assertion that it was 'different'. As the case will illustrate, Greg seemed to want to be different and the organisation appeared to be the vehicle for the expression of his difference. As Kets de Vries (ibid.) predicts, Greg had attracted subordinates with dependent personality structures, people who would rely on the inspired judgements of the boss.

In his detailed profile of the typical entrepreneur, Kets de Vries also asserts that aspects of the typical entrepreneur's inner world; feelings of low self esteem, inferiority and helplessness are counteracted through excessive control and activity. The entrepreneur is continually in search of an admiring audience to shore up a fragile sense of self. The need for control and the desire for applause lead to primitive defence mechanisms such as splitting, projection, denial, and flight into action.

It was not the aim of this research to explore the inner world of one individual and no attempt is being made to analyse Greg's personality. The point being made here is the extent to which the organisation as Greg had created it, seemed to be not just an enterprise but part of his identity; an extension of himself. He is singled out here because of his influence over the organisation.

In the case I refer to the organisation being 'dependent' on Greg and in the next section I explain the implications of this descriptor.

3.5.4.1. Dynamics of Dependency

When staff in an organisation behave as if they are inadequate and dependent on the principals for nourishment, for example, in the form of work allocation, it is said that the organisation is in a state of dependency. Bion (1968) has labelled this ‘basic assumption dependency’. In this mode, group members behave immaturely, act 'as if the leader is omnipotent and omniscient, someone who can solve all difficulties and problems as if by magic' (De Board 1978 p. 39). As the case will illustrate, the organisation was dependent on Greg. As the assumed all-powerful leader, he was idealised by staff and this inhibited their dealing effectively with the reality of the changing circumstances.

3.6. People and organisational systems

3.6.1. Introduction

In this section, I extend the idea of making meaning out of work and interactions with people at work, into some more general concepts.
3.6.2. The sentient system

All human beings seek affiliation with others and ways of defining who they are. Regardless of whether they are in the workplace or elsewhere, people have a psychological need for affiliation and identity (Miller 1998). The work in which people engage can contribute to satisfaction of these needs. It can also lead to a sense of deprivation; a feeling that something that was hoped for has not been achieved. In an organisational setting, both satisfaction and deprivation can manifest overtly, as in the case of the satisfaction one might feel as a result of a pay rise, or the deprivation experienced when a hoped for salary increase does not materialise. Equally, satisfaction or deprivation can arise out of a person's inner world of unconscious drives and their need to defend themselves against anxiety (Miller and Rice 1975).

Consulting services organisations such as ISPL are usually staffed by individuals who have received many years of professional training and development and who seek satisfaction from the work they have chosen to do. Satisfaction arises from the work itself and from relationships with others, which, in the case of consulting work, include colleagues, customers and others with whom one has a professional association. For a person who is well suited to their chosen profession, a great deal of satisfaction may be derived from their day to day work. However, given the vicissitudes of contemporary organisational life in general and the transitional state of this organisation in particular, the work and organisational life can also lead to a sense of deprivation, as described earlier.

To the extent that people have needs that are not satisfied within the task systems in which they are involved, they will seek to satisfy those needs elsewhere. Miller (1998) referred to this need for affiliation and identity as a 'second form of organisation' (p. 9); the sentient system. This has been interpreted as 'the affects and meanings that are attached to the common emotional bonds among members who hold a shared reality' (Smith and Crandell 1984 p. 814). It is possible to combine both the task and sentient systems into a single socio-technical system (Miller and Rice 1967) although in a fast-changing environment such as the case study organisation this would be an unrealistic objective. As soon as possible after one project ended at ISPL, consultants were assigned to another project, working with a different client and different colleagues, if the project required more than one consultant. In this environment, it is unlikely that sentient needs could have been met entirely within the task structure.

The case study illustrates some of the ways in which sentient needs were fulfilled or frustrated, including the part played by e-mail. Attention to the sentient needs of an organisation and its
people allows the person as a whole to be accommodated into the way the organisation and its work is thought about including their emotions.

3.6.3. Emotions in the system

A rational approach to business is often seen to necessitate the exclusion of emotions, which can be seen as the interference factor (Hopfl and Linstead 1997). However, as Armstrong (2000) has pointed out, every organisation is an emotional place because it is a human invention and is dependent on human beings to function. Both the work itself and the experience of organisational life can trigger emotions. Equally, people in the organisation experience emotions relating to their lives outside the organisation. Emotions arise out of the inner world of individuals in the organisation as much as they arise out of inter-personal relationships within the organisation. They are 'constitutive of organisational life because they are constitutive of all human experience' (Armstrong ibid. p. 1).

Within an organisation, individuals, groups and the organisation as a whole, are all seen to be entities which can have inside them anxiety laden and unbearable parts, which may or may not relate to the work of the organisation (Nutkevitch 1998). Individuals and organisations alike develop defences against difficult emotions such as anxiety. They can be denied or they can be separated from the tolerable elements of mental life in the process of splitting. When intolerable feelings are separated from good feelings and projected onto other individuals or groups, the person or the group is said to be in the paranoid-schizoid state (Klein 1985). It is important to emphasise here that this is a natural aspect of childhood development and a psychic position into which individuals and organisations can repeatedly move, in dealing with difficult emotions. When organisations attempt to exclude negative feelings in favour of rationality and a so-called 'positive approach', emotions must be defended against, resulting in states of denial and projection of feelings onto others (Hopfl and Linstead, ibid), within or external to the organisation. Alternatively, under appropriate conditions, they can be worked through so that groups and individuals are able to return to the work. Emotions are part of sentient functioning so when an attempt is made to separate emotions from the person who enters the work place, sentient functioning is inhibited, yet, as discussed earlier, sentient functioning is a necessary part of the organisation as a whole.

In Chapter 2, I mentioned several conscious sources of anxiety for staff in ISPL. First, the anxiety of meeting earn-out targets, experienced by former owners as a threat to financial success and by consulting staff as pressure to achieve the eighty percent utilisation target. Second, the anxiety associated with the organisation's stated purpose of solving customers' problems. Third, the range of anxieties associated with loss of familiar structures, fear about
losing an identity which had effectively become part of staff members' inner world in that they had introjected the ISPL identity projected by the entrepreneur. Often such anxieties stir up other, neurotic anxieties, associated with the individual's inner world. The effect is similar in that both lead to painful emotional states, that must be dealt with in order for the work of the organisation to be carried out effectively.

Oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions is an on-going part of organisational life (Obholzer and Roberts 1994), but the return to the depressive position can be a realistic goal when attention is paid to containment.

3.6.4. Containment

Containment is a metaphorical term used by Bion (1970) to represent the evolution of thoughts from lesser to greater abstraction and the intrapsychic processes that are involved in that progression. Bion argued that the processes involved in the container/contained relationship play an important part in mental development.

Containment occurs also in interpersonal processes, in that when a person splits off and projects an unwanted himself onto another person or group, the projected part can bring about a change in the psychic reality of the object (Nutkevitch 1998). If the recipient of the projection is able to deal with it in such a way that constructive action can be taken, then the recipient has provided a container for the projection. On the other hand, if the unwanted material is projected elsewhere, a situation of non-containment is perpetuated. To the extent that the object of the projection is able to recognise what has been projected and to do something about it, it is said that containment has occurred. It is appropriate to note that Bion himself worried that the concept was constrained by its naming and his discussion substitutes symbols for the two terms 'container' and 'contained' (Symington 1996).

Containment then, can occur within an individual, in a pair relationship and in a group setting such as an organisation. The organisation itself can provide a sense of psychological and emotional containment for the individual because staff are able to project unwanted parts of themselves onto parts of the organisation such as management (Stokes 1994). Borrowing from Winnicott (1960), Nutkevitch (ibid) uses the term 'good enough container' (pp. 5-7) to define the managed system's capacity to hold and deal with anxieties arising in or brought into the workplace. The manager's role includes not only management of the boundary but also the provision of a containing function. He asserts that a good enough container is a shock absorber and argues that there exists a causal relationship between management's provision of a containing function and more efficient organisational functioning (pp. 5-7).
Stokes (ibid.) argues that there are two conditions which must be satisfied if management is to be a reliable container. First there must be clarity around the primary task of the organisation. The primary task is defined as the task the organisation must perform if it is to survive (Rice 1958, Hutton 1962) and as the dominant import-conversion-export system (Miller and Rice 1975). Second, there must be clarity around roles and they need to be consistent with the primary task. The significance of these conditions is illustrated by the case study in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Containment is an important concept within this framework because of the extent to which anxiety was manifest in the case study environment. The organisation’s capacity to contain anxiety and the effect on this of e-mail mediated communications will be discussed further in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

### 3.7. Counterstructure

The final concept in this framework, starts with a return to the hierarchical view of the organisation presented in Chapter 2 and now considered in the light of the alternative socio-technical systems view of the organisation. Executives often implement a restructure of their organisation, in the hope that it will bring about needed change. Indeed, one such event occurred in the case study and will be discussed further in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Managers implement structural change because they believe it will result in a change in behaviour, a shift in the power balance or that it will 'upend old coalitions' (Hirschhorn 2000 p. 161). However, irrespective of structural changes and associated role changes, people create and maintain the necessary relationships and connections to accomplish what they need to do. E-mail provides supporting infrastructure for such relationships.

Hirschhorn (2000) has used the term 'counterstructure' to describe a process of undermining formal structure in order to effect needed change. He advocates that, when leaders need to effect a change in the culture of an organisation, rather than reorganise they should create a counterstructure, which 'attacks the chain of command', linking top level executives direct with the parts of the business in which urgent change is desired. This creates a 'new moral community' in which commitments are made directly between the senior executives and those involved in the counterstructure, in order to get the job done.

As I will discuss in the case, the entrepreneur in this organisation regularly restructured the organisation and worked using counterstructure in pursuit of his aims.
3.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, the organisation has been defined as a socio-technical system and the elements of that open system have been discussed and illustrated by examples from the case study organisation. The importance of boundaries has been emphasised in terms of organisation related boundaries and the boundary which mediates between the individual's inner world and their environment. The distinction between role and person and the boundaries between have been discussed.

Management has been conceptualised as a boundary function, including management of self, and self in role, and in terms of management of the various sub-systems in the organisation. The importance of the boundary between the organisation and its environment has been incorporated into the model.

Human needs of affiliation, identity, need fulfilment and dealing with anxiety have all been discussed and the importance of paying attention to the emotional side of organisational life has been emphasised.

E-mail has been conceptualised as an integral part of the system and its sub-systems, as a way of linking between systems, and as a system in its own right, operating independently from but impacting on, the organisational system. By examining the interdependencies, e-mail's impact on the case study group and the business as a whole, can be viewed as part of a complex system, rather than as a variable, whose effect can be isolated from the system as a whole.

3.9. A final point…

I noted in the introduction to this chapter that the theories and ideas selected for inclusion in this chapter have been selected for their applicability to the data emerging from the case. I feel it is also important to acknowledge here that cases are complex and inevitably one chooses to report on some themes in preference to others. Had other themes been teased out, that may have led to the selection of other theories from the vast body of knowledge available. Such is the nature of organisational research; the possibilities are endless.

I admit also that I had a preference to work with socio-technical systems theory. The idea of thinking about an organisation, a group or an individual as a bounded system held much fascination and seemed to provide the basis for insights into organisational functioning, not available through more traditional means of describing organisations, such as the hierarchical
view also referenced here. I had been looking for an opportunity to test the principles against a contemporary organisation.

Chapter 4, which follows, describes the study design and methods utilised to undertake the research. It also describes the process of selecting and working with themes.
Chapter 4. Design and Method

4.1. Introduction

This chapter describes the research project design and the methods used to generate, collect and analyse data. Their support of the research aims and relevance to the conceptual framework are explained.

There are three main sections in the body of this chapter. First, the methodological focus and its relevance to the research aims set out in Chapter 1 and the conceptual framework in Chapter 3, is explained. The choice of a psychoanalytically informed, action research methodology and a design shaped around a single in-depth case study is discussed in relation to other options. Second, the study design is described in detail. Third, the methods used to generate, record and analyse data are explained. Throughout, reference is made to ISPL, the case study organisation, which was described in Chapter 2.

This chapter is followed by Chapter 5, which presents the case study and Chapters 6 and 7 in which the case is analysed. Chapter 8 includes a retrospective review of the research process, including reflections on the suitability of the study design and methods described here.

4.2. Methodological Focus

4.2.1. Requirements to support research aims and conceptual framework

Given the research aims set out in 1.3 and the conceptual framework described in Chapter 3, I sought a research methodology that satisfied four key requirements.

First, it should enable e-mail use to be studied in a real business setting, allowing the complexity, interrelatedness and dynamic nature of the business system, its component sub-systems and the external environment, to be reflected. Equally, it needed to enable exploration of the part played by e-mail in and between those systems. Furthermore, Chapter 3 presented a framework in which the organisation is conceptualised as a socio-technical system and analogous with a living system. The methodology needed to allow the organisation to be viewed as a complex, whole system in which the component parts are related to each other and to the external environment, in ways which may not be apparent if a reductionist approach is taken (Senge 1992).
Second, my interest in the meaning made of e-mail by a group of people in the business meant that the methodology needed to allow for that meaning to be discovered. Much of it would comprise emotional content, unspoken assumptions and private mental models, which would need to be teased out and transformed into data for incorporation into the study. The study therefore sought to draw on hidden meaning as well as consciously held material. This would involve an exploration of unconscious processes and their bearing on organisational life, as well as the more easily accessed aspects. The study was founded on a belief that such a process would lead to some understanding of the impact of e-mail use on social reality. In practice, this required a methodology that could accommodate uncertainty and a trial and error approach, so that subjects' experience of, their interpretations about, and the meaning they had derived from e-mail use could be progressively teased out.

The third requirement flows from the second, in that dealing with uncertainty and processes of teasing out require a method that can incorporate and build on the learning that occurs during the research. This implies a flexible approach in which new knowledge can be applied to an evolving design, and thereby inform the ongoing research process.

Fourth, and related to the second and third requirements, the approach needed to accommodate a collaborative process, in which researcher and researched would work together in the search for meaning. A necessary condition for the effectiveness of this working relationship would be an ability on the part of both researcher and researched to tolerate a state of uncertainty and 'not knowing'; that is, the 'capacity to tolerate anxiety, ambiguity and other forms of psychological and social pain' (Long 1999 p.262).

These requirements led to the choice of action research methodology and a case study based design. Action research is a particular genre of interpretivist research. In order to explore unconscious and hidden processes, I incorporated a psychoanalytically informed approach into the interpretive processes. Section 4.2.2 below outlines the nature of action research and characterises the steps involved.

4.2.2. The nature of Action Research and its value in this project

The combination of my findings from some framing interviews and my own experience working with a range of organisations had fuelled my confidence that this study was worth doing. However, I was unaware of the relevance or usefulness of this background to any particular case study situation. I was about to embark on an investigation that would 'commence exactly like a fishing trip: with a hunch that the waters were worth fishing' (Cherry 1999 p. 60). My own experience, my preconceptions and my existing knowledge of how e-mail is used in other
organisations would, at best, be useful input to the study but in this specific organisation, at this particular time in its history, I did not know what to expect. A successful outcome for the research would depend on a research process that would enable a search for meaning in this particular social setting. It would also be important to establish a setting in which the players would be able to engage with me in the learning process. Action research accommodates these conditions in that the techniques it embodies are conducive to a gradual process of learning, in which collaborative learning leads to better understanding of the researched social reality.

Social reality is said to be fundamentally different to reality in the natural world (Flick 1998). It is usefully conceptualised as being constructed by the actors in the particular situation (Cherry 1999). In an effort to understand social reality, the interpretivist researcher enters the same social setting and endeavours to understand the meaning made by those who inhabit that milieu, in work undertaken with them, not on them. The process depends on a collaborative relationship between researcher and researched. The subjects of the research are invited to participate in the project, by contributing to the production of new knowledge, by working alongside the researcher to reflect on what has been learned, and by engaging in dialogue to determine actions that might be taken as a result of the learning.

The process requires that both researcher and researched are able to sustain a state of mind in which uncertainty can be tolerated, ideas can be tested and personal experience and the associated emotions can be worked with (Hirschhorn 1991).

The researcher engages in the research with their own set of ideas about reality and draws on this knowledge in the creation of preliminary hypotheses. The research work then involves a process of learning about the reality as it has been constructed in this particular setting, drawing on both participants' and the researcher's own experience and making use of the differences to inform and progress the research, in collaboration with the participants. Reporting becomes a product of collaborative exploration rather than the independent setting out of researcher findings. In action research, the exploration is an iterative process, involving a four stage repeating cycle of plan, act, observe and reflect (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988), depicted in Figure 4.1.
The System Psychodynamics of E-mail: A Case Study

Figure 4.1       The Action Research Cycle (adapted from Berg (2001))

The iterative nature of the work means that emergent understanding and nascent knowledge can be input to the cycle as it progresses, and can be incorporated into the work. This leads to generation of hypotheses, based on what had emerged to that point. These hypotheses are tested, interpreted and refined, and the results of that work are fed back for further reflection and action within the research framework.

In action research, the researcher's task is to take an anthropological approach (Karlsen 1991), to immerse herself in the participants' world in order to understand reality as they define it (Cherry, ibid). It is situational (Burns 1994) in that it aims to diagnose a problem in a specific context and can support small-scale theorising (Berg 2001). It is not undertaken for the purpose of deriving far-reaching generalisations that can be applied outside of the research setting. In choosing action research for this project, I accepted that the findings might have no applicability to situations other than this organisation at this time in its history.

In some respects, I see the process as akin to an archaeological dig, in which layers of earth are carefully removed in order to eventually reveal what has lain hidden beneath. The hope in action research is that in bringing to light what was formerly hidden, it is not damaged or distorted so much that its meaning is lost. Furthermore, the best result possible may be a surfacing of pieces, which are later patched together, in order to obtain some understanding of what had lain beneath the surface. The archaeological metaphor is not intended to signify that
data is simply there to be collected, like artefacts from an earlier civilisation. In action research data is created in the processes that are described in this chapter and as with archaeology, material that is brought to the surface contributes to the cycle of narrative creation. I find this metaphor helpful in thinking about the care that needs to be taken in surfacing material. It is also a useful reminder that, albeit perhaps subtly, the very act of surfacing alters what is brought to the surface.

Action research allows for flexibility in design and methods. Within a broad framework, the detail of the method is negotiable. It emerges in the process of working in the field with the research participants and takes account of what is learned in the action research cycle.

Action research satisfies each of the requirements outlined under 4.2.1, and is therefore appropriate in pursuing the research aims set out in 1.3.

4.2.3. Psychoanalytically informed action research

Action research does not always embody a psychoanalytic perspective. In discussing action research here, I have included references to others' work that does not use psychoanalytic theories or system psychodynamics as frames of reference. However, they are an integral part of the method used here.

A specific aspect of a psychoanalytically informed approach is to include emotional data and to examine this data for interferences to rational thinking that may be indicative of such dynamics as social defences (Menzies Lyth 1989), splitting and projection (Klein 1985).

The system psychodynamic dimension in this project developed through interaction between the action research project and the organisation. In this respect, it is useful to also think of the action research project in socio-technical terms; that is, as a system in its own right, with inputs, outputs, a primary task and a defining boundary. Thus defined, the action research project can then be thought about in terms of its interactions with the case study group, the systems to which members belong and the role of the action research boundary manager; that is, the researcher.

Gabriel (1999) advocates the creation of well thought-through boundaries, beyond which an action research project will not venture. The action researcher manages the boundary as well as the research process. Figure 4.2 represents my view of the relationship between this action research project and the case study organisation and the case study group, which guided my work. In my role as researcher, management of the action research boundary involved dealing
with interfaces with both the organisation and with the case study group, as well as managing the boundary around those parts of the project that did not interface with ISPL.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 4.2  The group, the organisation and the action research**

The role of action researcher called on many of my own skills and utilised some of my accumulated experience, but as discussed in Chapter 3, the taking up of role leaves redundant capabilities in the individual. One is constantly involved in making conscious choices about how a role is to be taken up and how to behave in the role. In addition, role-taking involves managing the tension between the demands of the role and the forces both in the mind of the role holder and external to the same role holder, which tend to pull one out of role. Although my role within the research was action researcher, I was conscious of the potential to be pulled into something arising out of the other roles I take up in other facets of my life. For example, it was known to participants before the project started, that I worked as a consultant to organisations. I had stressed that this was research and therefore different, as much for my benefit as theirs. They also of course knew that I was a student. However, they knew little else about my background. Despite this formal awareness of some aspects of my non-researcher self however, the tension remained to be managed.

The system psychodynamic perspective also highlights the potential for the research project or the researcher or both to become the object onto which unwanted parts of the organisation or
of individuals can be projected in the unconscious processes discussed in Chapter 3. A psychoanalytically informed approach to action research enables this material to be worked with to inform the research, in the cyclical processes of action research. Awareness of the potential available from the creation of a containing environment within the research setting is also helpful.

The psychoanalytically informed researcher, working with participants, is alert to the potential for parallel processes to occur, in which 'covert dynamics in one system can get played out, in parallel form by other system with which it interacts' (Smith and Crandell 1984 p. 817). Awareness of the existence of, and then working with parallel processes informs the research.

4.2.4. Action research differentiated from other methods

Action research is different from the traditional scientific approach to social research. The latter approach allows that reality consists essentially in what is available to the senses and that the data is there to be collected and analysed, independently of the players in the social setting from which it emerged (Hughes 1980). Historically, the scientific approach to research has taken human experience into the laboratory and has adopted the stance that social situations can be observed empirically, independently of what is in the mind either of the researcher or those in the social setting (Jones 1985). In this research paradigm human experience is separated from its social setting and results in what has been called the basis of reductionism in psychology (Georgi 1993). It is seen as an inappropriate approach when one is interested in what happens in practice (Susman 1983) within a complex multi-dimensional dynamic business system.

In the scientific approach, the researcher considers replicability of the data, and generalisability of the findings and ensures that the data is not contaminated by the researcher's biases. In contrast, the interpretivist position taken here recognises that the individuals making up the social group to be studied have made their own individual and collective meaning within the social setting to be researched.

Action research shares some methods with traditional scientific methods (Long 1999) in that it may incorporate controlled observations, interviews and surveys. It certainly demands no less rigour of the researcher than scientific method. However the theories on which one draws, the conceptualisation of the problem to be researched and the analytic approach are all applied to, and tested against, the chosen research setting (Susman 1983). Also, as discussed in the preceding section, in action research, it is assumed that the researcher will impinge on the system being studied (Long 1999) and this informs the research.
4.2.5. Choice of a single case study

The research was undertaken within the framework of a single in-depth, action research based case study. Given the research aims, a case study complemented the action research approach in three ways.

First, case studies are a rich source of ideas, findings and methods, and they are particularly useful when the researcher is interested in an area which 'has something interesting about it but has thus far remained unexplored or insufficiently explored' (Berg 1990 p. 67). Using an action research framework, I would enter into the case study work with my own preconceptions, ideas and hypotheses and then, over time, develop them further in collaboration with a group of participants in this particular social setting, drawing on local knowledge and local experience (Flick 1998) in order to generate new knowledge about the impact of e-mail on group dynamics, in one organisation. I wanted to avoid what Turner has called 'armchair theorising' (Turner 1983).

I held the view that the results that could be achieved from this sort of collaborative exploratory process of a real world case, would be dependent on certain conditions being met within the case study organisation and these are discussed in 4.3.2 below.

Second, the research aimed to explore the effect of a particular technology, e-mail, which was an integral part of a complex socio-technical system and its component sub-systems, on the organisation, through the experience of one group within the organisation. The intention was to examine this experience in situ and therefore to allow for the interrelatedness of sub-systems and for real life complexity. A case study would be conducive to a systems approach and to 'systems thinking' (Senge 1992). It has been noted that 'the systematic examination of a single case often enables us to see in the whole that which is often obscured in the process of studying its pieces' (Berg 1990 p. 66).

Finally I saw a case study as a means by which I could make one organisation's story available for review by others. As Cherry (1999) points out 'most of us have experienced being challenged and stimulated to think about our own lives when reading an account of someone else's' (p. 105). I intended that the results of this study would make such an opportunity available to others, who might regard the results as a template, against which they might review their own experiences.
At this point some commentary on the value and limitations of choosing to undertake a single case rather than multiple cases is appropriate. I anticipated that my aspirations about taking an anthropological approach, would involve a considerable amount of time and effort on my part, in gaining entry to a suitable organisation, in setting up appropriate alliances and in maintaining the relationships necessary to sustain the work. It also seemed prudent to allow for unanticipated factors. I concluded that an attempt to undertake more than a single case study would be detrimental to my purpose, which centred on a preference to deal with the complexities of organisational life.

However, the choice of a single case study carried significant risk in that, in the event that participation in the research became unacceptable to some participants after the project had started, I might have to start the entire project again in another organisation. The personal anxiety triggered by this was an unanticipated factor as the research proceeded and I refer to it again in the detail of the case.

4.2.6. The nature of the Case Study

When I first conceived the idea for this study, I had not selected a case study organisation. Assuming that it would not be a very small business, practical considerations of time and researcher resources dictated that the case study should focus on a group of people within an organisation, rather than attempt to explore the impact of e-mail on an organisation as a whole. In addition, given the interest in the ultimate impact of e-mail on the business, it was important that membership of the group should, in some way, reflect the organisation’s work. Group membership should correlate with some aspect or aspects of the overall socio-technical system e.g. it could be a sub-system of the whole, involved in a common set of activities in the business.

The research spotlight would centre on the case study group and its work but would also throw light on other aspects of the business and the external environment. I recognised that the boundary between what was within the scope of the study and what was outside, was not clear at the outset and ought to have more definition in order for the project to be manageable. However, given the characteristics of the research methodology described above, I wanted to define those boundaries in collaboration with participants, so that practical considerations, known to people working in the organisation could be taken into account.

Within the case study design, I needed to achieve sufficient immersion in the life of the organisation to support the anthropological approach. At the same time, the design needed to incorporate an adequate boundary between the group and me, in order to be able to sustain
differentiation between researcher and researched. This too would be negotiated with the group.

My proposal to prospective case study organisations was that I should experience the life of the organisation in several different ways, including individual and group interviews, observation sessions and access to members’ e-mail messages. The precise nature and extent of each of these methods was also open to negotiation.

In action research, the researcher’s experience of negotiating various stages in the project can yield valuable data about both the psycho-social and socio-technical dimensions of the system. This is illustrated in the Case Analysis in Chapters 6 and 7.

4.3. Study Design

4.3.1. Design Overview

The project comprised five stages:

1. Project Initiation
2. Project Set-Up
3. Hypothesis Generation and Data Collection
4. Interpretation of Findings and taking actions
5. Report preparation and publishing

Project initiation involved two stages, a preliminary search for potential organisations, which culminated in identification of ISPL as a possible case study organisation. The second stage involved detailed discussions with the Managing Director (MD) of ISPL to determine whether the project was feasible and to negotiate the conditions under which he was willing for it to proceed.

Project set up began after formal agreement to proceed had been obtained from the MD and involved detailed discussions about the project design and the processes involved, as well as about the demands participation would place on participants, my role in the work and some negotiation around expectations.

Phases three and four were iterative and represent the main body of the action research work, as depicted in figure 4.1. They involved a cyclical process of identifying the research questions and hypotheses, data collection focussed on dealing with the questions and collaborative analysis of
the data, leading to new questions and revised hypotheses. A provisional duration for stages three and four was negotiated during project set up and subsequently renegotiated in response to issues encountered during the project.

Phases two and three involved some documentation in support of on-going findings, including interview and process notes. The manner in which these were created and their use in the project are discussed later in this chapter.

The final stage of the project, report writing, was undertaken independently of the case study organisation. Unlike a research project initiated by a client organisation, there was no obligation to provide a copy of the final report to ISPL. The value for participants and therefore for the organisation, was described during the negotiation phase, in a way which was intended to emphasise that learning would emerge from participation, not as something that I would 'deliver'. In a document outlining the project and included here in Appendix 3, I described the project as 'an opportunity for first hand involvement in creating a new body of knowledge about the social and psychological implications of e-mail usage, and to participate in some creative thinking about how the technology might be more effectively applied to the benefit of both the business and individuals'. The five stages described here are summarised in Figure 4.3.
4.3.2. Phase One - Project Initiation

4.3.2.1. The search for a case study organisation

Given the research aims described in 1.3 and the nature of action research described in 4.2.2, it was important to identify a case study organisation that satisfied certain criteria. First, there should be an interest in the topic, in discovering something new about the application of e-mail in the business and an acceptance that this should flow from collaborative effort between us.

Second, and linked to the first criterion, there should be a preparedness to tolerate a state of not knowing in order to accommodate new knowledge, arising from the action research. I recognised that this may be difficult to find. As noted in Chapter 1, organisations face much pressure to continually improve measurable business performance. This can result in an environment in which it is very difficult for staff to step back, allow time and space for reflection and to take up what Hirschhorn (1991) has called the 'learner role'.
The third criterion emerges from the second one. The case study organisation should not be looking for immediate answers to a pressing problem relating to this project because I felt that this could seriously compromise the research aims, which centred on this project being an exploration of the unknown. It sought understanding; not answers to problems. As Gabriel (1999) has pointed out, often 'the pursuit of knowledge and understanding is inseparable from the desire to improve organisational life through consultation' (p. 256). Attention to this differentiation became particularly important once I had established ISPL as the case study organisation because, as discussed in Chapter 2, the organisation’s consulting work centred on solving customers’ problems.

Fourth, the organisation would need to be tolerant of the presence of a student. Fifth, although I did not expect a senior manager to be a member of the group, it was important that the project have senior management sponsorship to ensure ongoing commitment to the organisation's role in the project. I knew that this project would place certain demands on participants’ time and it would be important for their ongoing allocation of time to the project, to be sanctioned.

I approached several organisations and held exploratory discussions, using the document in Appendix 2 as the basis for discussion. The process of approaching organisations and holding preliminary discussions continued until I had identified an organisation that seemed to meet the criteria.

4.3.2.2. **Negotiating Entry**

I became aware of ISPL as a potential case study organisation in casual conversation with a business and academic colleague who was also a member of the ISPL senior management team, reporting to the MD. She urged me to make contact with her boss, Greg, offering to ‘pave the way’ by mentioning the project to him. My initial contact with him was by telephone, followed up with an e-mail, which included the proposal document contained in Appendix 2. I met with Greg a few days later. He told me that he had read the project proposal and expressed much enthusiasm for the project, insisting on showing me his current e-mail intray there and then. He scrolled very quickly through what seemed to be a very long list of inbound messages, providing an accompanying commentary about the nature of the material I would find in there if he were to be the subject of the study. Clearly he used e-mail extensively for both private and business purposes and I left with the impression that this was the case throughout the business. Our meeting concluded with his agreement to accept the role of project sponsor, as defined in the document in Appendix 2 and an invitation to meet with Richard, one of the division managers to set the project up.
4.3.3. Phase Two - Project Set Up

Setting the project up started in the meeting with Richard once we had discussed whether his division also satisfied the criteria. This seemed to be the case so we went on to discuss their work and the logistics of setting up the project, including the manner in which I would brief participants, discuss their involvement and seek their consent. Separately from the meeting with Richard, and in parallel with introductory conversations with group members, I dealt direct with ISPL's system administrator to organise how I could obtain access to the group's e-mail messages. After discussing the alternatives, it was agreed that I could be provided, for the duration of the study, with copies of members' inbound e-mails. The alternatives considered and the rationale for the choice made are discussed later in this chapter.

During project set up, it became feasible to more precisely define desirable group membership, since I could now do so in collaboration with the group leader and with some knowledge of the organisation's work. The division managed by Richard was one of several divisions within the organisation, each specialising in a particular type of consulting work. After assessing the likely total volume of e-mails for his division, we agreed to include all members in the case study group.

Early interactions with group members were initially via e-mail and telephone and subsequently face to face in small groups of between two and four members. In these sessions, the focus was on ensuring their understanding of the project and the implications, negotiating our respective roles and our expectations of each other as far as they were understood at that early stage, and some discussion of their use of e-mail. Other matters discussed with Richard and subsequently with group members were their willingness to participate in data gathering methods such as interviews, focus groups and occasional e-mail exchanges with me, their capacity to take actions based on learning that would emerge during the project and the extent of their own curiosity around the research focus.

Most importantly, I provided each participant with a copy of the university's 'Disclosure and Informed consent' form to which was attached the project scope document that can be found in Appendix 3. It was particularly important that they understood that they were agreeing to let me see copies of all their inbound e-mails. Once each participant had read and signed the consent form, the e-mail connection was activated.

4.3.3.1. The initial research questions

In order to begin the exploration, the following questions were put to participants in small groups of between two and four:
1. Does e-mail help you do your work and how?
2. Does e-mail affect the ways in which you relate to colleagues?
3. What has changed since e-mail was introduced to the business?
4. What factors influence your choice of e-mail over other forms of communication?
5. Do you see any disadvantages in the way e-mail is used in this business?
6. What are the implications of the liberal e-mail policy at ISPL?

### 4.3.4. Phase Three and Four

Phase three, hypothesis generation and data collection and phase four, interpretation of findings and taking action, together form the iterative process of action research. The cycle starts with one or more hypotheses which derive from theory, including 'theory in use' (Argyris 1982, Senge 1992). The starting hypotheses are implied in the initial research questions noted under 4.3.3.1. For example a combination of socio-technical systems theory and personal experience led me to hypothesise that e-mail does impact on group dynamics in some way. The initial questions sought to test this initial hypothesis and to generate data that would enable it to be refined or possibly rejected and for new hypotheses to be formed.

In action research, data must be created before it can be collected and analysed. The choice of an in-depth case study method and selection of the case study organisation against specific criteria provided the opportunity to explore the organisation from several perspectives. Obtaining data from a variety of sources provided the opportunity for me to look for inconsistencies and to probe their meaning and to discover corroborating evidence from multiple sources. For example, I was informed at one stage that nobody in ISPL had ever lost their job by not being involved in enough consulting work, yet, not long after the fieldwork started, the e-mail messages indicated that a member of the case study group was leaving the organisation abruptly. In face to face meetings, I explored and sought to interpret staff’s response to this person’s departure.

Interpretation occurs throughout the action research process. Action research seeks social meaning and when the researcher chooses a psychoanalytic and interpretive stance, the findings are always provisional (Gabriel 1999). The findings from this study are presented in Chapters 6 and 7 in the form of substantiated hypotheses.

The data creation and collection methods used in this study are described more fully in 4.4.
4.4. Methods

4.4.1. Overview

The preceding sections describing the project's design have illustrated the cyclical nature of action research and defined both data collection and data interpretation as evolutionary processes rather than discrete events. In action research, data emerges gradually through working collaboratively with research participants and through interpretation. The results of these processes are made available for further input to the continuing research process. In figure 4.2, I depicted the research project as a system in its own right and noted the contribution made by a psychoanalytically informed approach to data generation. Data emerges from the interactions between the research project as a system and the researched systems. In the next few sections, I define data and describe the means by which data was generated, processed and interpreted.

4.4.2. The data required for the study

The conceptual model provided a basis for thinking about the data in which I was interested.

First, I needed factual information about the socio-technical system in which the research was located, that is ISPL's business, its primary task, the sub-systems in place to achieve the primary task and data about the external environment, to enable sense to be made of data emerging in the project. In addition, I needed facts about the purposes for which e-mail was used, that is, its technical application in and between the socio-technical systems of interest. Furthermore, I have noted that e-mail exists as a system in its own right, independent of the organisational systems so data was needed for this concept to be applied in the ISPL setting. This observable data can be thought of as the surface of all potential data relating to experience and activity in the organisation (Flick 1998).

Second, I was interested in the deeper structures that are not so readily accessible, which a psychoanalytically informed approach would enable me to seek. Data about deeper structures arises out of interactions with the system (Berg and Smith 1985) and it emerges when the researcher searches for and follows up clues, rather than attempting to amass volumes of data (Gabriel 1999). This is the data that would form the basis for reflection (Grundy and Kemmis 1988).

Gabriel (ibid.) has defined clues as 'the odd, the out of place, the significant exception' and has argued that such material provides 'far more insight than large volumes of uniform and unidirectional data'. He also notes that 'of special interest is what may have been disturbed,
concealed, tampered with' (pp. 251-252). This definition was helpful as I sought to tease out the meaning of what I was experiencing in the case. The measure of what was 'odd', 'out of place' or a 'significant exception' was assessed within the case study setting, drawing both on my own experience and on the experience of participants. Over time, the themes that are reflected in the narrative in Chapter 5 emerged. Ultimately, not all the clues to which I paid attention were incorporated into the analysis but the act of discarding them in favour of others was an important part of the process in that it involved choices being made, based on what was being learned along the way.

Throughout the research, my own experience, values, and role would influence my perception of the data. The very act of observation can change the observed phenomenon (Atkinson, Heath, and Chenail 1991), and as Lowman (1985) observes, ‘intuition and the understanding of phenomena on the basis of experience form an important research tool’ (p. 174).

It is important to remember that information is not necessarily data for the purposes of the research. Over the duration of the project, I had access to a vast amount of information in interviews with case study group members, in interactions with other staff, in observations and in the e-mail material made available to me. Data, on the other hand, emerges during execution of research processes, through the relationship between action researcher and case study group. In action research, data collection methods involve the researcher in the design and management of processes. The data generation processes used in this project included:

- individual and group semi-structured interviews,
- observation of e-mail use,
- accessing information about the organisation and its work,
- observations within ISPL’s office space, and
- a personal research diary maintained throughout the project.

In Section 4.4.3 which follows, I describe each of these data collection methods and the way in which data was recorded.

### 4.4.3. Data Collection Methods

#### 4.4.3.1. Interviews

Both group and individual interviews were used and they were intended to be semi-structured in format. I was interested in teasing out participants’ experience within the field of interest and
felt that a structured interview, framed around my own experience would have been too constraining. Semi-structured interviews are seen as appropriate in a field research setting where the role of the interviewer is somewhat directive, the question format semi-structured and the purpose phenomenological (Fontana and Frey 1994). In practice, discussion sometimes went outside the boundaries of what had been intended and the session became quite unstructured. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I discuss the conscious choices I made about this shift and the data emerging as a result.

Interviews were organised at times when it seemed likely that they would inform the study and when they could be fitted in with participants other commitments. The Managing Director had agreed to participate on condition that the project would not be unreasonably demanding of people's time. The meaning of this condition and the implications for management of the project became clearer as the project progressed.

I took some notes during each interview, attempting to strike an effective balance between adequate note taking and attending to what Rice (1975) called the 'here and now' of the interview process. Hirschhorn (1991) has described a situation in which one concurrently attends to the content of a conversation and monitors it, as 'being in two psychological spaces at once' (p. 55). On the whole, I aimed for my note taking during interviews to be a basis for more detailed field notes, which I made as soon as possible after the end of each interview. I was careful in the note taking to differentiate verbatim quotes from material that reflected recall but not direct quotation (Strauss et al. 1964). I chose not to use any form of electronic recording device. Staff had already been generous in agreeing to my access to their e-mails. In addition, listening to an interview recording after the event would have the effect of separating the conversation from its context and this would have been inconsistent with the project design. My notes covered not only the interview discussion but also my own emotional and cognitive responses.

4.4.3.2. E-mail exchanges with participants
The experience of e-mail interaction with participants in the study also provided data. This arose out of e-mail exchanges for the purpose of organising face to face meetings with participants and out of occasional use of the 'working note' technique, described by Eric Miller (Miller 1995) as 'a presentation of work-in-progress based on field notes, interviews and observations of the dynamics within the organisation' (p. 27). The most significant application of this method was a working note that I produced as the fieldwork was coming to an end and it formed the basis for discussion at the final focus group meeting. This working note is reproduced here in Appendix 4 and its use is discussed in the case study in Chapter 5.
4.4.3.3. Observing e-mail use

Many staff used their company e-mail address for private as well as business use, and the company encouraged them to do this. For some staff this was their only e-mail address. Others also had a private address. In agreeing to participate in the study, staff accepted that I would have access to all e-mail inbound to their ISPL e-mail address.

As a result of discussion about the potential ways in which I could be provided with access to the participants' e-mail messages, it emerged that only one method was acceptable both to myself and to ISPL. This involved providing me with copies of staffs' inbound e-mail, using a method that would be entirely automatic and transparent both to the recipient and the sender.

The only means by which I could have had access to staffs' outbound e-mail would have been for them to copy ('cc') or blind copy ('bcc') me for each outbound message and we agreed that this would be unacceptably onerous for group members. The main implication of this decision was that I was only privy to a proportion of each participant's e-mail messages.

I down-loaded the e-mails from my own Internet provider each day and during the early part of the study this meant up to 300 e-mails per day. It quickly became clear that some of the inbound e-mail had been destined for multiple staff members and in some cases for all staff so I was receiving up to eleven copies of some communications.

Figure 4.4 shows the potential sources of inbound e-mails. The small circles represent case study group members within ISPL. An inbound e-mail could be to one or more participants from a sender outside of ISPL, from a sender inside ISPL but not in the case study group or from another member of the group. I would only see a member's 'outbound' messages if they were 'inbound' to another member of the group, or if they were appended in an 'inbound' message.

4.4.3.4. Accessing information about the organisation and its work

I learned about the business and its work by accessing a combination of public domain information such as web pages, annual reports, organisation charts and other internal documents. Several of the documents became available to me because they were included as attachments in e-mails copied to me in the automatic process described earlier.
4.4.3.5. Observations in the office
Each time I attended ISPL's office for the purpose of conducting an interview was also an opportunity to observe the working environment and the changes that took place over the duration of the study. In addition, I negotiated some specific periods for observation sessions, although on each occasion the session became more like an interview with one or more people. I comment on these unexpected changes to the design in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Field notes from observation sessions were recorded as soon as possible afterwards.

4.4.3.6. Research diary
I maintained a research diary throughout the project, starting on May 12th, 2000 when I first met with Greg, the Managing Director of ISPL and ending on July 28th, 2001 when the fieldwork ended. The diary served several purposes. It was a place to record my own thoughts about the research and my own responses to interactions with the organisational system, as well as anything else relating to the research that was not recorded elsewhere. I used it extensively while reading my daily e-mail batches, recording notes about e-mail content for later reference and to note my conscious responses to what I was reading. The diary was a useful aide-memoir, supporting private reflection about the project and the emerging meaning for me, thereby supporting the cycle of action, learning and knowledge.

In addition, the research diary supported work on system psychodynamics and the psychoanalytically informed perspective. Used as an aid to reflection, the diary helped me to
think about what might have been projected onto me from the research setting, the signs that I was being pulled into other roles and it helped me to discover and work with parallel processes occurring during the project. Work with my research supervisor was a significant contributory factor in these processes, providing a reflective and containing environment, in which new learning could develop.

4.4.4. Record keeping

Whatever the source of the data in action research, it must ultimately be transformed into texts. During the research process these are used for interpretation, for hypothesis generation and for generating new knowledge. At the conclusion of the fieldwork, the text becomes input to the analysis leading to report writing. The following records were retained from this study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Method of recording</th>
<th>How stored</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-mails(^3)</td>
<td>12,500</td>
<td>Automatically by e-mail system</td>
<td>PC hard disk plus CD backup.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail exchanges between group members and me</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Automatically by e-mail system</td>
<td>A combination of hard copy and computer disk storage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Interviews</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Notes made during and after each focus group</td>
<td>Electronic and hand written copies kept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual interviews</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Interview notes made during and after each interview</td>
<td>Electronic and hard copy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Diary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Entries made between August 4(^{th}) 2000 and July 26(^{th}) 2001</td>
<td>Electronic and hard copy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company information</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Web pages accessed as needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Various hard copies of public domain documents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3. Electronic copies of documents copied to me in the course of accessing incoming e-mail.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.5  Data Recording

\(^3\) This number excludes duplicates.
4.4.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in two distinct phases. First, it was on-going throughout the fieldwork, emerging in parallel with, and in relation to, data creation, hypothesis generation and interpretation of findings. Second, after the field work was complete, I engaged in another cyclical process of reviewing the data, the hypotheses and the interpretations that had emerged from the field work, for the purpose of distilling the findings into the themes upon which the thesis would be built. Later, material that supported the chosen themes was assembled from the fieldwork and the literature searches that were occurring in parallel.

The spiral in figure 4.6 represents the iterative nature of data analysis during the fieldwork. Even in the early stages of the research work, the analysis was thematic. That is, by careful exploration of material emerging from the case, I sought to identify significant patterns and recurring themes that dominated the material (De Rivera 1984). Having arrived at my own interpretation, I would take it as an idea into the group, with the intention of either working on it further with the group, or, if it seemed to be rejected by the group, attempting to determine whether that was evidence of resistance. I was mindful of Gabriel's warning against automatically treating rejected interpretations as resistance (Gabriel 1999).
An inherent risk in working with themes is that, the stronger the existing themes, the more likely the possibility of passing over new data that does not fit existing themes, yet it may herald a new theme. Again, I found a cyclical approach was helpful in dealing with this issue in that, sometimes a new theme emerges, yet, over time other themes come to dominate, some themes are subsumed by them and still others are eventually abandoned in order to focus on the themes that have become dominant. The process of dealing with the emergent themes was supported by the project design, which enabled both deductive (top-down) and inductive (bottom up) logic to be used. The approach was deductive in that I embarked on the research with some ideas and tested them against the case study organisation, and it was inductive in that the case provided an opportunity to observe and to find theories to describe what had been observed (Cherry 1999). In both modes, I also drew on my own experience of many other organisations, at the same time taking care that my own experience was informing, not eclipsing the research process. Gradually, I teased out the relatedness between my own experience and the researched situation, learned to differentiate between what might have been put into me by the researched organisation from what might have arisen from my own inner world. Throughout, the idea of following up clues, as discussed earlier, was helpful.

The second phase of analysis was distinct from the first in that it occurred after the fieldwork ended and without further input from members of the case study group. At this point, I took steps to create more reflective space than had been possible during the fieldwork, so that a working through of the research process as a whole could occur. This included taking time out from full time employment.

In this phase, a third type of logic, abductive logic, was also helpful. Abductive logic is operating when 'experience is continually recycled; earlier experiences and data are revisited with the wisdom of accumulated learning'. The theory goes on to suggest that the cycle continues until there are 'no more useful possibilities or meanings to be created' (Cherry ibid. p. 63), although, as the case study will reveal, in this particular piece of work the cycle came to end for reasons that had more to do with the state of the organisation in general.

During this second phase of data analysis, the continuing work of distillation, analysis and hypothesis generation was supported by academic supervision and opportunities in related settings for me, in collaboration with others, to further process the experience of the research and refine the themes.
Having chosen the themes that would become the foundation for this thesis, I reviewed the data yet again in order to select the material that would enable me to gradually build up the picture I wished to paint in this final document.

4.5. **A note on ending the fieldwork**

I regard the exploration of e-mail's impact on business as work-in-progress. The fact that the research on which this report is based, came to an end was the result of negotiated boundaries for this particular project; not an indication that there was no more learning to be done. On the contrary, this was a typical action research project in that it raised new questions as quickly as it threw light on existing ones. There is much more to be thought about, to be questioned and to be discovered using the findings from this study as a starting point and a record of the method and its effect will I hope, serve to inform future work.

4.6. **Conclusion**

This chapter has explained how action research methods were used to approach a case study exploration of the impact of e-mail on group dynamics within one organisation. The cyclical nature of action research, the need for collaboration between researcher and researched and the fact that data is not just there to be collected but must be created, have all been emphasised.

Chapter 5, which describes the case study and Chapters 6 and 7, in which the case is analysed are necessarily a condensed view of the project. They focus on the themes that became dominant as the work progressed and therefore do not cover detail that may have seemed important at a point along the way but which did not ultimately seem to have a bearing on chosen themes.
Chapter 5. The Case Study

5.1. Introduction

This chapter has emerged out of the cyclical action research processes, described in Chapter 4, from which one important outcome was the determination of the key themes around which this thesis would be constructed. It became possible to write this chapter once the distillation process described in Chapter 4 had occurred. Within the body of this chapter I have aimed to provide a narrative that not only reflects the major themes but also reports on the action research process, from the perspective of its contribution to emergent understanding of the case study organisation. The importance of the interrelatedness of the method and findings was explained in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 also justified my selection of an action research based design and explained the method as far as I had planned it. It pointed out that much of the detail of the method was intentionally left open for negotiation with the case study organisation. Within this present chapter, I show how the method evolved within the action research process and how understanding of the organisation and the effect of e-mail on its socio-technical systems emerged. I have also aimed to reflect in this chapter's narrative, the need for the thesis to attend as much to the dynamics of an organisation in transition as it does to specific e-mail related dynamics.

Within this chapter and Chapters 6 and 7, which follow, I also show how the research was supported by a psychoanalytically informed approach, enabling work with unconscious processes, which are present in all group and organisational settings, although their effect is often discounted.

Even though the project was designed to be flexible and to allow for events as they unfolded, some logistical, technical and social difficulties were encountered that were outside the scope of what I had imagined. Nevertheless, they had to be managed in order for the project to continue. A discussion of the ways in which these both complicated and informed the research begins in this chapter and continues in Chapters 6 (Case Analysis), Chapter 7 (The effects of e-mail on members of the organisation) and Chapter 8 (Reflections).

Chapter 2 (The Case Study organisation) provided contextual background to the case study and this chapter refers to its content.
The main thread in this chapter is an account of events and the learning that emerged during my nine month involvement with the case study organisation, ISPL. In order to provide a succinct review of the data that supports the analysis in Chapters 6 and 7, the main sequence of events is inter-woven with discussion of key themes emerging over the nine month period.

Figure 5.1 shows a time-line of key events occurring during the case study.

The body of this chapter starts in section 5.2, at the point where I had negotiated entry to the organisation, initially with Greg, the Managing Director and subsequently with Richard, a Division Manager and one of Greg's direct reports. The research process up to that point was described in Chapter 4. I was yet to contract with other members of the proposed case study group and to arrange for the network communications set-up that would provide me with access to participants' e-mail messages.

I discuss my developing sense of the organisation, derived from face to face and e-mail interaction with ISPL staff, starting with the process of contracting with members of the case study group. Impressions emerging from face to face interactions with participants, from physical workplace observations and from my experience of the organisation through my e-mail 'window', are included. In engaging with the organisational system in these various ways, a picture of social reality started to emerge. Discussion includes commentary about the organisation's work in the two main sub-systems of sales and consulting, in other supporting sub-systems and in management of the associated organisational boundaries.

E-mail use is described in terms of the conceptual framework set out in chapter 3; that is, as part of the socio-technical system and sub-systems, as a means of linking systems within, and external to ISPL and as a separate system that operated independently of ISPL's formal systems, supporting sentient functioning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/Period</th>
<th>Event/Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12th May</td>
<td>First negotiation meeting with Greg, the Managing Director. Agrees to proceed with the project and refers me to Richard, Division Manager for Division V1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2000</td>
<td>I was overseas so progress on the research project was suspended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th July</td>
<td>First negotiation meeting with Richard, one of Greg's direct reports, about working with Division V1. Agreement to proceed with the research project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th August</td>
<td>Richard, Division Manager for V1 advises that he has been 'seconded to a role in marketing'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th August</td>
<td>First meeting with David, temporary replacement for Richard as Division Manager for V1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Negotiating entry with group members via e-mail and face to face meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th September</td>
<td>Day 1 of receiving copies of group's e-mails</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The System Psychodynamics of E-mail: A Case Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4th October</td>
<td>ISPL managers advise that e-mails sent to me are 'bouncing' back to the senders. Copy process is stopped until the problem can be resolved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First week in October</td>
<td>Organisational restructure announced to all ISPL staff via e-mail. Includes the creation of two new roles: Principal Consultant and Managing Consultant. Principal Consultants and Greg will focus on the sales activity needed for earn-out achievement. Case study group now 9 members due to the departure from the company of two of the original members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31st October</td>
<td>E-mail 'copy' process resumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November to December</td>
<td>On-going access to e-mail copies, e-mail interactions with group members, face to face meetings with case study group members and workplace observations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26th December</td>
<td>Technical problem on my PC results in loss of all copied e-mails.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd January</td>
<td>E-mail 'copy' process resumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January to July</td>
<td>On-going provision of e-mail copies, e-mail interactions with group members and face to face meetings with case study group members. Also workplace observations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late February</td>
<td>Claire, one of the group members, resigns. This leaves eight staff from the original case study group of eleven.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid March</td>
<td>Greg states that he is 'encouraged' by February results with respect to earn-out achievement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early April</td>
<td>Greg advises staff that March figures were good and that he is confident staff can do even better in the April results. Gllian begins a series of e-mails to all staff about 'the office move'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid April</td>
<td>Andrea resigns from ISPL leaving seven in the case study group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30th April</td>
<td>Glenda resigns leaving six members of the case study group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th May</td>
<td>Richard signals to me, his intention to resign from ISPL in 2 weeks time, indicating that likely failure to meet the earn-out is one of his main reasons. His departure will reduce the group to five of the original eleven members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First week in May</td>
<td>Daily e-mails commence from each PC to Greg, reporting on selling activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid May</td>
<td>Greg initiates discussion with PCs and former shareholders about 'salary sacrifice' as a means to achieve the earn-out result, since it has become evident that it will not be achieved through increased sales revenue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First week in June</td>
<td>ISPL staff move into GTC office.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid June</td>
<td>Greg informs all staff of the 'salary sacrifice exercise' by shareholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22nd June</td>
<td>Rejection by auditors of the 'salary sacrifice' plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27th June</td>
<td>Gillian informs all staff via e-mail that Greg is 'out of e-mail contact'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29th June</td>
<td>Greg informs ISPL staff that 'integration' with GTC will be accelerated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th July</td>
<td>Greg advises that he has resigned and that integration with GTC will be going ahead very quickly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th July</td>
<td>Final focus group session over lunch. Six attendees. Discussion of working note.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th July</td>
<td>Report on review of the MC role goes to all the MC's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20th July</td>
<td>Last day for receiving e-mail copies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.1 Key Events in the Case study**

Within the case study narrative, I discuss participants' experience of the changes to the organisation structure and associated roles and responsibilities that were implemented soon after the project started, including some commentary about the way the change process was managed. Factual data describing the structural changes was provided in Chapter 2.
Within the case study there are three interrelated themes. First, although Greg, the founding entrepreneur was not part of the case study group, it became clear that he had a pervasive influence over many aspects of the organisation. His centrality to ISPL is discussed, along with his changing role as the acquisition process progressed. The part played by e-mail in system psychodynamics relating to the entrepreneur is explored. Second, the effect of the restructure, in combination with the entrepreneur's shifting focus is examined, with particular attention paid to the role of Managing Consultant (MC), one of the new roles created in the restructure. Third, the acquisition, its implications and the meaning of the restructure were sources of anxiety for staff in the case study group. The effect of this anxiety and individual and collective responses to it, including e-mail's involvement, are discussed.

This chapter reports on the effect of e-mail from three perspectives. It is about e-mail use in the work itself, about e-mail's contribution to the socio-technical system and about the effect of e-mail in an organisation in a state of flux.

The case study begins with the process of negotiating entry to the case study group.

5.1.1. A note on style in this chapter

Throughout this chapter, I quote individuals who participated in the case study. Where these quotations are longer than a few words, they are set on a separate line, indented and in italics. Some of these quotations have been extracted from the e-mails to which I had access. Elsewhere in the text, I show words and phrases between single quotation marks. Where these are not accompanied by a bibliographic citation, they are the words of one or more individuals in the case.

5.2. First encounters with the Socio-technical System

5.2.1. Negotiating entry to the group

Early notions about the part played by e-mail in this business were formed when I was negotiating entry to the organisation with Greg, the Managing Director and Richard, the Division Manager. Their behaviour in our meetings and their descriptions of e-mail use in the business left me with the impression that the organisation made extensive use of e-mail and that it was particularly useful for informal discussion. Indeed, e-mail appeared to be a preferred communication medium. Both Greg and Richard had responded very quickly to my e-mails to them, usually in less than an hour. In contrast, I experienced much difficulty in making telephone contact with them, my calls to them almost always being diverted to a message bank or to the company switchboard operator.
I therefore set about arranging to meet with members of Division V1 with the assumption that their use of e-mail would follow a similar pattern. At the same time, I also felt a little apprehensive. Richard had told me that everyone was 'happy to proceed' and this surprised me, since I had imagined that participants would have their own questions about the project and that any concerns would be worked through in the process of negotiating entry.

I soon discovered that the reality of dealing with the members of the prospective case study group was very different from my experience with Richard and Greg. People did not answer my e-mails, and eventually I had to organise early meetings with them by telephone. Also, I had envisaged that I would initially meet with the whole group together but it became clear that, as a result of their various work commitments, this was not feasible, so I arranged a series of meetings with up to four members in each.

I had provided participants with a copy of the project outline, replicated here in Appendix 3, as well as a consent form for them to sign. I had explained that by signing it they would be indicating that they understood what the project was about, what their participation might mean and that they would each be free to withdraw from the project at any time. Individuals raised a few questions when we met, the main concern being that the project should not adversely impact their capacity to meet work commitments. It was some weeks into the project before I understood more fully what had been meant by this condition.

It seemed as if the decision that they were to participate had already been made, providing a clue about the dispersal of organisational authority. Initially, Greg had agreed to the project. Although he had told me that it would be necessary to seek Richard's approval as the Division Manager, by the time I met with Richard, it seemed that in his mind, the project had been agreed and that our meeting was about setting it up.

In his e-mail to the V1 group in mid July after his initial meeting with me, Richard had written:

"Of all the companies in the world, and all the divisions in ISPL, she (or at least Greg) chose us."

And

"I don't want to push anyone into helping with this, though I'd be very disappointed if we struggled because one person wasn't happy"
It seemed as though the managers had agreed to proceed on behalf of the rest of the members of the potential group, before they had had the opportunity to assess the project for themselves and before they had met with me. The evidence suggested that, once Greg had made a decision, others did not have a choice and that the effect of this rippled through the organisation. Therefore, I hypothesise that when Richard sent me by e-mail that "everyone says they are happy with the concept of supporting your project", it really meant that nobody had openly objected.

When I met directly with members of Division V1, three told me that they were very interested in the topic and looking forward to the outcomes. Reactions from the other six ranged from less enthusiastic interest to "I have no objections". Although I had stressed, in conversation with them and in the documents I provided, that this was intended to be a collaborative exploration, I was left with a sense that the learning was seen to be my responsibility and that the group was expecting me to provide what they called 'results'. It seemed to me that their own work in 'providing solutions' might be influencing the 'research in the mind' for participants and it would be important to work with differing interpretations of the project and the meaning of collaboration to the people involved. It was also important to maintain momentum. Like them, I was trying to juggle multiple commitments, including full time consulting work. They had all signed the consent form so, at the time, there seemed no reason to prolong the contracting period.

5.2.2. Exploring e-mail use in the case study group

The fieldwork began with arranged face to face interview sessions, which occurred in parallel with my access to participants' inbound e-mail messages. The interview sessions also afforded me the opportunity to gain first hand experience of the organisation. In these early days, the main objective was to derive a 'thoughtful sketch' (Pava 1983 p. 57) of the organisation, to use as a basis for further progression of the action research cycle.

When we met, I began with the research questions that were set out in Chapter 4 (section 4.3.3.1), aiming to explore how and for what purposes, members of the group used e-mail. However, they responded by telling me, not about their own use but about what was wrong with others' use of e-mail, about what they themselves did not use it for and about their own caution around its use. This shed some light on the difficulties I had encountered in organising meetings via e-mail.

Despite the apparent resistance to direct discussion of the research questions, everyone seemed keen to talk. Indeed, a pattern started to emerge in which it seemed that it was necessary to
allow space for them to talk about matters of concern and then it became possible to deal with the research questions. I began to wonder whether the research meetings might be providing a space that was not available elsewhere in the organisation.

In these sessions, angry feelings were expressed about e-mail material and about the senders of that material. Everyone agreed that e-mail items sent to 'all staff' were annoying. The 'all staff e-mail' was a device most often used by managers and they were seen to contain far more information than was useful. Also there was something about their impersonal nature that rankled; for example the greeting 'All,' used by Gillian to introduce her messages. My attempts to tease out more about what was annoying led to anecdotes about the content of the e-mails. Participants were annoyed about mail sent by managers other than Greg. They told me that these e-mails were neither helpful nor informative, yet they seemed unwilling to do anything about it. The combination of their inaction and the strength of feelings expressed led me to explore whether feelings directed toward the senders represented a broader issue. E-mail was an unwelcome intruder but it was impossible to ignore. A full 'in-tray' was undesirable; it represented 'work pending' and staff fought to 'keep the in-tray clean'. This was illustrated graphically by one member who said "I kill them as soon as I've read them". It seemed that e-mail was a hated object onto which feelings could be projected. The availability spreadsheet, described in 2.4.2 was prominent in this conversation. Designed as an accounting tool for keeping track of scheduled billable work commitments and staff availability to take on additional billable work, its use was seen as a cover for more sinister motives. One participant commented: "The system is used to wallpaper over issues" and another, "We overuse e-mail", held clues to be traced further as the project progressed.

Some of the 'all staff' items came from GTC, the new owner, for whom 'all staff' meant thousands of staff all over the world. These messages were particularly resented by the group; "Their e-mails tell us nothing" I was told. Material that was circulated to all staff by GTC, was seen as irrelevant to members of V1, as if they were not part of GTC. The level of resentment seemed out of proportion with the apparent intent of these e-mails. At one level, they were providing information about administrative matters that was relevant for all staff. However, ISPL staff were angry about them and this prompted me to explore further the feelings associated with the new owner. Their e-mails were seen to have invaded ISPL space and it seemed possible that the related anger was also to do with 'wallpapering over' of issues relating to the sale of the business.

In contrast with 'all staff' e-mails from GTC and from other managers, e-mails from Greg were welcomed and seen as a way for people to maintain a personal connection with the Managing
Director. His 'all staff' e-mails were generally short, informal in style and often mildly humorous. Participants in the study valued this. Greg described his management style to me as 'transparent', saying that he believed that it was important to keep staff informed about the affairs of the business as a whole.

Sometimes, 'all staff' e-mails were sent by members of staff other than managers. One category of these was designated the 'soap box' in that when someone held a strong view on a matter, they would send an e-mail to all staff. This was said to be an important element of 'freedom of speech' in the firm. I wondered what this meant and whether there were alternative fora where strongly held views could be expressed. I had already experienced that it could be quite difficult to have a voice in the presence of senior members of staff, particularly Greg. It seemed that e-mail provided a space into which voices that were otherwise unheard could be projected.

Consultants in the group insisted that e-mail was not an appropriate communication medium when issues were 'complex' or 'emotional'; they were all in agreement that there are times when there is no substitute for face to face communication. I was struck by the apparent double entendre in this assertion in that it was unclear whether it was a statement about their own choices or another criticism of others' use of e-mail; that is, an indirectly expressed wish for more face to face communication with managers. Given the nature of the work and the extent to which it took place in geographically dispersed settings, the preference for face to face encounters seemed incongruent with the reality that consultants were expected to be engaged in revenue generating work eighty percent of the available time. I now assumed that the difficulty I had experienced in organising meetings had something to do with the pressure to be 'eighty percent billable'. It was as yet unclear whether the 'complex and emotional' issues were dealt with at all.

Through a combination of the interview sessions and direct access to participants' inbound e-mail messages, it emerged that e-mail was an integral part of the two main sub-systems of work, in its use for information sharing. Documents were passed from one person to another via e-mail, for information only, for comment and in some cases to be worked on by more than one staff member. Many of the work related e-mails had attachments. For example, tenders for new work were prepared by one person and then passed to another for further work or for review and comment. E-mail was also convenient for information sharing with external parties such as customers; typically a covering note with a formal communication sent as an attachment, or a brief exchange to determine appropriate times for a meeting. These were all deemed safe uses of e-mail. Curiously however, only a small proportion of consultants' e-mail exchanges (usually less than ten percent) were with customers.
In contrast, there were large volumes of inbound e-mails from other parties, many of which had been very widely circulated in the external environment. They included solicited and unsolicited advertising material, chain-letter style jokes that had been forwarded many times, on each occasion to a new group of participants, newsgroup items, some of which related to ISPL's business and many of which clearly did not. The widely circulating jokes often included images and sometimes video clips, including pornographic material. Some members of the group received regular messages from commercial sources offering goods and services; one member received five to ten messages daily, mostly about debt reduction, making easy money and offering free gifts. This member and others also received a daily guide to television programmes. Clearly, a large volume of e-mail messages from the World Wide Web crossed from outside to inside as if the boundary between the organisation and its environment did not exist. A 'task boundary' (Hirschhorn and Gilmore 1992) could be created by an individual choosing to leave their computer screen turned off in order to avoid the distraction of e-mail. However once it was turned on, e-mail messages flowed automatically to the user's screen.

Members of the group seemed to have more e-mail connections with the external web of e-mail users than with colleagues. Most of the time, at least fifty percent of the inbound e-mail fell into this category. I attempted to engage participants in discussion of how and when they dealt with this material. As the technology enabled them to be available for work, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week so I assumed that somehow they would be making choices about the boundary between work related and personal material; that is how and when to deal with each. My questions about this were at first dismissed with assurances that the non-work items did not interfere with work as if, in expressing interest in how staff managed the boundary, I was questioning their private use of the system while at work. The combination of this resistance and the fact that my entry to the organisation had been sanctioned by management, left me wondering if I was seen to be acting on behalf of management. Paradoxically, staff seemed to accept that the organisation's work could extend into private time, to suit the needs of the organisation. This included periods when staff were absent on 'sick leave' or on holiday. One of the more senior members of staff summed it up:

"………the priorities between self, family and work have always been difficult .. the 24*7 challenge is just status quo ... and the solution is in me"

Others drew on perceptions of role responsibilities to draw helpful boundaries, believing that one did whatever was necessary, whenever that might need to be, on the basis that delay would
lead to personal cost. One of the PC's summed up his approach to dealing with e-mails while on holiday:

"Quick fix vs pain when you get back to work"

E-mail was used more extensively by senior managers in doing their work than by the consultants, particularly for discussions about day to day issues relating to regulatory and maintenance activities. They used e-mail to express disagreement with each other, to 'bounce ideas' and to engage Greg in issues. One of the unwritten rules in the organisation was that if you wanted to canvass Greg about a matter, he preferred that this be done on e-mail first, so that he would have the opportunity to think about it before responding. This was said to be particularly important if you had 'bad news' for him. Messages from Greg were given high priority by senior managers. When I met with them, our conversation would be punctuated by the arrival of a new e-mail message, heralded by an electronic beep and they would check the source before continuing with our meeting.

In stark contrast with managers' use, there were few e-mail mediated discussions about the work between consulting colleagues both within the group and with consultants in other parts of the organisation. Their stated preference was to use the alternatives such as a telephone call or a face to face interaction.

5.3. The Restructure

Shortly after the case study began, in September 2000, Greg 'seconded' Richard to a temporary role managing the company's marketing activity and another senior member of staff, David took up management of the division. When he told me about the change, Richard foreshadowed other organisational changes. We agreed that, in view of likely further changes, rather than alter the composition of the group, Richard would remain, both as a participant and as Greg's delegate, with project sponsorship obligations.

Staff were used to changes in the structure. From time to time, Greg would feel that aspects of the organisation structure were not working well and that a reorganisation was called for. In this case, the restructure was intended to address two issues.

First, staff had told him at the last company conference that their 'pastoral care' needs were not being attended to. This was a term used widely within ISPL to refer to staff members' needs in terms of their general well being at work. However, it had not been formally defined. It seemed to include attention to matters such as their desire to undertake work that was interesting to
them as well as satisfying the company's need to generate revenue; what might in another setting be called 'job satisfaction'. During the fieldwork I also discovered that pastoral care also included professional development of staff, 'quality of life at work' and 'value add' by managers to consultants' work.

The second stated reason for the restructure was that the organisation needed to secure more new business in order to achieve the earn-out\(^4\) targets and that necessitated more time being spent on selling activity.

The structure shown in Figure 5.2 was announced via e-mail to all staff at the beginning of October and was effective immediately. In the restructure, Richard retained marketing responsibilities in his new role as a Principal Consultant (PC). Two more of the group became PCs, including David, a further two became MC's and the remaining 4 members joined one of the two groups led by the newly appointed MC's. The new and old structures are shown in Figures 5.2 and 5.3 respectively.

The fact that most staff had been told about the reorganisation by e-mail was not a surprise to staff. An e-mail broadcast was the usual procedure when senior managers wished to communicate with staff about a major change. Participants in the study were supportive of the need for a change in structure. There was a commonly held view that the role of Division Manager had been 'an impossible job' and staff believed that Greg had finally recognised that. Division managers had been expected to 'husband a team, sell, project manage and also bill 80% of their time' and they had apparently accepted responsibility for this broad portfolio. However, given that they were now being released from these responsibilities in order to sell more, one wonders what compromises were being made but not discussed.

\(^4\) See Appendix 1 for a definition of 'earn-out'.
Case study group members were both philosophical about the change and supportive of Greg's decision. They believed that he had sought input from various people before making his decision but that it would have been unrealistic to expect all staff to approve. They told me "He can’t expect to have buy in from everyone". However, the reorganisation was not well understood by staff. Colin, one of the newly appointed MC's, attempted to organise a meeting with his group to discuss how the new structure would work in practice but conflicting diary commitments meant that he had to abandon his mission.
In a group interview about two weeks after the reorganisation had been announced, I started by asking the group what the reorganisation meant for them and the dialogue which ensued was as if they had been waiting for an invitation to talk about their emotional response to the restructure. My invitation seemed to open the floodgates. They appeared to be very confused about the new structure, about what it meant for them and for their work and at a loss to understand how the issues would be worked through. "There are no job descriptions or performance indicators for the new roles" was a typical reaction.

Although staff agreed on the logic for the change, they felt that the restructure had been imposed on them. Comments such as "The restructure was rammed through - I was never happy about it" left me with the impression that this was a matter on which very strong feelings were held but unlike the 'soap box' stance, it was not possible to have your say on the matter. The confusion therefore remained, summed up by one of the participants in "There's a lot of ambiguity and anxiety in the organisation - stuff no-one wants to talk about".

They were particularly perplexed about the role of MC and a spontaneous debate about the role's responsibilities and its relatedness to other roles revealed widely differing views. I became curious about how clarity would be obtained and how the anxiety generated by the changes would be worked through. Meanwhile all consulting staff, including the MC's were still under pressure to 'bill at 80%'.

5.4. Meeting face to face

Apart from meetings with Greg, which occurred at the agreed time and in his office, meeting face to face with others in the group presented unexpected logistical difficulties. Having arranged a time to meet, staff were rarely available to start on time and in the case of group interviews, the first ten minutes or so would be spent in 'rounding up' participants. Individual interviews with group members were rarely held in the office. I would arrive at ISPL's office at the agreed time and almost always it was suggested that we 'go next door for a coffee'. It became apparent that meetings often took place this way. The obvious reason was the shortage of space for meetings in the office. However, coffee shop meetings were the norm even when office space was available. Over time, it emerged that there were other reasons for holding meetings away from the office and I discuss these later in this chapter and in Chapters 6 and 7.

Arranging meetings with participants in the study also proved difficult for other reasons. I came to the conclusion that it was going to be impossible to meet with all group members at once because each had various prior commitments. Booking a session well in advance was not a
solution because, at any time, members could find themselves required to work on a client's project and billable work must take precedence. However, just before ending the fieldwork, I offered to host lunch for all members of the group to reflect on the project as a whole, using the working note I had produced (included here at Appendix 4). The invitation to lunch was extended to all members of the original group including those who, by then, had left the organisation. This session had the highest attendance level of any of the meetings with the group. Six members attended.

The idea to host a lunch had occurred to me as a result of learning that social gatherings occurred quite regularly and staff seemed to find a way to be there, including for lunch time meetings outside the office. 'Team lunches' were funded by the firm and monthly was seen to be an appropriate interval. It had been the responsibility of division managers to organise these and then, after the restructure, it was assumed that the MC's would take over. The firm was generous in its support of these types of events. Apart from funding the 'team lunches', food and drinks were always made available for 'Friday night drinks' and everyone was invited. There was also a continuous supply of chocolates and lollies candies in the reception area for staff and visitors.

Apart from the social events, there were few opportunities for consulting staff to get together to discuss work issues. In the past, there had been a regular 'company conference' although I was informed that there would not be any more as there had been 'sexual harassment' problems. After the restructure, the PC's held regular meetings, as did the senior management group. Prior to the restructure, the Division Managers had also met regularly. However, meetings between MC's, although spoken about, rarely occurred. I discuss this further in later sections of this chapter and explore its significance in Chapter 6.

When I arrived at the ISPL office for an interview session, almost always Greg would appear in the reception area, on his way into or out of the office or, as the reception area was the most direct route from one part of the office to another, just passing through. He always seemed to be hurrying somewhere but would greet me warmly, generally making some sort of quip about the project, usually in a manner that left the impression an extended conversation was unnecessary. In these brief exchanges he had acknowledged my presence, sanctioned it by expressing enthusiasm for the work and left me with the feeling of being included in the organisation.

5 'Lollies' is an Australian word for candies or sweets.
5.5. Greg

During the first few months of the study, it became evident that Greg was ubiquitous in the business. On almost every occasion when I met with participants in the office, Greg would appear at the door and interrupt the conversation in order to raise an urgent issue with a staff member. Nobody seemed to mind. On the contrary, staff valued the fact that he remained accessible to them even though the business had grown to the point where most people reported to other managers. It also seemed that the attitude to managers had polarised into respect for Greg and contempt for other managers. They would speak of him in admiring terms and of other managers in a derogatory manner; "Gillian is not a people person" and "She just doesn't understand our concerns" were typical.

Staff recognised that e-mail was often the best way to 'get to Greg' in the first instance, although they stressed that it was also possible to meet with Greg if you needed to speak with him. His regular e-mail notes to all staff were seen as part of his style; "Greg uses e-mail to float ideas" one told me and from another "for him, it's a conversation tool". It seemed that it was generally recognised to be easier to communicate with Greg by e-mail at least in the first instance; "He appreciates getting e-mails. It enables him to better manage his time".

Although the organisation had grown to about sixty people, Greg still held sway over many aspects of the business. Major decisions were not made without referral and often deferral to him. Managers frequently sought guidance from him including on seemingly trivial matters and he was generally seen to be the arbitrator when managers disagreed about an issue. Much of the interaction between Greg and the managers reporting to him was on e-mail and I was able to observe some of this because two of his direct reports were members of the case study group. Managers would solicit his involvement in a matter by including him as a 'cc' on e-mails between them. Most major decisions involved Greg, in that, although he had created a management structure, he was still very much involved in each of the major sub-systems within the business.

He frequently featured in interview material, even though he was rarely the subject of interview questions. The pattern was usually similar. First, I would enquire about something I had observed. Next, responses would initially focus on criticism of management in general, represented by the pronoun 'they' and then invariably shift to Greg, as if it were generally understood that management decisions were heavily influenced by him. However, blame for the area of dissatisfaction was levelled at managers other than Greg.

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Over the years, Greg had taken a keen interest in staff's satisfaction with their work and with the organisation. Historically, staff had sought his guidance on both work-related and personal matters that were impinging on their work performance. He seemed to relish the opportunity to act as mentor or counsellor. Curiously however, Greg discouraged staff from 'bringing personal stuff' into the workplace. His rule of thumb was that staff should not discuss a personal matter with colleagues if there was a chance they 'might regret it later', although he encouraged people to discuss personal issues with him.

Greg's creativity and commercial nous in founding and successfully growing the company was held in high regard and his position as head of the ISPL family unquestioned. He was well known and respected for his professional expertise in the marketplace in which ISPL did business, and he appeared to derive much enjoyment from his personality status. In the first months of the study, he was clearly involved in managing the boundary between ISPL and its environment, representing the organisation at external events, actively seeking new business opportunities and keeping up to date with competitive activity in the marketplace.

This was the picture on the surface. As the study progressed, it also became clear that participants in the study were trying to do business as usual in a very turbulent environment. The business had been sold, nobody knew what the future held and it was rumoured that Greg would leave the organisation once the sale was complete. Furthermore, a restructure, that nobody understood fully, had been announced. Also, subtly at first and then increasingly in evidence, Greg's focus shifted to the earn-out.

5.6. Managing the Project

Managing this project was not only more difficult than I had expected in terms of organising meetings and holding an adequate space for the work to be done but there were unanticipated technical difficulties. About two weeks after the fieldwork began, I received urgent telephone messages from Gillian and from Richard and from the I.T. manager, informing me that e-mail messages forwarded to me in the automatic process were bouncing back to the original sender and that this included customers. I realised the potential embarrassment for ISPL and immediately took steps to cancel the process until the technical problem could be resolved. As Richard described it, the incident had caused quite a 'kafuffle' at ISPL. This meant that Greg had become aware of the problem and had expected immediate action. I believe that this had been the catalyst for the multiple telephone calls. It took four weeks to solve the problem, including my purchasing a business account with my Internet provider in order to accommodate the volume of e-mail being forwarded to me. During the resolution period, it was evident that ISPL saw this as my problem, not a shared one.
On December 25th, 2000, a different technical problem resulted in the loss of 15,000 e-mails from my PC. Neither my diary notes nor interview material was affected and in any case I had back-up copies of those documents. However, it had not been possible to back up the e-mails due to the large volume in terms of disc storage space, although, as a result of this incident, I bought a CD-R/RW (CD drive with 'write' as well as 'read' capability) before re-starting the e-mail copy process again.

I was feeling quite fragile by the time I reconnected with the group and my feeling of being at fault intensified when Richard told me that the project was 'losing credibility' as a result of these problems. I explored further what he meant by this when I next had the opportunity to meet face to face with Richard. Then, it emerged that he was anxious about his role and was feeling the weight of Greg's expectations of him as one of the senior managers. At the same time, he had growing doubts about the potential for the earn-out objective to be achieved. I hypothesised that Richard was projecting his own anxieties on to the research project. In turn, I had been available to introject this material, transforming it into self-doubt and fear for the project's future.

Although difficult and frustrating to work through, I can now see that these difficulties informed my understanding of the organisation and the working life of consultants. For example, a parallel existed between my feeling alone in my research work, with the need to resolve research project difficulties alone and ISPL consultants with their consulting work on the client site. Also, there was the uncomfortable feeling of being pressured by multiple managers at a time when what I really needed was help to solve a problem. I suggest that the pressure I felt was a reflection of the pressure felt by the managers in responding to Greg's perceived expectations.

5.7. ISPL's work

5.7.1. Tensions around the Primary Task

ISPL's Internet pages, promotional material on display in the reception area and submissions to prospective clients for new consulting work, all projected the image of an impressive range of capabilities and experience. As an organisation that was selling an intangible product, ISPL guarded its accumulating credentials carefully. Consultants were diligent in keeping their curricula vitae up to date with a summary of each completed project, and more detailed case histories were kept on file for use in future proposals and as a source of support for future projects. At one level, the organisation had a strong foundation in its track record and client list.
on which to build new business and a wealth of consulting capability in the staff. However, there were also several sources of tension in the system.

First, it was a constant battle to secure enough contracts for work to be in a position to meet revenue targets and each month end brought renewed anxiety about the likely flow of future work and whether or not it would be sufficient to cover the targets. In addition, during the case study period, the pressure was even greater because of the increased targets associated with the earn-out conditions.

Then, after the restructure, responsibility for securing new work, which had originally been vested in the division managers shifted to the PC's. Relieved of their former responsibilities for line management of staff, PC's were seen to have more time to devote to sales work and there was much pressure to do this for earn-out achievement. It became evident as the months went by that the sales system had become Greg's first priority. The PC's met regularly as a group, with Greg, to discuss progress on their various sales campaigns.

Once a contract had been won, it became an official 'job' and the need for resources became input to the work of the National Manager Consulting Staff (NMCS), Gillian. Her role centred on the task of allocating appropriately skilled consulting staff to new projects, including detail of exactly how many days had been allowed for the work. The 'allocation spreadsheet' was the official record of who was allocated to which projects and for how long and ultimately of variances between the estimated and actual time to complete the work. As the majority of projects were based on 'fixed price' contracts, any negative variance represented a cost to the company.

The link between the sales system and the consulting system was a source of anxiety from several perspectives. First, despite the facilities available, including e-mail, little information flowed to the consultants who would undertake the work, until a contract had been secured, so the system did not provide them with a view of potential forthcoming work. However, there was a belief among consulting staff that ISPL had an obligation to provide consultants with 'interesting' work. In practice the work allocation system had resulted in an informal negotiation system in which consultants 'positioned' themselves for interesting work with those who had secured the contracts, presumably resulting in greater satisfaction for those who had built the most effective coalitions and disadvantaging newer consultants and those who were less effective negotiators.
Regardless of the inadequacy of the order book, consultants were expected to maintain an 80% billing level. The terms 'on the bench' or 'rattling' were used to describe consultants who were not currently billing and therefore available for assignment to a new job. My musing that it might be embarrassing or anxiety provoking to find oneself on the bench was met with an immediate rebuttal leaving me initially feeling embarrassed that I had offered such an inaccurate interpretation and later realising that the response may equally have been resistance to an accurate interpretation.

Also, it is likely that the work itself was anxiety provoking. The company positioned itself as a 'provider of solutions' and ultimately the consultants were responsible for creating those solutions. The way in which the organisation's work had been advertised in the marketplace left no room for uncertainty. I reflected that my own feelings of inadequacy in response to the expectation that the research would provide 'answers' was potentially a parallel process (Smith and Crandell 1984).

5.7.2. Managing uncertainties

Staff had access to a vast amount of information to help them deal with uncertainty about the work. An electronic storage system enabled easy access to comprehensive records of the documentation associated with previous sales bids and consulting work completed. As noted earlier in this chapter, e-mail supported sharing of these documents. The workplace was described as a 'supportive' environment because colleagues' expertise could be called on and combined with the consultant's own skill and experience to produce a 'solution' and I noticed how often this meant telling someone where to find a piece of information.

Concerns about unfamiliar work were routinely dealt with in this way as if uncertainty could be eliminated with information. However, anxieties are not always resolved by the provision of information, and, although a clear definition of 'pastoral care' was never obtained, I observed that its interpretation included some attention to staff members individual work-related anxieties. 'Pastoral care' had been part of the division managers' responsibilities and after the reorganisation was intended to be part of the MCs' role.

As a result of the sale, there were also new sources of anxiety for staff; the changing ownership and what it would mean, Greg's likely departure and personal fears about what the future might hold for individuals. It was paradoxical that at a time of increasing anxiety, the structure that had served to provide some containment had been dismantled and its replacement, whilst apparently attending to the need for increased sales focus, was not addressing pastoral care needs.
The System Psychodynamics of E-mail: A Case Study

The manner in which staff members' anxiety was typically dealt with, is illustrated in the following vignette.

Mark was a member of the consulting group in which Colin was the MC, although not a member of the case study group. For reasons that did not seem to be understood, Mark was threatening to resign. He rang Gillian who dealt with the issue in an e-mail to Colin, copying Greg:

Colin,

Every conversation I have with Mark at present is very negative. He indicated he is unhappy with the level of support he is getting from me specifically and others generally. He rang my mobile today when my battery was flat and when I had previously advised him to ring the office switch if he had an urgent request.

He threatened to resign.

I am concerned about his attitude to ISPL flowing to clients.

Can you have a coffee with him sometime over the next week and find out how he is - don't make it a big thing:

- is it that he doesn't like the project work he is doing?
- is it the lack of framework and procedure?(This isn't going to change, this is a norm in consulting environments)
- does he feel he isn't valued? (He is. We have made a very conscious effort to ensure he is highly billable so that he can't be picked off by Greg as having low utilisation. He might like to compare his position to those in Sydney).
- does he feel uncomfortable being out on site by himself. He seems to be one of those people who prefers home base to client sites?
- is he getting enough sleep? Maybe the baby cries a lot at night.
- does he feel out of his depth in the assignment?
- etc

Thanks

Gillian

An email exchange between Gillian and Colin ensued, with copies to Greg. Ultimately, Greg provided coaching advice by e-mail to both Colin and Gillian and offered to speak to Mark if necessary. In a one-on one interview, Colin told me that in his role as MC he wanted to deal with the issue but felt powerless to act.
5.8. Effect of the Structural Change

By February 2001, the new structure had been in place for over four months yet the MC role was still a source of confusion. Staff, including those assigned to MC roles, continued to debate their respective interpretations of the role and seemed no closer to a common understanding of its responsibilities. In some respects, it was as if the role did not exist. MC’s were not mentioned on the availability spreadsheet; staff holding this new role were being listed in the section covering work commitments for senior consultants, as if the roles were equivalent. Figures in the spreadsheet confirmed that MC’s were also expected to continue to bill at 80%, as if there had been no additions to their responsibilities. In addition, I discovered that PC’s were unable to recall which consulting staff were in which MC’s group. The MC role had been an integral part of the organisation as Greg had announced it back in October yet it seemed that nobody, least of all the MC’s, was able to incorporate the MC role into their mental model of the organisation.

Meanwhile, Gillian was attempting to resolve the confusion by e-mail. An e-mail with an attached Powerpoint presentation intended for use at a meeting with the MC’s, offered a definition of the role, stating that MC’s were expected to:

'add value to their staff, to professional development of staff, to the Quality of Consultant's working lives and to the outcomes for consulting assignments'.

In the absence of meetings between the MC’s there was no opportunity to reach a common understanding of what was meant by this.

Gillian's next overhead in the same Powerpoint presentation, specified the agenda for a meeting with the MC’s the following day and offered three alternative solutions:

1. How can communication between MC’s, PC’s, NCM, NMM and NMCS be improved?
2. Is administrative and systems support to MC’s and consultants adequate?
3. What areas of MC activity should be covered by the Quality system?

Following the meeting with the MC’s, Gillian e-mailed a report summarising the results of her meeting with the MC’s and noting inadequate communication as the main impediment to the success of the new structure. She wrote:
The major concern in the new organisation structure is the creation of some gaps in communication which exacerbate a feeling of uncertainty by MC's and staff within ISPL.

There are three major gaps:

1. Between staff and senior management
2. Between MC's and senior management
3. Between MC's and PC's

The report also noted that:

MC's have a key role in managing change.

Colin, one of the two MC's in the case study, expressed, also on e-mail, his disagreement with the way the outcome of the MC meeting had been interpreted. He felt there was a problem that went 'way beyond communication gaps'. He felt that MC's were being vested with responsibility for issues relating to the organisation as a whole and as an example cited a proposal that 'MC effectiveness' should be measured by staff turnover. There was no response from his colleague MC's or from Gillian.

The difficulty facing the MC's is illustrated in the following vignette. One of the consultants in Colin's group, Andrea, was working on a customer site in Hong Kong. Colin was aware through e-mail exchanges with her that she was feeling isolated and disappointed that the work was not as interesting as she had hoped. He also knew that she was thinking of resigning in order to escape from this situation. One day, she revealed that the client had asked her to expand her role to 'look at change management' and 'cultural issues' and although interested in the work, she had little experience on which to draw. Colin sought to help her by canvassing colleagues for information to assist her in pursuing this additional revenue potential. However, Andrea was left to deal with her own anxiety about her role and the work. She resigned in mid April.

Although the MC's had a regular scheduled meeting with Gillian, often it would be cancelled and on the occasions it had been held, the MC's had not succeeded in addressing the concerns, that had seemed to be quite clearly articulated in sessions with me.
By late February, Greg was concerned that the new structure was not achieving the intended results. He instructed Richard to undertake an overall organisational review. Although it was May before Richard left the organisation, the review was never completed. He cited competing demands on his time as the main reason. By mid June, the MC role was seen to be a major problem. Gillian announced to the MC's via e-mail that Greg had approved a review specifically of the role of MC and that the findings would be 'part of the input used by Greg into what managerial changes should be implemented for year 3 of the earnout'. MC's were asked to make themselves available for a session with David who had been given two days to undertake the review. It looked as though further organisational change was imminent and the last one was not yet understood.

David's review proceeded swiftly and the results were summarised into an e-mail, listing his findings in six pages of bullet points, and this was followed by a document labelled 'MC Roles and Responsibilities', which Gillian e-mailed to all PC's and MC's inviting comment. Nobody responded, either by e-mail or by any other means.

The MC's seemed well aware of the potential role to be taken up but powerless to act and resentful that their role seemed to be largely ignored, as evidenced in the following e-mail from Colin to other MC's:

> It was not recognised that we actually exist and that we could assist to fill what is a large gap in management practices right now. But given that we don't appear to have any currency in fulfilling that sort of role, it's not surprising that MCs didn't get a mention. So what's unusual about that I ask. I was interested in the cancellation of today's meeting. It was set so that Gillian could attend before training in Canberra tomorrow, yet she went yesterday without a word of explanation about being unable to attend. I specifically asked her on Friday about the agenda, and made a strong case for some management action this week to fill the 'information about what management is doing' void in communication. No response, your honour, it seems is her reply, apart from her e-mail. I don't mean to sound carping, but right now I find the silence from the top a concern, especially where an avenue exists to help via our MCs.

The sense of frustration expressed in face to face meetings with me was now spilling over into e-mail exchanges between the MC's, although they still felt powerless to initiate dialogue with Gillian or Greg. This impasse was ironic given the earlier assertion that e-mail should not be used to deal with 'issues that are complex or emotional'.
Gillian attempted to fill what she perceived as a 'communication gap' with e-mails to all staff. In March she started a series with the subject line heading 'Weekly Roundup', with the intention of providing all staff with an update on the PC's marketing activity, a summary of the weekly MC meeting, a summary of the weekly AC meeting and a report on resource allocation. When printed, each of the series covered about two sheets of paper with tightly packed text, containing much detail of activities in which some people had been involved. All PC's were mentioned by name but none of the MC's were mentioned. A single line under the heading 'MC meeting' generally noted 'No MC meeting this week'. The participants in the case study group told me they either did not read these e-mails from Gillian or 'skimmed' them, although nobody had informed Gillian.

5.9. The Meaning of Ownership Change

5.9.1. Uncertainties about Identity

Organisational life inside GTC was assumed by case study group members to be very different from staffs' experience of ISPL and the prospect of integration with the new owner's organisation generated much anxiety. It was believed that ISPL would lose its identity, that GTC would not take care of staff in the way that Greg had done and that ISPL would be 'corporatised', meaning that there would be formal policies and procedures where there had been none. Of particular relevance here was the assumption that e-mail use would be much more regulated. GTC had a more restrictive policy, and ISPL staff became particularly concerned about the potential loss of what they regarded as a 'right' to use it for both private and business purposes. Some found relief in the belief that GTC could not restrict their private use, as ISPL staff owned their own notebook computers.

Fears around what life as a GTC employee might bring were often expressed as issues of detail; staff were concerned about whether they could retain their ISPL business cards and whether the look of ISPL's web pages, on which staff had worked together at the last company conference, would be preserved. The response to GTC's presence in their lives was epitomised in one participant's facetious summary of GTC's contribution to working life in ISPL:

"All the GTC people have done to date to contribute to our working lives is to help propagate viruses and junk mail"

ISPL's identity was strongly reflected in its office accommodation. The reception area had been painted in the company colours including an entire wall bearing the same, visually striking company logo artwork as the marketing brochures and business cards. Early in the new year,
staff became aware that after occupying the same office in the city for many years, an office move was planned, in that ISPL would be moving into shared accommodation with GTC.

5.9.2. Striving for Earn Out

Early in the new year, the task of reaching the second year 'earn-out' targets became the focus of Greg's and therefore other senior manager's attention and the pressure to 'deliver' to the new owner and therefore to the ISPL shareholders mounted. Late in February, Greg met with all staff to tell them about the short term focus and to deal with mounting concerns about the implications of failure. The next day he confirmed his messages in an e-mail to all staff:

1. I didn't talk about Grand Visions or Missions but noted that as a consultancy we are in the business of helping others achieve theirs - and that our satisfaction comes as much from helping our clients succeed and doing our specialist work as it does from any progress towards a some corporate goal. As with any consultancy, the game is about delivering work that our clients value, and continuing to build our capacity to do so (and getting satisfaction from both).

2. All this emphasis on financials is because:
   (a) For some stakeholders (GTC Shareholders) that's the only thing that matters
   (b) For some stakeholders (ISPL ex-shareholders, staff who want salary increases, staff who value job security) it's important
   (c) We've said we'll achieve certain targets, and it's a matter of professional pride to deliver them and (importantly)
   (d) Financial performance is an indicator of our overall health. If we're not performing financially, something is wrong, and there will be other symptoms, such as staff on bench, staff overworked, unhappy clients...

4. We needed to achieve a dramatic turnaround, from 8 months of 700-or-less billable hours per week to 900 per week in March and 1000 for the rest of the year, to make our GTC targets. The dramatic turnaround started this week, with 975 hours booked. We don't need to do much more than this, but we need to build the order book further, and better spread the load.
5. We want to achieve a "big hit" in results in March to kick start the recovery (so we will be tight with spending, pushy on utilisation), but I want to settle into a proper balance of billing, development, spending etc from April. "If we're not billing, we should be building" remains a key maxim, particularly as non-billable hours become scarcer.

6. The office moves in Sydney and Melbourne are almost certain to go ahead. Gillian is currently coordinating.

7. GTC have not intervened in the management process to date. They have a right to if we are not meeting our targets, and are at this time naturally concerned about profitability.

8. Some particular acknowledgments - ... the PCs who have delivered sales in a very tough market, the non-PCs such as George and Marion who have won business, the people such as Claire who have done long unbroken stints in a single job... and Vanessa's 40th Birthday today. As always, this is an unfair list, missing out many other contributors....

9. If you are thinking of making a decision based on information from the rumour mill (or are just worried, concerned, interested, fascinated), just give me a call. There's been no change to the value of "open and frequent communication", and the intent is always there - we just don't always succeed!

This e-mail was sent out the day after Gillian's last 'roundup' message and had the subject line, 'All the news that's fit to print'. The implied denigration of Gillian's communication efforts was perhaps unconscious on Greg's part but his off the cuff remark left the impression that her e-mail had not been 'fit to print'. Some of his humour was now at her expense. In another memo to all staff he referred to Gillian's message bearing the 'Roundup' title with:

"a title which has been given additional meaning by her recent acquisition of a stock whip"

Greg's own anxiety about the targets was apparent in e-mails between him and members of the senior management team, that included Richard, sometimes expressing fear that the targets
would not be achieved. Early in March he referred to the need to 'get out of trouble' with the results. Very shortly after that, he seemed much more optimistic and in an e-mail to PC's only, he provided sales and revenue figures for February, noting that he felt 'encouraged'. He continued to pay close attention to forecasts and regularly communicated with the PC's on his assessment of the potential. It seemed that each month he held on to hope that the targets could be achieved, but the financial performance needed to achieve them was continually increasing.

As the situation became more desperate, Greg sought to assemble the PC's in an out of hours meeting to discuss short term revenue generating opportunities that would enable targets from April onwards to be met. His e-mail to the PC's noted that he would like there to be time at that meeting for people to discuss how they were feeling. On the same day, Gillian e-mailed all staff, berating them for inaccurate forecasting and blaming individuals for the fact that the actual billable hours for the month was 220 hours less than they had estimated. She urged staff to be more vigilant in their attention to administrative matters and referred again to the MC's as a source of help and advice.

By late March, Greg seemed very confident and in an e-mail to all staff at the end of the month he noted:

"Based on the mid-month billings, and current hours (estimated for the rest of the month), we seem to have done it. Thanks especially to those who contributed to cost restraint and to those who helped keep the work coming in. Particular thanks to people outside the PC team who have won us additional work - they include ........

Interestingly, senior consultant utilisation is still only in the low 60 percents"

However hard they had been working, it seemed that, based on Greg's 'billing hours' based assessment, the senior consultants still had spare capacity!

During the 2nd week in April, Greg was able to announce that ISPL had 'Achieved our best result in living memory', immediately followed by an announcement that the outlook for April was much less rosy. In the same e-mail, he went on to say:

"April is shaping up as a really poor month, with utilisation way down - even taking leave and public holidays into account. It's a combination of factors (the
order book hasn't dropped) and I'm hopeful we'll be back in business in May.

But if you are not billing right now and tossing up whether to take leave... please do!"

Richard had been quite pessimistic about the outlook from the outset and early in May, he confided in me that he intended to resign in the middle of the month. As he was not only a senior manager but also a shareholder, I was surprised to hear this but only until he confided in me that there was 'no way' the company was going to reach its earn out figure for the year. Greg, on the other hand continued to act as though the targets were achievable.

5.9.3. Office Move

In April, planning for the office move was accelerated as it was seen as a means by which a cost saving could be achieved for ISPL, thereby contributing to earn-out achievement. In her continuing efforts to deal with the communication gap, Gillian started to circulate a new series of 'all staff' e-mails with the subject heading 'Office Move Update #', the # being a serial number. No more of the 'Round Up#' series appeared after this although the 'Office Update' series did not replace its content. In the new series she provided copious detail about the cost saving benefits of the move, the logistics of the move, her views on the implications of sharing office space with GTC and her advice on how staff should respond to the move. The following is one out of fifteen paragraphs in the first e-mail of the series:

"There are cultural norms that many of us appreciate. They are to do with us being a tight knit and supportive group - drinks on Friday, lollies at the front reception, noise levels, access to people and offices etc. It's up to us to maintain our friendly culture and to develop new norms appropriate to being closer to our colleagues in GTC. This should be seen as an opportunity, not a barrier. In Melbourne we will dominate the office space by the sheer number of staff we have working out of the office"

As though she were anticipating their questions, Gillian composed these e-mails in a 'Question and Answer' format. I wondered how staff were expected to deal with questions that she had not covered and the answer lay in her final paragraph.

"If you have any other questions please feel free to ask myself or your MC."

The 'office moves' e-mails became increasingly detailed, providing much information about the logistics of the move and what staff would need to do in order to prepare for the move. This
included an expectation that they would all undertake a 'big clean up' that would eliminate all the 'junk' that would not be needed at the new location.

The office move occurred over a weekend in May and I had the opportunity to visit the new premises a couple of weeks later. Accommodation now comprised the whole of one floor in a large city block and it had been divided into 'the GTC end' and 'the ISPL end'. I accepted Colin's invitation to tour the new accommodation, although this did not include the 'GTC end'. The reception area too, was now shared with GTC and looked very different from ISPL's former office - it was painted throughout in muted tones and a large sign bearing GTC's logo was attached to the wall behind the reception area. I noticed that the plaque bearing the ISPL company name, which had featured prominently on the wall in the reception area at ISPL's former premises, had been left in a corner, on the floor, leaning against the wall.

5.9.4. Desperate measures

When it became clear to Greg that the earn-out figure was in jeopardy for the year, he introduced a new tactic. He designed a scheme whereby shareholders could sacrifice salary, thereby reducing the company's costs in order to increase profit. The idea was that the amount sacrificed would be repaid out of profits at the year end. Shareholders who were members of the case study group assured me that everyone trusted and depended on Greg to act in their best interests although, in interviews, staff who depended on the cash flow from their monthly salary, were very anxious about what had been agreed to.

By early June, the outlook was even gloomier. In an e-mail to the PC group, Greg announced that he would not be able to attend a scheduled meeting with them that afternoon. In the same e-mail he told them that results for May had been very disappointing and that the 'salary sacrifice route' was probably the only way they had any chance of achieving the earn-out targets. He committed to obtain GTC's approval.

Meanwhile Greg maintained his sense of humour as evidenced in an e-mail from him to all staff about the scope of work in which he was prepared for the organisation to engage in order to make the target.

"If the client wants a chicken sexer, we should do our best to help them find one".

By mid June, Greg was communicating directly with all staff about the impossibility of achieving the earn-out through the normal revenue stream and revealing his salary sacrifice plan, which
had now been approved by the new owner. His e-mail was short, to the point and expressed Greg's optimism about the future.

One week later, Greg advised the shareholders that the 'salary sacrifice option' would not now be implemented as the external auditors were 'not comfortable' with the plan. He also admitted that the scheme was unlikely to have 'bridged the gap' in any case as the shortfall was now too big. He again expressed optimism for the future.

5.9.5. Effect on staff

During the time that Greg was so focussed on earn-out achievement, many staff were grappling with what the future held for them professionally and were not finding answers. They had been provided with what seemed like an overwhelming volume of information, but little to answer the issues of real concern to them. It appeared that there was nowhere for their questions to be heard or for their uncertainties to be dealt with. It looked as though MC's were expected to deal with the issues but they were equally confused and demonstrably unable to act.

I also experienced the difficulty of being heard and the frustration of having to take in large volumes of information, in the hope of finding a space for my thoughts to be heard, in sessions with senior managers such as Greg and Richard. An interview with Greg was not in the research plan. However, I found myself in conversation with him at various times during the study, sometimes for an extended period. There was a similar pattern. Greg would enquire how the study was going and would interrupt my response after just a few seconds, to provide vast amounts of information about the history of the firm and the background to issues I had observed. It was the same in meetings with Richard. Both would speak very quickly and it was often hard to collect my own thoughts as well as take in what they had to say. Over time I realised how difficult it could be, inside the firm, to think ones own thoughts, to have a voice to express those thoughts and to be heard. I believe this was one reason for the 'off site' meetings. Even sessions that had been scheduled as observation sessions for me turned into conversations with Greg.

As with the MC's and their resorting to e-mail to express their unresolved frustrations, e-mail seemed to provide a place where the broader community of consultants could express their dissatisfactions. In a note to the staff member in Hong Kong, Colin said:

"The prevailing climate round here, is hardly what you'd call jolly. Resignations from Leigh and Lisa will be followed by others soon I anticipate."
Meanwhile Andrea in Hong Kong e-mailed to a friend outside the firm, that

"Work is proving a little frustrating. I am required to play much more of a support role than I had hoped which is tedious. I should probably be a little more positive, given that I know (relatively) little about this stuff. and any time I think that I can’t last any longer on this project, I have the reassuring thought that I can always resign. It’s a very liberating feeling. I composed a letter of resignation this evening. No plans to hand it in as yet, but nice to know its there."

5.9.6. Escaping the Uncertainty

Andrea resigned at the end of April. Hers was the fifth resignation from the case study group and by the time the fieldwork ended, only five of the original members were still with the organisation, two of whom were PC’s.

Keith had been the first member of the case study group to leave ISPL. He left the organisation suddenly without working any notice period not long after the study started, and it was said that he had been asked to leave by Greg. He had joined ISPL with extensive management experience and had been seen to be an appropriate addition to the group that worked at the 'business end of I.T.' A flurry of forty four e-mails occurred over a few days, relating to the organising of a 'leaving lunch' for Keith. It seemed very important to most group members that he should be given a 'proper' send off. I later learned, to my surprise, that Keith had been deemed by Greg to be a 'bad hire'.

Patricia's departure occurred in February. She had been with ISPL for eight months. Patricia was also deemed to have been a 'bad fit'.

Claire resigned in February, which left eight members in the case study group. She had been with the firm for four years, initially in an administrative role and for the last year in an associate consultant (AC) role. Her departure was explained in an e-mail from Gillian to all staff as follows:

"The AC program is designed to foster and grow people, to provide an array of experiences and to be a stepping stone to a chosen career. At the end of their year all ACs, including Claire, face a choice about their future career. It’s easy to forget this given Claire has been with ISPL over four years in various roles not just as an AC; we all had an expectation that she would simply remain -
forever! However, Claire has decided to accept the challenge of a new career outside of ISPL into what is a great opportunity. Claire has taken a consulting role in a small consulting firm (7 staff) that specialises in change management."

A different perspective on her departure was revealed in an e-mail to Claire from an ISPL colleague:

"Congratulations! I know you could do brilliantly here too, but sometimes it's easier to make a big career-jump in a new organisation - where people recognise the strengths you have built and enhanced during your employment, rather than the ones you brought when you first joined."

Glenda resigned around the same time as Andrea, leaving 6 in the case study group. Glenda explained her reasons for resigning in a meeting with me just prior to her final day with the organisation. As she chain smoked her way through our one and a half hour meeting, she expressed her escalating dissatisfaction with the changes taking place since GTC's takeover, her disappointment with ISPL managers in general and her decision to resign in favour of working alone as a contractor. Richard's resignation reduced the case study group down to five members.

Early in July, Greg revealed that he too had resigned. Most staff heard this direct from Greg in meetings that he organised for each of the main offices. His resignation and other information about an accelerated 'integration' process was confirmed by e-mail the next day. In another e-mail to all staff two days later, he announced that he would be away on leave for a few days and foreshadowed that he would be away on leave for much of the following three months during which time he was serving his notice period.

This left unanswered the question of who would be managing the company and an e-mail from Gillian to all staff two days later raised more questions than answers. In the following transcript of her message, Peter is another member of the senior management group.

"All,
a few of the management team are out billing.
I am teaching in the Canberra office for Tues through Thurs and will be back in the Melb office on Friday afternoon.
Peter is basically uncontactable in Sydney facilitating workshops for Tues through Thurs.

Greg is back on Wednesday.

Any probs call Sally on the mobile or at home on (home phone no.)

Thanks, Gillian”

The MC's meeting for later that week was cancelled due to 'lack of attendees'.

### 5.10. Conclusions

The case study revealed how focus on the organisation's primary task, as it was described in Chapter 2, was displaced at senior management level, by attention to the earn-out associated with the sale of the business. A key factor in the shifting dynamics was Greg's change of focus, from management of the organisation as a whole and involvement in management of each of the major sub-systems to management of the earn-out process. During this time, consultants were expected to produce more revenue generating work than ever before.

The dominant theme in the narrative presented here has been around the extent to which Greg controlled the organisation as a whole and was the glue that held it together. E-mail supported and sustained this dynamic. As he withdrew from the business, the extent to which stability of the system depended on his involvement in its various aspects became apparent. The management structure, which had depended on Greg's involvement, was unable to compensate for his shifting relationship with the organisation. The situation was further complicated by the restructure. In addition, this was a time of heightened anxiety and debilitating uncertainty, particularly about what the future held, for the consultants on whom the organisation depended for its income. The case has shown how this combination of shifting circumstances destabilised the organisation and has illustrated e-mail's involvement in the shifting dynamics.

The findings presented in this chapter are analysed further in Chapter 6, in which hypotheses that emerged from distillation of data into key themes and supporting evidence are presented and discussed. Chapter 7 focuses specifically on the effects of e-mail on ISPL staff.
Chapter 6. Case Analysis

6.1. Introduction

This body of this chapter begins in 6.2 with a summary of the main hypotheses that are discussed in the remainder of the chapter.

Then, I begin the detailed analysis in 6.3 by turning to the action research based methodology that was described in Chapter 4, in order to explain its contribution to the course the research ultimately took and to illustrate the distillation process, which I introduced in 4.4.5. I discuss the factors that led to the broadening of the research focus from the original small group setting to an exploration of the system as a whole, through the experience of the case study group.

The transitional state of the business is discussed in 6.4 and provides the context against which the hypotheses are explored. Two key themes present in the transition are (1) the evolving role of Greg, the entrepreneur, in the changing socio-technical system and (2) the impact of the structural change on the socio-technical system, and these are discussed in 6.5 and 6.6 respectively. The extent to which anxiety was increasing and the organisation's capacity to deal with it was diminishing, are highlighted in these sections.

Section 6.7 focuses on the anxiety present in and arising out of, the business, the approach to dealing with it and the extent to which it was possible to contain it. Over the course of this chapter, I build a picture of the system psychodynamics of an organisation in transition, highlighting the psycho-social effects of e-mail use.

This chapter is followed by Chapter 7, which looks specifically at the impact of e-mail on the day to day working lives of organisational members.

6.2. The Key Hypotheses

The key hypotheses that will be discussed in this chapter are as follows:

Hypothesis 1

ISPL was not just an enterprise but an extension of the founder's personality. The socio-technical system was dependent on his involvement throughout the business. Staff identified at a psychological level with ISPL, the company founded and managed by Greg. He was central to the way in which staff thought about the organisation. E-mail helped to sustain his presence.
throughout the organisation, including in his physical absence. He provided a containing function.

**Hypothesis 2**
ISPL was involved in a transition from one state of being to another. ISPL, as it had been before the sale, eroded during this earn-out period and e-mail use contributed to the erosion. Hypotheses 3 to 9 relate to the organisational factors that contributed to the erosion.

**Hypothesis 3**
During the earn-out period, Greg and the PC’s became involved in a different primary task from the rest of the consultants. This 'substituted primary task' depended on consultants successfully carrying out the original primary task.

**Hypothesis 4**
The impending loss of the founder and of the organisation associated with him invoked fear and anger in ISPL staff. This was directed towards managers other than the founder and towards the new owner. This split between an idealised view of the founder and denigration of others was mirrored in responses to e-mail use.

**Hypothesis 5**
The restructure described in the case had much more impact than previous restructures because it amplified a seismic shift in the system as a whole. The restructure further undermined the system because it reinforced the split between the primary task and the substituted primary task.

**Hypothesis 6**
The restructure was motivated by both conscious and unconscious factors linked to the founder. At a conscious level, the restructure was a response to the needed increase in sales for earn-out achievement. However, at an unconscious level, Greg needed to retreat from his omnipresent involvement in the business, in order to deal with his guilt associated with abandonment of the 'family' and the restructure supported this personal shift.

**Hypothesis 7**
Although the leader was withdrawing, a culture of dependency endured. Managers in the new structure were powerless to deal with the seismic shift in the system as a whole and the related uncontained anxiety.
Hypothesis 8
Although it was never clearly defined by members of the case study organisation, what was meant by the term 'pastoral care' related to sentient need fulfilment and to provision of containment for consulting staff.

Hypothesis 9
What was expressed as an inadequacy in one sub-group of the organisation, the MC’s, is better understood by looking at the psychodynamics of the system as a whole. Although their appointment represented a conscious desire to provide pastoral care, this was an impossible task due to unconscious group dynamics.

Hypothesis 10
The combined effect of the changing ownership, the associated pursuit of the earn-out and the restructure created a working environment in which there was greater uncertainty and more sources of work related anxiety but significantly less capacity for containment.

Hypothesis 11
E-mail supported the collective use of the Managing Director as an idealised container of the consulting work until he turned his attention to the substituted primary task of 'reaching earn-out'. Then, e-mail technology contributed to a reversal of this containing function by amplifying the disjunctive potential of random emotional experience unmitigated by primary task, the loss of connective thinking, and a disintegrative, post-dependency dynamic.

6.3. The change of focus for the study

6.3.1. What was the change in focus?
As I explained in Chapter 1, my initial intention was to explore the effects of e-mail on work group dynamics in an Australian business. Based on my own knowledge about, and first hand experience of, e-mail use in a wide range of businesses, I had expected to be conducting the research with staff who would be dealing with high volumes of e-mail relating to their work. I therefore assumed that the research findings would have much to say about the impact of e-mail on the organisation's primary task (Rice 1958, Hutton 1962, Miller and Rice 1975) and the dynamics of work groups engaged in that work. I had expected that the exploration would extend to looking at the impact of e-mail on the socio-technical systems (Miller and Rice 1975, Pava 1983) to which their work contributed and to other socio-technical systems with which the organisation connected in its external environment, such as its customers.
However, as Chapter 5 illustrated, the study presented some early challenges to these assumptions about how the project would unfold and where the work would centre and these led to a shift of focus. In fact, I found myself conducting the research in an organisation that was in the process of being sold, with a group of people who were not a group for the purposes of doing the work and whose views on e-mail use seemed to be more about others’ use than their own. These early discoveries were surprising, frustrating and ultimately significant input to the action research process.

### 6.3.2. The significance of early surprises and frustrations

As illustrated in the case study in Chapter 5, generating data about participants' work, proved frustratingly illusive from the start. Much of the e-mail content I was able to observe had no bearing at all on the work and a surprisingly high proportion of the remainder was about administrative matters, rather than about the organisation's primary task, as I understood it. On average, less than twenty percent of the e-mails in the research were related to the organisation's primary task. Also, as described in Chapter 5, it proved very difficult to work within the boundaries of the interview frameworks, particularly as a result of participants using interview time to discuss matters about the state of the organisation that were concerning them.

After grappling with the possibility that these phenomena had resulted from errors in the research design or deficient interviewing skills on my part, I came to realise that this was data to be acted on in the research and this led to three related decisions.

First, hypothesising that I was experiencing parallel processes that were reflective of something within the organisation, I decided to explore whether my own experience in getting to the planned work of the research was reflective of something within ISPL. The value of information emerging from the researcher-researched relationship has been emphasised (Smith and Crandell 1984). It is not 'error to be eliminated' but is 'a window into the subterranean, sentient life of the system being investigated' (p. 817). They describe sentient dynamics in which researchers enact behaviours predicated on similar sentient forces. In choosing to explore what was contributing to flight from the task of the research, I started to become aware of the issues impeding focus on the primary task of this organisation.

Second, I decided that it would be necessary to also think about the meaning of 'group' in this organisation and the relatedness of 'group' to the primary task. I had contracted with people who were a group, in that they all belonged to one division, but they seldom did work together on a task or tasks; indeed consultants often worked alone on the primary task. The research project became further complicated when a reorganisation caused Division V1, with whom I
had contracted to do the work, to be disbanded, resulting in participants in the study now being dispersed across a number of newly formed groups, which were also not work groups.

Third, I made a decision to continue with the project. This decision was partly based on my own preparedness, discussed in Chapter 4 (Design and Method), to regard this project as 'an exploration of the unknown' and to use the project to learn about action research methods in practice, including taking actions based on emerging data. The decision to continue was also partly based on pragmatism. My interest was in e-mail and its impact on group dynamics and this was an organisation, willing to host a research study and comprising groups of people who used e-mail. Clearly my fantasies about how the research would proceed had been replaced with disillusionment and that was painful. However, disillusionment was accompanied by a greater understanding of the setting in which I had the opportunity to explore e-mail's impact and I regarded that as progress.

Nevertheless I felt disappointed with this turn of events and discomforted by a growing sense of uncertainty about what the future held for this project. The work of Bain, Long, et al. (1992) provided needed and helpful guidance. They posit that it is appropriate to begin the research 'from issues or problems of immediate concern to the staff within the aims of the project' (p. 8). Also it has been argued that 'action research aims to contribute to the practical concerns of people in an immediately problematic situation' (Rapoport 1970) and that, as discussed in Chapter 4, the search for clues is more important than an attempt to amass data (Gabriel 1999).

### 6.3.3. The significance of clues

Some clues began with an observation of something that seemed odd, either because observed phenomena did not resonate with my own experience or because of apparent differences between one part of the organisation and another. Here, I highlight the clues that were significant in my decision to shift the central research focus from the group setting to the organisation as a whole.

First, I became curious about the inconsistency between management's frequent and discursive use of e-mail, and much more sparing use by consulting staff in the case study group. This seemed odd. Also, these staff seemed generally passive in their use; that is, they appeared to be more often recipients than senders of e-mail. I was careful in reaching this conclusion since, as explained in Chapter 4, my e-mail access had been to participant's inbound e-mail only. I took into account the content of inbound e-mail, which was usually an indicator of whether it was replying to a message initiated by a member of the case study group or initiated by someone other than a member of that group. This discovery led me to enquire further about participants'

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use of e-mail which in turn revealed the extent to which they were critical of other's use of e-mail. I return to this later in the chapter.

Other clues emerged from my experience of interacting with the organisation in general. For example, I noted in Chapter 5 how it could be difficult to 'get a word in edgeways' particularly in conversations with managers. It was often frustratingly difficult to complete a sentence before I would be interrupted and I noticed that the less assertively I provided my input, the earlier the interruption occurred. In parallel with ISPL's market position as a 'business solutions provider', it seemed that expert opinion was sought and listened to within the organisation and an expression of doubt or uncertainty had to be 'corrected' by the provision of information. It became apparent that part of a manager's role was to fill the gaps in consultants' knowledge.

I noticed some effects of this in my own responses. I found myself attempting to absorb a large amount of information and to relate it to the topic of discussion. My own thoughts became quite muddled and I became part of a dynamic in which I was more a 'recipient' than a 'sender'. Overall, I was struck by the apparent difficulty of thinking in the presence of others and with others. There seemed to be no space to do this. This led me to explore further if and where the thinking necessary for the organisation to pursue its stated objective of creativity occurred and to investigate the manner in which uncertainty was managed. This too is explored further in later sections of this chapter.

The dominance of message sending over receiving was reflected in e-mail content. It was managers who were sending large e-mails providing answers and this was consistent with the idea of being an information provider. I also wondered about the extent to which e-mail might be providing them with a means of defending against their own anxieties. Sending an e-mail to staff about a reorganisation provided a shield for the manager from the inevitable questions and anxieties of staff. Furthermore, the question and answer format suggested that the manager was projecting his or her own anxieties into cyberspace, framing an answer which provided some containment for his or her anxiety but leaving staff with their own questions potentially unanswered. Staff were left not only with their own concerns, but with the added burden of managers' projected fears. As my focus in the research was on the participant group, I explored with them the effect of being a recipient of so much information and the apparent absence of space for working through issues.

Sometimes a clue began with a feeling invoked in me during the research work. In picking up and teasing out the meaning of these clues, a psychoanalytically informed approach provided the means by which counter-transference phenomena, (Salzberger-Wittenberg 1970, De Board
could be drawn upon to inform the project. In my efforts to do this, it was essential that I sought to differentiate between feelings arising out of my involvement in the project and my own valency to respond to situations in certain ways; that is, my own transferences. Transference is the process whereby feelings, wishes or expectations are deflected from one person to another, becoming disconnected from their original context and revived somewhere else (Marrone 1984). In other words it was important for me to work on staying in role and to be aware of forces that tended to pull me out of role. This was true of the entire project and particularly relevant in dealing with what I am calling clues here.

By examining the feelings invoked in me in my role as action researcher and by being open to the possibility that they had been projected into me from the organisation, it became possible to explore the experience of being in the organisation, first through my own experience and to then use this in exploring participants' experience.

My experience of being drawn into a role other than that of action researcher when participants used interview sessions to talk about issues that were concerning them, was another significant clue about social dynamics in the organisation. It seemed that these discussions needed to happen before we could work on the project and it led me to explore with participants, the manner in which those concerns were dealt with when I was not there. My hypothesis was that action research settings provided some containment for anxiety that was not being dealt with elsewhere.

Teasing out the early clues, drawing on my own experience and acting on what was being learned about the organisation, revealed that there was something to be discovered in this organisation about the impact of e-mail on group dynamics but the data was more about the socio-technical system as a whole than about one specific work based group. Also, my discoveries were more related to regulatory and maintenance activities in the system than about the primary task and related operating activities. Furthermore, the regulatory and maintenance activities being brought to the project by participants related to the fact that the organisation was somewhere between two different states of existence.

6.4. The States of the Organisation

6.4.1. Between two states

During the entire period of the study, ISPL was in transition between two states. It was no longer ISPL in the sense of being a privately owned organisation, protected and controlled by Greg but it was not yet fully part of GTC. Transfer of ownership would not occur until the
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earn-out agreement had been fulfilled and in order for earn-out conditions to be measured, it needed to continue to operate as an autonomous business unit, reporting into GTC.

I argue in this section that ISPL, as it had been when acquired, eroded during the earn-out period and I discuss the causes and implications of this in subsequent sections, including e-mail's contribution to the erosion. In this section, I start with the characteristics of ISPL as an acquired entity that are germane to this analysis. This is followed in 6.4.3 with an assessment of the relevant characteristics of the transition.

6.4.2. Defining characteristics of ISPL

There were three defining characteristics of ISPL that are of importance to this analysis.

First, although the organisation has been described conceptually in this thesis as a bounded socio-technical system, comprising two major bounded sub-systems, it was, in an operational sense, largely without many of the boundaries that might be used to define an organisational system. The following three examples of boundary absence are illustrative. The provision of notebook computers and mobile e-mail facilities provided to all consultants, in combination with the expectation that staff were available for work '24 by 7' meant that there was no formal boundary between home and work. The absence of such a boundary was reinforced by the organisation's liberal e-mail policy, which permitted use of the company's e-mail system for both private and business purposes. Also, the 'hot-desking' system, increasingly in evidence in firms wishing to maintain a city centre office, led to consultants working from home if they needed an uninterrupted work environment and further contributed to the erosion of the boundary between home and work. A third example of the boundarylessness of operations emerges from the fact that consulting work routinely took place on the customer's premises, sometimes for months on end.

Given the nature of the work and the facilities made possible by technology, the boundarylessness made sense for the business. As Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1992) have pointed out, the reality of technology enabled, knowledge based business today is that the old boundaries are no longer relevant and increasingly the boundaries that are important in organisational life need to be in the minds of employees and relate to authority, task, politics and identity. The question that will be explored here is what those 'in the mind' boundaries were in the case of participants in the case study.

A second defining characteristic of this organisation was the dynamic nature of workgroup configurations. Work groups were formed and disbanded according to the needs of the work
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and availability of staff. Frequently, the work involved a single consultant working with a client based project team. Therefore although both V1, the division which had been disbanded and V6, the group of consultants to which Colin had been assigned as MC, were referred to as groups, they had not been formed for the purpose of carrying out the operating work of the organisation. There was seen to be a need for consultants to belong to a group configuration, that transcended the life of individual projects and it was said that these groupings were intended to cater for 'pastoral care' needs. I interpret the term 'pastoral care' here as some contribution to the sentient needs of the organisation and discuss this further in subsequent sections of this chapter.

The third characteristic was the strength and nature of the ISPL identity. On one level, the identity was defined by the 'brand'; the company logo and the way in which this had been used consistently on company stationery, marketing material, Internet web pages and even in the internal décor of the office environment in its original premises, before the move to office space shared with GTC. However, I assert that these were symbols representing staff's identification at a psychological level with ISPL, the company founded and managed by Greg. As Stapley (1996) has pointed out, the 'cement' that holds organisations together is 'ultimately psychological' (p. 50). As I discovered in the case, it seemed Greg was central to individuals' organisation in the mind. He was strongly associated with their perceived object of identification (Stapley ibid.). Given the boundarylessness of operations and the transient nature of work groups, Greg provided a needed source of identification. Being part of Greg's organisation provided some sentient need satisfaction (Miller 1998) for staff. In addition, I argue that Greg's intra-psychic make-up and its relatedness to that of others, contributed to the way in which ISPL was defined in the minds of staff. This is discussed in more detail, in the analysis of the effect of the entrepreneur's shifting role in 6.5.

6.4.3. The Nature of the Transition

The transitional state of the business had numerous implications for ISPL and impacted each of the characteristics of ISPL described under 6.4.2.

First, there were boundary implications. A contract for the sale of the business had been signed and when the study started, a three year earn-out period was underway. ISPL therefore needed to operate as an autonomous business unit, in order that progress towards the earn-out targets could be measured. However, it was also becoming part of a much larger entity. On the one hand therefore, ISPL needed to be preserved as a bounded business unit; on the other hand, it was in the process of being incorporated into another entity. The boundary between ISPL and its environment, historically managed by Greg, now served to separate ISPL, not only from the
business environment from which it derived revenue but also from its new owner, GTC. However Greg's interest in GTC extended only as far as earn-out achievement and the manner in which he dealt with the new boundary seemed to reflect this. Historically Greg had managed the boundary around ISPL as a whole but he now had a narrower interest and I contend that he neglected this important new boundary. The case illustrates how, enabled by e-mail, information flowed freely across the boundary from GTC into ISPL but in the absence of a context against which staff could attempt to make sense of it, it served both to fuel their concerns and as an object for projections about the feared new owner.

Second, there were identity implications. Greg, who had started, built and closely managed the firm was in the process of ending his relationship with ISPL. It seems that all that remained for him was to realise the value of the asset that had been sold, an outcome from which he would be the main beneficiary, although the 'B' shareholders would also derive financial benefit. During the transition, it appeared that the pursuit of revenue and profit targets displaced other considerations that had been important in the past, notably his attention to managing and being present in, many aspects of the business.

Participants in the study knew very little about GTC or its staff. It was said that in making his decision to sell out to GTC, Greg had taken account of the views of some others, but the majority of participants in the case study had not been involved. Unlike their decision to join ISPL, which had been their choice, the decision to change their employer to GTC had been made for them. There was much resistance to the new identity and this is discussed further in 6.4.4, which follows.

Third, there were primary task implications. During this transitional phase, the expected focus for consultants' work remained the same, they were still 'solving customer's problems'. This was what Lawrence has called the normative primary task; that is, 'the task that people in an organisation ought to pursue (usually according to the definition of superordinate authority)' (Lawrence 1985 p. 236). In addition, the earn-out conditions meant that the consultants needed to generate more revenue than ever before.

During this time, Greg and the newly appointed PC's were directing their attention towards the additional sales necessary for the earn-out to be achieved and, as a result of the restructure, were able to do so, unencumbered by line management or pastoral care responsibilities. I argue that Greg and the PC's were therefore engaged in a 'substituted primary task', which depended on consultants successfully carrying out the organisation's work, independently of those who had
formerly carried division management responsibilities and largely independently of Greg's involvement.

6.4.4. Implications for staff of the transitional state

ISPL had always set a target of '80% billable' for consultants, although in the past there had been considerable leniency shown by management if a consultant failed to achieve that level. Now that the company had been sold, pursuit of the earn-out meant that consultants were under constant pressure to perform at the 80% level. In addition, the business lacked the volume of new contracts to consistently feed the needed level of performance.

Gillian's availability spreadsheet recorded individuals' progress against expected performance levels. Although not raised as a specific concern by participants in the study, I hypothesise that this evoked strong emotions in consultants, for several reasons. First, however hard a consultant worked, they could still fail to bill at the required level. This was because the inadequacy of inputs to the consulting sub-system (sales orders for consulting work) from the sales system left some consultants 'on the bench', effectively competing against each other for the available work, possibly leading to undiscussable feelings of embarrassment, guilt and potentially anger. I noted in the case how my interpretation on this matter had been met with a vehement rebuttal, a response I interpreted as resistance to, rather than inaccuracy of, the interpretation. Second, consultants had historically been able to lobby for work they considered interesting, whereas now the focus was primarily on being 'billable'. This frustrated sentient need fulfilment.

Work with the case study participants revealed the extent to which their familiar, protected environment was disintegrating. They believed that Greg, who had been the dependable father figure for as long as the firm had been in existence, would now only be there until the earn-out had been achieved. I hypothesise here that the impending loss of Greg, the 'protector' invoked anger in ISPL staff which could not be directed towards the idealised father and so GTC, Gillian and other managers became a target for split-off feelings of fear and anger.

ISPL staff responded to the new owner, not as a population of new colleagues but as a feared other, an unknown entity that invoked paranoid anxieties within the case study group. These were defended against by 'killing' their e-mails and by resistance to the symbols that threatened to make the new ownership real. The prospect of carrying a GTC business card was ridiculed, the new office space was divided into 'our end' and 'their end' and GTC staff were referred to collectively as 'ex IBMers', the derided other which represented the antithesis of everything they believed ISPL embodied.
However it emerged that GTC was now being criticised for its lack of attention to matters that had not been addressed by ISPL over the years. As one participant noted:

"There is no real vision for ISPL at this stage other than integration ... sooner or later with GTC ... and they don't know, or won't tell what their plans are ... eg., is there a place for a business consultancy ... or systems building ... will we have a team structure, will we be based around market or product segments ... there are other decisions that no-one knows at present ... further these questions have never been fully answered at ISPL but were evolving ..."

Vision, strategy and structure had never been clear in ISPL but staff had not been greatly concerned. I came to the conclusion that this was a function of the organisation's dependence on Greg, the entrepreneur, the one who had held it all together.

6.5. The Changing Role of the Entrepreneur

6.5.1. Between two states

In 6.4 I discussed the transitional state of the business, from its origins as a privately owned Australian organisation, to its state during the research as a company in the process of being acquired, through an earn-out process, by a publicly owned international organisation. Greg, one of the founding entrepreneurs and the person who had instigated the sale process, was therefore also involved in a personal transition. For Greg the transition was from owner to temporary employee for the duration of the earn-out, on completion of which he would no longer be part of either ISPL or GTC. In the following three sections, I discuss first his role in ISPL, then the effect of his role on the socio-technical system as a whole and finally his role as the earn-out period progressed. E-mail's contribution to the way in which he took up his role and its effect on staff is highlighted. In Section 6.6, which follows these sections about Greg, I discuss the reorganisation and its impact on the socio-technical system.

6.5.2. Role in ISPL

Greg was a typical entrepreneur according to Kets de Vries definition (Kets de Vries 1996), discussed in Chapter 3. He had started the company from scratch, taking personal financial risk in order to do so. He had historically maintained tight budgetary and operational control and as the business grew, he surrounded himself with a number of 'lieutenants', who were assigned responsibility for various aspects of the business.
Unable to relinquish control and allow others to take up the organisational authority associated with their role assignments, Greg made sure that he hired lieutenants who were 'yes people'; individuals who were prepared to tolerate and work with his detailed involvement in most aspects of the business. This was evidenced in the case study by the extent to which even senior managers deferred to Greg on both important and trivial matters. I noted how he would be 'copied in' on e-mails between managers, including when they were dealing with seemingly trivial administrative issues. The organisation’s internal functioning was therefore dependent on Greg’s involvement and e-mail supported this dynamic. His on-going involvement in many of the input and output transactions meant that management of the consulting system boundary and the sales system boundary was always shared by the designated managers and Greg. For example, he was said to be the 'best salesman' in the firm. Also, no recruitment or dismissal occurred without his involvement. No other manager apart from Greg had budget management responsibilities. Organisational roles carried delegated responsibility but not the necessary authority to fully discharge those responsibilities. Therefore managers had to involve Greg.

His omnipresence was starkly evidenced for me when the e-mail copying difficulties occurred early in the study. Three managers all seemed to be dealing with the problem as a matter of urgency and with hindsight I realised that each was attempting to deal with Greg's involvement in their work.

In the earlier months of the case study, there was a strong sense of Greg's presence in the business. Physically, he seemed to be always there. As noted in Chapter 5, it was uncanny how often he appeared when I attended meetings in the office. When physically present, he shaped perceptions and provided an authoritative answer when it was needed or when he perceived a need for one. Even when not physically there, he was often present in discussions between staff, present in interview material and present in e-mail messages. Through his 'all staff' e-mails, his exchanges with staff at all levels and by being copied on e-mails between managers, his presence in the mind was sustained. Greg was the internalised ideal in ISPL and because e-mail resonates with past experiences (Aram 1998), Greg’s e-mails had the effect of sustaining his omnipresence throughout the organisation, including in his physical absence. Staff greatly valued the connection. The experience for them was expressed in one participant's comment early in the project 'Greg lives on e-mail'.

There was an assumption that Greg must be attended to - whatever else you were busy with. Conversations in the business and interviews in the research were interrupted to attend to Greg's needs. Also, as noted in discussion of interview content, Greg would often feature in the response, even when he was not the subject of the question. He seemed to be constantly in
mind. Greg demanded attention, not necessarily by always being demanding but by the dynamic that resulted from the combination of his physical presence and his being in collective and individual thought processes. I noted how managers even allowed his e-mail messages to interrupt my meetings with them when they attended to the electronic beep that heralded the arrival of a new message. I noted in Chapter 5 how my own observation sessions turned into one-sided conversations with Greg.

As well as his detailed involvement in the business, Greg had assumed responsibility for managing the boundary around ISPL as a complete system. He traditionally dealt with the uncertainties of the external environment, relying on his 'lieutenants' to impose order on the work, through documented processes such as the quality system and the many procedures which guided the manner in which consulting work was undertaken. The absence of 'company vision', and 'strategies' was not a concern for consulting staff or managers because it was assumed that Greg could be relied on to take the business in the right direction.

The entrepreneur is also characterised by the experience of feeling 'different' (Kets de Vries, ibid.). ISPL had built its brand image around the assertion that it was 'different'. Greg wanted to be different and the organisation seemed to be the vehicle for the expression of his difference. Even his e-mails were different by being quirky or humorous; certainly different from most managing directors of my experience and certainly different from those of the managers reporting to him.

Kets de Vries (ibid.) has also pointed out the effect of the typical entrepreneur's inner world; feelings of low self esteem, inferiority and helplessness are counteracted through excessive control and activity. The entrepreneur is continually in search of an admiring audience to shore up a fragile sense of self. When not billing, staff were expected to be in the office to 'contribute to the life of the firm' and I posit that this had something to do with being part of Greg's admiring audience. I noted in the case study how Greg would progressively draw people into a conversation, even though he continued to do most of the talking. Staff and managers alike provided the admiring audience he craved and nobody overtly aspired to higher authority than that afforded to the 'lieutenants'. This behaviour was mirrored in Greg's 'quirky' e-mail messages to all staff. Using a riddle or a trivial matter of common interest such as the 'on-hold' music, he would canvass all staff, a regular reminder of his presence in the business. Replies always went to Greg at the centre of the communication, without being copied to other recipients.
It is notable that although restructures occurred regularly, with associated role and responsibility changes, the role of Managing Director remained constant, with Greg in it.

The point being made here is the extent to which the organisation as Greg had created it, was not just an enterprise but part of his identity; an extension of himself. Furthermore I argue in the next section that before the business was sold, the socio-technical system was dependent on Greg's involvement throughout the business.

6.5.3. The entrepreneur and the socio-technical system

Greg's intra-psychic make up had led to him surrounding himself with managers who would tolerate his need for both personal and organisational authority at the expense of theirs.

Organisational authority is defined as 'the authority that is delegated to roles' (Gould 1993 pp. 51-53) and it is distinct from personal authority which is defined as 'the right to be' and 'the right to be oneself-in-the-role'. A person's sense of their own authority affects how they take up an organisational role (Gould, ibid.). Personal authority can be thought about as existing on a continuum, one extreme of which is the 'inhibited individual', who fails to exercise the minimum amount of authority vested in their role; at the other extreme, the grandiose individual has an inflated sense of self and denies others the appropriate exercise of their authority (Gould, ibid.).

In some important respects, because of its origins ISPL operated like a family in which Greg was the father figure who would provide. In ISPL Greg had mobilised his employee's needs for security and certainty and the organisation was sustained in basic assumption 'dependency' (Bion 1968), a state in which it was assumed that Greg would provide for staff's needs. Drawing on Freud's terminology, Miller (1998) has noted, when followers become dependent on the leader, 'their capacity for critical judgement - their ego functioning - is suspended' (p. 7). Greg had selected managers who were competent in the administrative skills of management but who would defer sufficiently to Greg's needed level of personal and organisational authority.

Dependency also generates rage (Miller 1998) and the successful leader, often unconsciously, diverts the rage from himself onto other objects. In this dynamic, Gillian was effectively mother and unconsciously drawn into the role of bad parent, while father could seemingly do no wrong - even though he had sold the family. As noted in Chapter 5, staff routinely attacked Gillian and other managers, projecting their anger about various issues onto the 'lieutenants' instead of Greg, who remained an admired and idealised object. It was notable during the case how Greg seemed to carry the 'blind hope' for a successful earn-out outcome, leaving Gillian to deal with the reality represented in the availability spreadsheet. Later in the case, Greg seemed to
reinforce this split in his reference to Gillian's 'stock whip' as if she were to blame for the pressure on consultants. This split between an idealised view of Greg and the denigration of Gillian and the other 'yes people' was mirrored in the split between Greg's welcomed presence on e-mail and the resentment that had been expressed both of GTC and other ISPL managers except from Greg.

Despite the formal hierarchy, many staff had a direct relationship with Greg, which he sustained both by his use of e-mail and by bypassing the formal structure when he felt it necessary. Trist and Bamforth (1951) used the term 'reactive individualism' to describe a situation in which each person has a special relationship with the boss. More recently Hirschhorn (2000) has described 'counterstructure', explained in Chapter 3, which operates independently of the formal structure, sustaining links direct with staff located anywhere in the formal structure. Hirschhorn advocates counterstructure as an intervention to effect organisational change. My analysis is that Greg sustained a permanent counterstructure, supported by e-mail and enabled by the dependent state of the organisation, which kept the 'family' stuck, rather than facilitating shared thinking and the socio-emotional restructuring needed for survival in the shifting context.

6.5.4. The entrepreneur in transition and the effect on the socio-technical system

In the restructure, Greg split selling from consulting. Whereas Division Managers had been involved in both selling and management of consulting work, the role of Principal Consultant was focussed primarily on sales. Management of the consulting work was left for Gillian, the National Manager Consulting Staff, the newly appointed managing consultants and the rest of the consulting staff.

As discussed earlier, the restructure also relieved the PC's of some of their primary task related responsibilities so that they could focus on the substitute primary task of generating sales for the earn-out.

It appeared that the restructure amplified a seismic shift in the system as a whole. It paralleled a shift in the relationship between Greg's internal world and the business. The business could no longer be an extension of himself since, once the earn-out had been achieved, he would be leaving, as I later discovered, to participate in a business that he had already established elsewhere. I hypothesise that at a conscious level, Greg needed to focus on urgently signing new contracts for work, in order to optimise the return on his investment and at an unconscious level, he needed to retreat from his omnipresent involvement. Both outcomes were approached
by creating a split-off group of staff, the majority of whom were B team members, with whom he would work on the substitute primary task.

The split-off consulting part of the business was left to deal with the normative primary task (Lawrence 1985) of the business 'solving customers problems' as well as the many difficulties associated with the transitional state of the business, including an insufficient volume of sales and staff anxiety about the prospect of a 'Greg-less' future, plus the implications arising out of that for them. By withdrawing from his involvement in so many aspects of the business, Greg left 'holes in the boundary walls' which could not be filled by the managers he had appointed. As he was the person that was held collectively in high esteem, staff were dependent on Greg's presence as the 'glue' (Long 2000).

I hypothesise that the dependable father figure, on whom many staff had depended for their pastoral care needs was likely feeling guilty because of his abandonment of them through the sale. By pulling back from the business as a whole, Greg was not only pulling himself out of the business, he was also distancing himself from his betrayal of the 'family'. Also in order to assuage his guilt, he provided an alternative source of pastoral care, the MC's. I discuss this further in a later section on the MC role.

Although the restructure was predicated on logical reasoning, that is, the need for more sales, it undermined a system that had been held together adequately. Processes of splitting and projection are part of organisational life but, as the application of Klein's concept of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions to organisations (Obholzer and Roberts 1994) has shown, good and bad parts must somehow be held together in order for the organisation to survive. This case has illustrated the importance of the entrepreneur Greg and the associated system psychodynamics in holding the 'good' and 'bad' parts of ISPL together. As I will discuss in more detail in the next section, this particular restructure caused a fatal split. Like a building in which the load bearing structure is weakening, the structural change led to increasing instability and erosion of what had been ISPL.

6.6. Structural change

6.6.1. A 'different' restructure

Restructures occurred regularly in ISPL, so staff were familiar with adjusting to new roles and responsibilities. In any case, the coalitions that really mattered in terms of enabling consultants to do their work mostly operated independently of the structure. It has been said that restructuring is often propelled by dissatisfaction with the previous structure, yet old coalitions
persist because they 'get the job done' (Hirschhorn 2000). In the case of ISPL, these coalitions were with client organisations, with colleague consultants when a project involved more than one ISPL consultant and with any peers who could provide information needed to undertake the job. Direct reporting lines would change when the hierarchy of management roles was changed, as was the case during the research project, but Greg's involvement throughout the business was constant.

Hirschhorn (ibid.) asserts that structure provides a moral order that entails a 'set of obligations, promises, rights and duties that bind people together in a series of shared practices' (p. 163). People, he says, experience a sense of community through structure. Taken at face value this implies that a change of structure would upset the moral order. However, I have argued here that, in addition to the enduring coalitions, staff's sense of belonging and therefore of community was inextricably linked with Greg, the person, Greg's business and Greg's presence in the business. Greg reinforced this dynamic by maintaining a counterstructure, through his direct connections with staff. The moral order existed independently of formal structure.

This restructure was different from previous ones for two key reasons. First, it occurred at a time when there was a growing realisation that the ISPL world, as people had known it, was coming to an end and there was much associated anxiety. Second, it split sales from consulting. The consulting sub-system attempted to carry responsibility for the organisation's primary task, separately from the severed sales sub-system, which was primarily focussed on securing orders for the earn-out. Greg's e-mail to all staff, reproduced in chapter 5 (section 5.9.2), reinforced the importance of this substituted primary task.

Two particular roles merit further attention in this analysis because they were both located in the split-off consulting part of the business. These were the role held by Gillian as National Manager, Consulting Services and the MC role.

6.6.2. Split-off Roles in the New Structure

6.6.2.1. Gillian's role
The reader is reminded here, that Gillian was not a member of the case study group who originally contracted to participate in the research. Like Greg however, she has a strong presence inside the boundary of the research. It is important to note that she is represented in this report through her e-mails that were inbound to the group and through data relating to Gillian arising out of the research.
Gillian's role after the restructure effectively meant that she had been assigned the task of managing the consulting part of the business, while former Division Managers who were now PC's, concentrated on sales activity with Greg. It was also her job to 'bridge the gap' between sales and consulting.

Gillian had managed 'availability'6 prior to the restructure, so some of the formal responsibilities of her role did not change. However, as already discussed, and now explored further, Gillian was also part of the dynamic by which Greg sustained his 'dependable father figure' image. I argue that the task of managing the flow of work to the 'children' had been left to her and she had been drawn into a situation where she was unable to provide for everyone because there was often, during the case study, not enough 'food' to go around. In the absence of enough nourishing food in the form of interesting work, I was struck by the availability of what Menzies Lyth (1989) has called 'pleasure foods'. Chocolates and lollies7 were constantly available for consumption by staff, as if they would 'bridge the gap' which Menzies defines as 'not even primarily a hunger gap' but an issue of 'separation in our external and internal societies' (p. 64).

Gillian assumed that, even after the appointment of the MC's, all the consultants reported to her, even though the MC's had been assigned 'pastoral care' responsibilities. One is left with the question of whether it was feasible for her to be a 'good enough' mother to so many 'children' under such circumstances. Winnicott (1960) differentiates the 'good enough mother' from the 'not good enough mother' in terms of her ability to provide containment. Given that the MC's had been assigned pastoral care responsibilities and reported to Gillian, it appeared that Gillian did not take up her own authority for negotiating how respective responsibilities might be organised.

E-mail provided a means by which Gillian was able to manage herself in her role. She used it to deal with the consultants as a single entity. Her e-mails were addressed to 'all' and the availability spreadsheet represented individuals as '8 hour days'. It seemed that, through e-mail, Gillian was able to establish sufficient detachment from individuals to enable her to cope with her role. Menzies Lyth (1988) noted the 'detachment and denial of feelings' necessary for development of 'adequate professional detachment' in which, in order to take up a role, one needs to 'refrain from excessive involvement'. She asserts that reduction of individual distinctiveness aids detachment (pp. 51-56).

6 Availability was discussed in Chapter 2 and a definition is included in Appendix 1.
7 Lollies is an Australian term for 'candies' (U.S.) or 'sweets' (U.K.)
Gillian's detachment from the MC's was particularly evident. As noted in Chapter 5, they were not identified as MC's on the availability spreadsheet. Instead, individuals appointed to MC roles were listed with senior consultants. A regular hoped for meeting between the MC's and Gillian rarely took place. I maintain that it is significant that the MC's had been assigned pastoral care responsibilities, thereby relieving other roles of their pastoral care responsibilities. Concerns expressed by MC's about their role and how it would work in practice were unexplored and translated into Powerpoint presentations and 'bullet points' for circulation on e-mail. I argue that by dealing with emotional concerns through the provision of information via e-mail, Gillian defended against her own anxiety. It seems likely that she did not have the capacity to provide containment for the anxiety now in evidence in the consulting system. Neither Gillian nor the MC's were able to deal with this, not because of lack of technical management skills but because they were powerless to deal with the seismic shift in the system as a whole and the resultant uncontained anxiety.

Little wonder that her approach to managing the consultant group relied so heavily on long e-mail messages providing information. Likewise in her coaching of MC's in dealing with staff's job related concerns, Gillian's e-mails provided a finite list of alternative answers rather than leaving space for the people's real concerns to be worked through.

6.6.2.2. The MC Role
There were two MC's in the case study group, one of whom, Colin, was based in Melbourne and so face to face contact with him was possible. Much of the evidence presented in the case concerning MC's opinions emerged through my dealings with Colin, although I also had access to e-mail material, in which the views of other MC's were expressed.

The role of MC had been created for a purpose that, on the surface, seemed to be generally understood both by staff and by those assigned to MC roles in that there was an unfulfilled need for consulting staff to receive more 'pastoral care', a function which everyone agreed had not been successfully carried out in the past. The idea of creating small 'peer' groups of consultants, each containing a more experienced consultant, seemed logical enough on the surface. However, it was clearly difficult for anyone charged with billing responsibilities to find time to meet with peers individually and, as the research revealed, group meetings were even more problematic. The case study revealed that confusion about how the role could be taken up, given other competing objectives, persisted. How could intelligent people remain so confused for so long?
I contend that what was expressed as an inadequacy in one sub-group of the organisation, the MC's, can be much better understood if one looks at the psychodynamics of the system as a whole. On the one hand, they were expected to generate revenue eighty percent of the time, the same level as other consultants who did not carry pastoral care responsibilities. In addition, they were to undertake pastoral care responsibilities, which had not been done well in the past and had still not been clearly defined.

Over time, clues emerged about what was being projected onto this role. For example, Gillian stated in one of her e-mails that MC's were expected to:

'add value to their staff, to professional development of staff, to the Quality of Consultant's working lives and to the outcomes for consulting assignments'.

And that:

'MC's have a key role in managing change.'

It appeared that uncertainties about the organisation as a whole had been projected into the MC role. In the case, it emerged that ISPL was 'not good at managing change'. Yet the MC's were said to 'have a key role in managing change'. It seemed that, overall, the MC's had been assigned an impossible task.

As if this were known but not discussable, various parts of the system colluded to hide the role from view. It did not appear in the availability spreadsheet where MC's were listed as Senior Consultants. Meetings for MC's did not occur. Even when an agenda was assembled for a proposed MC meeting, there was no space to discuss the emotional impact on MC's of their appointment to the role or their struggle to take on responsibility for dealing with issues that had not been dealt with under the former structure. Even at the point when Greg commissioned one of the PC's to undertake a review of the MC role, the MC's still felt that they had not been able to express their concerns about the difficulties of the role. I came to the conclusion that commissioning a 'review' was an easy defence against the anxiety of finding out what it really meant to have been assigned pastoral care responsibilities. In the end, 'findings' about the review were provided to the MC's, via e-mail as a set of 'bullet point' information.

Like other management roles, the MC's had been set up as 'lame-duck' managers, a term used by Hirschhorn (2000) to symbolise the manager who has the trappings of authority. However, people do not feel loyal to that person or accountable to their demands. The role of MC had
been created in an environment in which ISPL was increasingly without the sustaining force of Greg's counterstructure or his capacity to contain the organisation as a whole. It seemed that although the leader was clearly withdrawing, the culture of dependency endured. The MC's found themselves unable to take up their own authority to define their role, blaming Gillian for cancelling MC meetings.

I contend that what was meant by 'pastoral care' had something to do with the provision of containment for consulting staff and I discuss the significance of this in 6.7. Before that, I will turn to the meaning of the restructure for the consultants as a whole.

6.6.3. The meaning of the restructure for consultants

The case study evidence points to this particular restructure being a source of much anxiety for staff at all levels. In 6.6.1. I argued that this restructure had much more impact than previous restructures. The new structure was one of the preoccupations brought to early group interviews. Most perplexing was that much of the confusion and uncertainty persisted for the duration of the case study. As noted in Chapter 5, a full six months after the research project began, staff insisted that they were still not clear on what the new structure all meant.

It seems unlikely that mature, experienced consultants were unable to understand the new structure in terms of reporting lines and role responsibilities. In any case, since Greg was known to be available for discussion, clarification could have been sought direct from him. I conclude that the evidence points to an unconscious flight from the reality of what was happening. A future without Greg was too painful to contemplate, so staff avoided dealing with the issues which would have meant confronting that reality, including the meaning of the restructure.

In parallel with needing to deal with the restructure, the earn-out had major implications for consulting staff. Notably it was a major threat to the protective 'family' environment. Prior to the earn-out, although '80%' had been the official expectation, it was well known that the organisation in general and Greg in particular, was flexible, particularly if one had a good relationship with him. His assertion to me that 'nobody has ever lost their job for being on the bench here', however, was denied by some members of staff who provided examples of where that was not the case. It was also belied by the termination of Keith and Patricia from the case study group, suggesting that the assumed extent of his benevolence may have been fantasy. Nevertheless, the collective view had been that there was flexibility around the 80% level.
Now earn-out achievement meant that there was no flexibility in financial targets and all consultants would have to perform to financial expectations. Consultants were treated as a revenue generating resource and, unlike factory machinery there was no need to allow for 'maintenance' because the 'consulting machine' would be abandoned to the new owner at the end of the earn-out.

The combined effect of the transitional state of the business from ISPL to GTC, the associated pursuit of the earn-out and the restructure combined to create a working environment in which there was greater uncertainty and more sources of work related anxiety but significantly less provision for containment. In 6.7 which concludes the body of this chapter, I discuss the implications of loss of containment in ISPL and the associated impact of e-mail use.

### 6.7. Containment of anxiety and the socio-technical system

#### 6.7.1. The significance of containment for effective work

In Chapter 3, I discussed the significance of emotions, such as anxiety, in the workplace, the relevance of the social part of the socio-technical system, the importance of attention to sentient needs and the containment of anxiety necessary for effective organisational functioning. In this section, I discuss the approach to dealing with emotions in ISPL, the way in which sentient needs were met and the extent to which a containing environment existed during the period of the case study. The involvement of e-mail in each of these elements is considered.

#### 6.7.2. Emotions and anxiety in ISPL

Rationality and logic was central to the consulting work in ISPL, which was defined as 'solving customers' problems'. Staff were encouraged to follow procedures, to comply with documented quality standards and to search for precedents when new work seemed unfamiliar. I noticed that ISPL staff would apologise for 'being emotional' as though emotions were 'error' to be excluded from the business as one would seek to eliminate faults from a production process. It appeared that negative emotions were seen as 'the interference factor' (Hopfl and Linstead 1997 p. 6), something to be excluded from the business lest it become a contaminant. There seemed to be a view that 'negative feelings' and 'emotional stuff' could be left out of the workplace and that performance would benefit as a result.

However, in his role as the dependable father, Greg recognised that this was not always feasible so although he encouraged staff to 'leave emotional issues out of the business', he made himself available for private discussion if necessary. This was exemplified when Gillian and
Colin copied Greg on their e-mail exchanges about how to deal with Mark's concerns, and then Greg offered to deal directly with Mark if they needed him to do so.

The case material suggests that 'pastoral care' may, in the minds of those who used the term, have had something to do with emotional issues in that it was variously described as 'managing change', and 'adding value to consultants lives', the matters it appeared could not be dealt with through existing processes and procedures. If this is what was meant by pastoral care then it is little surprise that division managers had not handled it adequately - emotions had to be denied or taken to Greg.

In reality, there was much difficult emotion in the business. The case illustrated how organisational life at ISPL presented consultants with the multiple sources of anxiety, many of which would have existed prior to the sale of the business; the need to act as an 'expert' consultant and the revenue generation expectations are examples. The sale added new sources of anxiety; the impending loss of ISPL's identity, the uncertain career future and the increased revenue generation expectations were all examples. Furthermore the shifting system psychodynamics associated with Greg's withdrawal from the business further increased the emotional material. In this respect Armstrong described the organisation as an object, which 'functions as a point of origin of psychic experience - in its own right' (Armstrong 2000 p.9). By extension I argue that the emotion associated with Greg's shifting relationship with the business had arisen not out of the work, but out of the organisation itself.

For consultants, there was no sanctioned place or time to deal with work-related anxieties that impinged on individuals' capacity to work. The organisation was dealing with its consulting staff as though they were machines, capable of turning out the required level of output regardless of the issues that might be draining their emotional and psychological energy. I postulate that this led to the 'coffee shop' meetings and the enthusiasm for 'lunches' and any other social events because, in the minds of staff, these events were outside of the work, which was defined as eight hour, billable days and therefore one could be 'emotional'.

When organisations attempt to exclude feelings in favour of rationality, emotions must be defended against, resulting in states of denial and projection of feelings onto others (Hopfl and Linstead, ibid). The case illustrated how feelings were projected onto Gillian and other managers, onto GTC and sometimes into cyberspace as in the example of the 'soap box' e-mails, and the e-mails from staff to someone outside the business, expressing their frustration about the organisation. As illustrated in the case, this was often a prelude to flight from the firm.
Sometimes attempts were made to transform the emotional into rational material. The distillation of the problems being experienced by the MC's into 'communication problems' is an example.

Often emotions are aroused by the task but spill over elsewhere (Armstrong 2000). One of Gillian's tasks was to optimise the revenue that could be derived from the consulting population, using the 'availability spreadsheet'. I have noted how she defended against her own anxiety by dealing with the consultants as if they were a single entity or as units of '8 hour days'. Whilst this enabled Gillian to deal with the emotional challenge of her task, the effect spilt over into the consultants.

The expectation that an individual's emotional responses could be split off and 'left outside' constrains the development of sentient functioning where social and emotional bonds develop among staff (Czander 1993). This is not to say that sentient needs were not addressed at all. In the next section I turn to a discussion of how sentient needs were dealt with in ISPL and then, in 6.7.4. to a discussion of the extent to which anxiety was contained.

6.7.3. Sentient Need fulfilment

As discussed in the context of the conceptual framework in Chapter 3, people have a need for affiliation and identity and this holds true in the workplace. Both their work and the environment in which people work have the potential to satisfy or deprive the individual of sentient need satisfaction (Miller and Rice 1967). It has been said that both task and sentient needs can be aligned within the organisation and that socio-technical systems are most effective when technical and sentient systems are aligned (Susman 1983).

To a great extent, it was impractical for them to be aligned in ISPL's consulting activities because of the nature of the work and the fact that consultants often worked away from colleagues and more connected with client organisations than ISPL. However this is the reality of consulting work, and, assuming that they were engaged in absorbing work, it can be assumed that some sentient need satisfaction for the individual was derived in the customer's environment.

In contrast with their more senior colleagues, the Associate Consultants (AC's) were the 'learners' in the organisation. The AC group comprised much younger people, 'Generation Y' (Washburn 2000) individuals with tertiary qualifications who were employed for a year's 'internship'. They met regularly as a group for professional development purposes and the
importance of this time was recognised in the firm. However there seemed to be an assumption that the more experienced consultants did not need such a facility.

Managers had more opportunities for sentient need satisfaction than did the consultants. Before the restructure, Division Managers met regularly with Greg, to discuss their management work and after the restructure, the PC group comprised most of the same individuals. Such meetings can also be a refuge from the pressures of work (Stokes 1996). Another source of sentience for these people is that they had almost all been with the firm for a long time and had been early recruits into Greg's burgeoning business, the 'consulting peers' from the early days. It is noteworthy that the split-off sales group after the restructure was the core of the original business.

An equivalent opportunity for sentient time did not occur for the MC's, who, although each was faced with a similar challenge, to provide pastoral care, on which they might have been able to support each other, had to assign top priority to their revenue generation responsibilities. Although referred to as a group, the MC's, rarely met as a group. Like the consultants, the pressure to be billable led to them being away from the common office space much of the time.

The contrast between management's opportunities to meet and that afforded the consulting staff and the MC's seems to be paralleled by management's use of e-mail for discussion between them and staff's avoidance of its use. I argue here that e-mail was used by managers as a support for the sentience dynamics that could develop in face to face meetings whereas consultants did not have a similar basis on which to build sentient need satisfaction, in the context of the work, with peers. Furthermore, aware of the emotional impact of others' e-mail on them, they mostly avoided proactively using it within the firm for anything other than information sharing. The e-mail exchanges between MC's, from which quotations have been cited in Chapter 5, were unusual in their expressions of their frustrations about the role.

In contrast with the constrained use for business purposes, consultants used the e-mail system to sustain communications with friends and other contacts outside the firm, presumably relationships in which some individual sentient needs were satisfied, although probably not sentient needs that aligned with the work of ISPL. Situations where staff's involvement in e-mail communications extends to matters unrelated to a business has been described as the technological system having a 'dynamic life of its own' (Aram 1998). Aram (ibid.) discusses the 'informal shadow system' which is emerging from technology use. In ISPL's case, this may have provided alternative sentient need satisfaction that could not, due to the operational constraints described here, be dealt with adequately inside the business.
It was also noted in the case that e-mail provided other distractions away from the life of the firm; participants in the study were members of newsgroups and other on-line communities which generated inbound e-mail on matters of interest to the individual. While this did not necessarily address sentient needs other than those of the individual recipient, they may have satisfied some individual needs, given the circumstances of the work.

E-mail also supported the sentient life of the counterstructure, maintaining a link between every staff member and Greg, largely independently of the formal structure. This suited staff who saw Greg as the ultimate authority and enabled them to circumnavigate the formal structure when they felt the need. As described earlier, these interactions with Greg were welcomed for their direct connection with the founder.

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, this organisation was characterised by an absence of work based groups due to the nature of operations. This section has illustrated how, despite that, there were opportunities for sentient need satisfaction, although it appears that this was more readily achieved by managers than consultants. Attention to the sentient needs of the organisation enables the person as a whole to be accommodated into the way the work and the organisation is thought about, including emotions. Theoretically, when emotions are contained, the organisation as a whole can operate from the depressive position (Klein 1985), which was discussed in Chapter 3.

6.7.4. Containment of anxiety in ISPL

It has been pointed out that organisations need to be in the depressive position in order to operate effectively in emerging settings (Krantz 1998). The evidence has shown that, even before the sale, ISPL as a functioning socio-technical system, involved much splitting and projection. This has been discussed in detail in the context of the entrepreneur and the associated system psychodynamics.

However, despite the splitting of good and bad objects, the organisation survived and grew successfully for many years. In this section, I argue that, until the reorganisation and the resultant effects discussed here, there was enough containment in the organisation as a whole for it to function. Despite the boundarylessness that has been discussed in detail, and despite the extent of anxiety provoking influences, the system held together.

The role of the manager at the boundary of a system, as discussed in Chapter 3, has been extended to incorporate the creation of a 'holding organisational environment' (Nutkevitch
1998). Borrowing from Winnicott (1960), he uses the term 'good enough container' to define the managed system's potential to hold and deal with anxieties arising in or brought into the workplace. The manager's role includes not only management of the boundary but also the provision of a containing function. He asserts that a good enough container is a 'shock absorber'.

This case has shown Greg had created a company wide container in which he took responsibility for shaping meaning by framing staff's experience and fostering a culture of dependency. Within this environment, the organisation itself provided a 'sense of psychological and emotional containment' because staff were able to 'project unwanted parts of themselves onto other parts of the organisation' (Stokes 1994 pp. 123-124). In ISPL this was sometimes onto one of Greg's 'lieutenants' and increasingly, as the organisation started to become part of GTC, onto the new owner.

It has been said that certain conditions are necessary for management to be in a position to be a reliable container (Obholzer and Roberts 1994, Stokes 1996). First, there should be clarity around the primary task. Second, roles need to be planned in a way that is consistent with the primary task. The reorganisation, resulting from earn-out needs, violated both these conditions. First, Greg and the PC's shifted their focus onto the substituted primary task and second, roles in the new structure had been created to deal with, in the case of the PC's, earn-out related issues and in the case of the MC's, with Greg's need to withdraw from the business.

The divisional structure that existed prior to the latest restructure had integrated the sales and consulting sub-systems. Division managers each carried sales responsibilities and were responsible for 'feeding' the consultants with work. In addition they were assigned to the management of a division, alongside Greg's involvement as discussed earlier in this chapter. That management system and the accompanying Greg related dynamics had provided a 'good enough' container. Greg himself had carried projected hope for the future of ISPL, managing the boundary between the relative certainty of life inside ISPL and the turbulent market outside, holding the organisation together. As the case has shown, the combination of the shift in Greg's focus, following the sale of the business and the associated restructure, led to the rapid disintegration of the system.

6.8. Conclusion

This chapter began with an examination of the difference between the originally intended focus for the study and its ultimate scope, explaining the factors that both led to the changed focus and helped shape the study over time. The nature of the business transition was considered in
terms of its effect on the organisational system as a whole, with particular attention paid to earn-
out related matters. The shifting role of the entrepreneur as the sale progressed was explored in
detail, in terms of its effect on the business in general and members of the case study group in
particular. The compounding effect of the restructure, given the other changes discussed, was
examined.

The nature of work and organisation related anxiety was explored, contrasting conditions before
and after the sale, and the extent to which containment of anxiety was both possible and
achieved was examined.

Throughout, e-mail's involvement in the socio-technical system has been illustrated.

Ultimately, this chapter has shown that the compound effect of the changes taking place in the
business resulted in a system that had been adequately contained becoming unstable and, in the
absence of management attention to contain what had become uncontained, the system rapidly
disintegrated.

The case study analysis now continues in Chapter 7, in which I discuss the effects of e-mail on
members of this case study organisation.
Chapter 7. The effects of e-mail on members of the organisation

7.1. Introduction

Chapter Six presented a detailed analysis of the case study, framed within a view of the whole organisation, centring on its transitional state and the factors that were found to have influenced the system as a whole. E-mail's involvement in this holistic perspective was discussed. This present chapter returns to the original question that was the catalyst for this research project and to which I referred in setting out the research aims in 1.3; that is, my curiosity around the impact of e-mail on the day to day working lives of organisational members. To some degree, this question has been addressed in Chapter 6, where discussion of e-mail use by individuals was involved in illustrations of system-wide effects. However, as this was an action research based project, the original question was progressively displaced along the way with new questions that emerged as the research unfolded. In the end, a cogent presentation of the analysis at the level of the organisation pushed aside a more specific analysis of what this study revealed about the impact of e-mail on individuals. In this chapter I deal more thoroughly with that perspective, referring to material already presented in the case and its analysis but focussing here specifically on individual effects.

The body of this chapter begins in 7.2 with some concepts that were introduced in the conceptual framework in Chapter 3. These are further explicated here to provide the basis for the subsequent discussion of individual e-mail effects. In this respect I begin with the idea of the 'organisation-in-the-mind' (Hutton, Bazalgette, and Reed 1997) before going on to discuss a particular aspect of organisation, that is, role. I extend the discussion of role as distinct from person or position in a hierarchy, which was presented in Chapter 3, with an exploration of the relatedness of roles to each other in an organisational setting. The concept of relatedness is then considered further in terms of its broader significance in organisational life. An important distinction is made between 'relatedness' and 'relationship'.

Against this extended framework and drawing on case study data, I discuss the part played by e-mail in developing, sustaining or altering the 'organisation-in-the-mind', role development, relatedness and relationships. The analysis incorporates exploration of the influence of an individual's inner world on their performance in work roles. A particular aspect of individuals' inner world is examined further, in that the multiple sources of anxiety, which were considered in Chapter 6 in the context of the organisation as a whole, are brought to the fore in an analysis of e-mail's involvement in individuals' responses to their own and others' anxiety.
This chapter concludes with some reflections on the usefulness to contemporary, e-mail enabled organisations, of the theories that have provided the framework for this chapter. This penultimate chapter is followed by Chapter 8, 'Reflections on the Study', which incorporates some suggestions for further research.

7.2. Elaborations to the conceptual framework

In this section, I refer back to the concepts presented in Chapter 3, building on them now as a basis for discussing the individual impact of e-mail. In addition to teasing out the concept of 'organisation-in-the-mind' and the idea of organisational role, I examine the significance of 'relatedness', a term that, in conjunction with its derivative, 'interrelatedness' has been an important aspect of this thesis throughout preceding chapters. I explore the meaning of relatedness to members of the case study group and its representations in their 'organisation-in-the-mind'. In section 7.3 I discuss e-mail's involvement in these aspects of organisational functioning in ISPL.

7.2.1. The 'Organisation-in-the-Mind'

As noted in Chapter 3, people routinely construct organisational models within themselves that reflect their own personal reality. The term 'organisation-in-the-mind' has been defined as 'what the individual perceives in his or her head of how activities and relations are organised, structured and connected internally' and is seen as 'internal to oneself' (Hutton, Bazalgette, and Reed 1997 p. 114). Since individual 'organisational role analyses' (Reed 1976) with participants were not included in the data gathering methods for this study, attributions are not made here about the 'organisation-in-the-mind' of particular individuals. However the data supports the following three hypotheses that in my view characterise the 'organisation-in-the-mind' that was shared by my informants.

First, on the basis of the evidence presented in Chapters 5 and 6, it seems that introjected parts of the relationship with Greg, evoking internal parental figures, dominated staff members' 'organisation-in-the-mind'. Indeed, drawing on Hutton's (2002) distinction between 'organisation' and 'institution', it seems that ISPL was in several other respects felt to be like an institution such as a family. Hutton asserts that the 'organisation-in-the-mind' is 'a conscious or pre-conscious construct, formed around emotional experience of tasks, roles, purposes, rituals, accountability, competence, failure, success' and that it 'calls for management'. The 'institution-in-the-mind' is defined as 'an unconscious construct, focused around the emotional experience of ideals, values, hopes, beliefs, dreams, symbols, birth, life, death' and it requires leadership (Hutton ibid. p. 1). She exemplifies this distinction with the single term 'nuclear family' in which
'nuclear' reflects the 'organisation-in-the-mind' and 'family' the 'institution-in-the-mind'. The institutional aspects of the 'in-the-mind' experience of ISPL staff are evidenced in the assertions by various staff members that ISPL had 'different values' from GTC and beliefs that Greg, the symbolic father figure would provide for staff's needs. Greg was seen as the dependable father figure and he had been the traditional source of containment in the life of this firm. Therefore, although consulting staff predominantly worked away from the 'family' setting, they did so, safe in the knowledge that Greg, with whom they strongly identified, would provide for them and would always be there when they returned. His regular e-mails supported this assumption.

Second, regardless of staff's individual sense of personal authority, their participation in an organisation that was partially defined by Greg's 'inflated sense of self' (Gould 1993), meant that each role and even tasks within roles, involved Greg or at least parts of Greg, as he was represented in people's minds. In the discussion in Chapter 6 of Greg's entrepreneurial style and its implications, I argued that working in this organisation meant relinquishing personal and organisational authority in response to Greg's desire for control. My own experience was that Greg was omnipresent both in a physical sense and as a virtual presence in the cyberspace environment I observed. I found that my own counter-transference in the field-work, both when I was physically in the office and when working on the project through my e-mail connection, involved father-like figures. I believe that my feeling of being silenced in his presence resulted in part from this dynamic and, as the case showed, this paralleled an internal organisation dynamic. For example, the managing consultants were unable to find a voice to express deeply felt concerns about their new role. The space for a working through of these concerns did not seem to exist. Then, a series of initiatives, such as the repeated reviews ordered by Greg, was imposed on them, further closing down any space for them to be heard.

Third, staff defended against the potentially painful reality that ISPL had been sold and that the organisation, as staff had known it, would cease to exist. The 'organisation-in-the-mind' seemed to include a firm boundary around what was ISPL, thereby defining what was not ISPL, the latter including the new owner, GTC. This hypothesis is supported by the apparent absence of any attempts by case study group members to explore the new ownership and what it would mean for them and phantasies about the 'bad' relatedness between ISPL and GTC, typified in the case study by one participant's assertion that:

"All the GTC people have done to date to contribute to our working lives is to help propagate viruses and junk mail!"
Contemplating the meaning of new ownership would have forced staff to deal with impending separation from Greg and the associated safety. During the data collection period, GTC was often mentioned but it was always in the context of being other than ISPL, as if its separateness was a constant. As argued in Chapter 6, GTC was seen as a bad object, outside of the 'organisation-in-the-mind' that centred on Greg, onto which uncontained anxieties were projected. Although staff spoke at length about the re-organisation within ISPL and associated difficulties, equivalent attention was not paid to GTC and the impending need to find and to take up a role in the new organisation's structure. The 'GTC-in-the-mind' was shaped and sustained largely through inbound e-mail content. Hence individuals could not easily test their unconscious projections against reality. Subsequently Greg's 'goodness' became amplified, thus magnifying the relative 'badness' of GTC, as staff saw it.

I now postulate that the collective incapacity to shift responsibility for pastoral care to the managing consultants, or even, for the most part, to acknowledge the role, was further evidence of the organisation's resistance to, and anxiety about, separation from Greg and that it arose out of the 'organisation-in-the-mind' that has been discussed here. I explore this further in 7.2.2.

7.2.2. **Organisational Role**

The distinction between role and individual was discussed in Chapter 3 in the context of boundaries and their importance in terms of organisational functioning and management of organisational systems and sub-systems. The idea of role has been further defined by Reed (2000) as something that is dynamic in that it 'is the patterning of ideas by which a person organises their behaviour in relation to a specific situation, seen as a system' (p. 3). He argues that role is 'never static' and that it is managed by the individual in a continuous process of 'finding, making and taking' (ibid. p. 4) organisational role or roles. Reed points out that 'finding' a role involves identification of system boundaries, 'making' the role involves understanding both the context of the system and how the system functions, and 'taking' the role necessitates the role holder making conscious decisions about 'how to behave in order to achieve the task of that system'. Each element of the role related process is influenced both consciously and unconsciously by the 'organisation-in-the-mind'.

My own experience of finding, making and taking the role of action researcher is illustrative of the significance of Reed's concepts. From the outset, as discussed in Chapter 4, (Design and Method, it was my intention to take up the role of researcher and, in preparing for the work, I had thought about what this would mean in terms of my conduct in the work and the relatedness between my role and the roles of others who would be involved in the research. I was conscious of the potential to be pulled out of role and in 4.2.3 discussed some important
role boundaries. During the preparatory stages of the research, this all seemed straightforward enough. However, as the research project unfolded, I found myself being increasingly drawn into paying a great deal of attention to Greg; more, it seemed, than his agreed role of sponsor of the research, necessitated. It was as if he were also a member of the group of participants, even though we had agreed that he would not be. Clearly an interpersonal relationship between myself and the managing director of the case study organisation had a place in the research project as a whole but it seemed that Greg became omnipresent in the research as he was in the organisation. In the on-going work of finding, making and taking a role as researcher I experienced the tensions that are involved, the difficulties of staying in role and the implications of violating role boundaries. Another example is my experience of being drawn into a 'listener' role when my informants used interview time to talk about concerns that could not be expressed within the organisation. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that, in the first example, the boundaries of the sponsor role had been violated and in the second example, I had fallen out of researcher role. Neither situation arose wholly out of a conscious decision; rather each situation arose in part out of the effects of unconscious processes and had to be managed in the here and now.

Seen in this context, the difficulties faced by the newly appointed Managing Consultants are further illuminated. They were consciously aware of having been assigned responsibility for pastoral care but this was in a system in which organisational authority was, to a great extent, retained by Greg and in which therefore, defining the boundary of the system in which pastoral care was to be managed, presented complex challenges. The difficulty of finding, making and taking the role of managing consultant is belied by the organisation chart view that was reproduced in Chapter 2 and utilised in ISPL to announce these and other new roles to staff. This is because, although everyone was consciously aware of the new organisation structure, it was more comfortable to construe the organisation as Greg's family, and to hold the associated belief that he was the provider of pastoral care.

In most organisations, work involves contributions from multiple role holders and work outcomes are achieved through role holders working together and communicating with each other. It can be said that individual work experience is a function of relations between organisational roles; that is, roles are related to each other.

7.2.3. Role Relatedness

Relatedness can be usefully seen as a linking of roles in the context of task and is differentiated from personal relationships (Reed 2000). An example of role relatedness from the case study is in the interactions between the role of founder and the other shareholders on the task of selling
the company. Another example is in the efforts of the National Manager, Consulting Staff to track and manage billable hours worked by consulting staff, each party making a contribution to the task of recording and measuring financial performance. These however are my examples of roles, tasks and relatedness. To ISPL staff at all levels, roles were seen as synonymous with positions in a hierarchy rather than in the dynamic 'person taking up role' configuration described by Reed. It is said that when people are working in role, it becomes possible to relate to other roles through the shared task (Reed, ibid.). In ISPL, there appeared to be no distinction between Gillian in her role that involved managing billable hours and Gillian the whole person. Equally, Greg’s various roles as owner, seller of a business, Managing Director, Principal Consultant and provider of counselling support to staff were undifferentiated. This contributed to the dominance in this business of relationships over role relatedness.

Relationships are also important in business and develop both within and outside of organisational roles. On the basis of data obtained in this study, ISPL’s day to day functioning was based extensively on relationships. It was seen to be very important for consultants to lobby with appropriate others for work they found interesting. Also they were encouraged build 'good working relationships' with those whose job it was to secure new contracts for work (initially the division managers and later the principal consultants).

Reed (ibid.) has emphasised the value to business of differentiating relatedness from interpersonal relationships. He argues that by relating to each other at work through their organisational roles, people will avoid being 'preoccupied with cultivating personal relationships' (p. 6) and will frame relations with others in the context of respective roles and responsibilities, rather than in terms of interpersonal relationships. At the same time, Reed (ibid.) acknowledges that in business, 'great emphasis is placed on developing good personal relationships'. In ISPL it seemed that relationships were a dominant factor in building relatedness between people in their various roles.

I will argue in 7.3 that the dominance of relationship building over management of self in role was a key factor in the manner in which e-mail was used in this organisation.

Other dimensions of relatedness are equally significant in organisational life and relevant to the e-mail focussed discussion in this chapter and I turn to them now.

7.2.4. Other dimensions of relatedness

Relatedness can be thought about in the context of the organisation as a whole. Relatedness between individuals and the organisation as a whole has been explored in depth by Stapley and
The System Psychodynamics of E-mail: A Case Study

Roberts (1996), who discuss the changing relatedness of employees to their employing organisations, particularly in light of the turbulent economic and financial environment. They note the fusion between self esteem, sense of worth and work identity (ibid. p. 1) and the accompanying sense by many employees of a need to prepare for the possibility of being discarded by the organisation either by loss of a job or by their becoming part of an outsourced service. 'Psychological withdrawal from work' therefore appears to be a prudent, self-protective undertaking for most employees in the early twenty-first century. In ISPL however, it seems that staff did not protect themselves in this manner, rather they retained a strong psychological attachment to their original employer, denying the reality of a rapidly changing employer identity. When staff did leave, they seemed to do so as a flight from the feared unknown. The case showed that staffs' relatedness to ISPL was defined in part by their identification with Greg as the founder and their collusion with the dependency dynamic discussed earlier. Also relatedness was strongly bound up with relationships. The general lack of discernment between what they could expect, as employees, from Greg in his role as Managing Director and what they unconsciously wished for from their relationship with Greg, as the idealised father figure, diminished their capacity to face the reality of the changing ownership. Also, the absence of appropriate differentiation between interactions with Gillian on tasks such as 'managing resources' and the phantasised relationship with her as the 'bad' mother inhibited effective role relations.

Civin (2000) has noted the relatedness of humans to their non-human environment in general and the environment created by technology in particular, arguing that, in the mind of the technology user, the distinction between what is human and what is non-human is often confused, with human qualities being ascribed to technology. He labels this dedifferentiation. I refer to this particular dimension of relatedness in the discussion of e-mail's impact that follows.

7.3. The effect of e-mail

Having elaborated on the conceptual framework, I turn now to a discussion of the impact of e-mail on individuals as it emerged in this case.

7.3.1. The effect of e-mail on the 'organisation-in-the-mind'

At whatever stage in its life one joined ISPL, it would have been, to some degree, like joining a family, headed by a strong parental figure. Even as the family expanded over the years, it seemed that Greg’s position at the apex of the hierarchy remained firm as did his presence throughout the business. Whilst the former was assured by the power associated with his majority shareholding, his omnipresence was sustained in part by the e-mail system. Given the dispersed nature of the place of work for all staff, including Greg, the e-mail system enabled him
to be in contact at any time with other staff, indeed with all staff, regardless of where their respective work activities located them physically.

Civin (ibid.) has pointed out that e-mail advances a synecdoche in that we 'attempt to communicate the entirety of our experience by parts that represent it' and 'to transform the fragmentary into the whole' (p. 32). I argue here for the effect of Greg's e-mails rather than his intent, in that in terms of staff's 'organisation-in-the-mind', Greg was with them wherever they happened to be. I noted in the case how often his name entered a conversation even though he had not featured in my question, and in this present discussion of e-mail, I posit that whether or not it was his intent, his use of e-mail sustained his centrality to staff's 'organisation-in-the-mind' and kept him 'in mind' as they went about their work. No matter how large the organisation became, e-mail use created a powerful illusion that he was in contact with all staff at any time. I refer to this as an illusion because in reality it was the words as Greg had entered them into the e-mail system, that represented him for the recipient.

In parallel with my interpretation of staff's experience, I noticed that as I read his e-mails in the isolation of my evening's reading on the screen, he was there in my mind's eye, saying the words I was reading on the screen, in the manner that had become familiar when I came across him in the physical office space. It was 'as if' he was there and in this respect I had experienced what Civin (2000) called dedifferentiation'.

Would this dynamic have been sustained without the parallel physical presence? Staff were expected to be in the office when not doing billable work and on those occasions would have likely engaged in some sort of interaction with Greg; an experience of the 'whole Greg', later reinforced by his virtual representation. This was always the case for me on my visits to the office when, whether or not my appointment was with Greg, I would come across him. I therefore regularly experienced the 'whole Greg', who later came to mind as I read his e-mails, inbound to members of the case study group.

Whilst the data from this study does not support a detailed exploration of the question that introduced the preceding paragraph, staff members' experience of me provides an interesting contrast. Although case study members had all agreed to my access to their e-mail messages, I was informed on several occasions that they had forgotten I was 'there'. One day, one of the group members quipped that he ought to have a photograph of me next to his screen as a reminder. Apart from the obvious difference in power and influence in the organisation between Greg and myself in my role as researcher, I argue here that e-mail seems to have amplified Greg's physical being as a performer's presence is amplified through sound and vision.
technology in a stadium. The researcher could be likened to the shadowy figures who change
the stage setting for the performer; they are seen but not held in mind for long.

Sometimes Greg's e-mails would indicate the particular role that he was in. For example, I
noticed that when he sent an e-mail to all staff on a matter that related to the role of Managing
Director, he would include in the subject line 'From the office of the Principal'. On other
occasions the distribution list would imply his role; for example on financial matters associated
with the sale, he would send e-mails to the 'B team', which comprised all other shareholders.
These examples could be thought of as 'e-mail bounded groups', and are illustrative of the
possibilities for differentiating between roles on e-mail. However, this was a setting in which
the general predominance of relationship over role relatedness would have prevailed in any case.

Data emerging from this study suggests that the idea of 'organisation-in-the-mind' is useful from
another perspective, that of the other organisations brought to mind as a result of e-mail. This
is particularly relevant in this organisation because, as noted in Chapter 2, staff were encouraged
to use e-mail for private, that is, non-ISPL purposes. I observed exchanges with family
members, with former university colleagues and with a range of other organisations, none of
which, it seemed, had any bearing on the work of ISPL. Members of the case study group were
found to be members of e-mail bounded groups, some of which were vast, and the only
common task appeared to be the receipt of jokes. Formal e-mail policies often ban participation
in such groups yet participation persists. I noted in the case how often individual contributions
were footnoted with the official 'e-mail disclaimer' from the employing organisation. What I
deem significant with respect to such circulated material is not the widespread contempt for
company policy but the possibility that ISPL consultants may have felt more a part of such e-
mail bounded groups than they felt part of the consulting groups that had been formed in the
reorganisation.

This leads to a question about the extent to which, in an e-mail mediated environment, one
might be constantly 'pulled' into other organisations and other groups. I believe that for ISPL
staff this would have been a complex issue since the boundaries that might have served to
separate work roles from other roles were largely absent; the '24 by 7' working day, the working
in customers' sites and the liberal e-mail policy may all have contributed to what I call here
'organisational conflict'. Nevertheless, it would seem that for many years, there had been an
adequate gravitational force centring on Greg to hold the organisation together despite the
'boundarylessness' (Hirschhorn and Gilmore 1992) of working conditions.
In the case I noted the apparent resistance to my attempts to explore whether and how staff consciously dealt with this seemingly boundaryless e-mail world in which they were all involved, a world that had the potential to fragment them into the 'bits' that belonged to the various organisations represented by individual e-mail messages. The defensiveness against this exploration was evidenced in responses such as "the 24*7 challenge is just status quo ... and the solution is in me". I suggest it was also a defence against the fragmentation possibilities of e-mail when consultants avoided its use, even though it held the potential to support them in their work roles and relatedness between work roles.

7.3.2. The effect of e-mail through roles, relationships and relatedness

Building effective relationships and relating to others for the purpose of work presents particular difficulties in an organisation like ISPL. Since the organisation's work necessitated that staff work in geographically dispersed locations for much of the time, the opportunities for face to face contact were very limited. In contrast with the characterisation of contemporary organisations in Chapter 1, in which, quoting Aram (1998), I noted that 'email has led to a distancing of colleagues from each other', in this organisation, the work itself involved a physical distancing of colleagues from each other. Consultants were obliged to work largely in the absence of colleagues, and managers had to manage largely in the absence of consultants. Despite the circumstances, it became apparent in the case study that survival in this organisation depended on consultants attending to relationships with colleagues at all levels.

For example, it was necessary to be seen to be a 'team player' and the early loss of two members of staff from the case study group evidenced the result of failure to deal adequately with this aspect of becoming part of the 'family'. Although the case illustrated the contempt shown for other managers in contrast with Greg's idealised status, one imagines that staff would have understood the politics associated with the senior management group. Although Greg clearly held the power, he would have depended on his 'lieutenants' for information about day to day staff performance. Building good relationships with the lieutenants, with other staff and with Greg was critical for survival.

On the surface then, it seems that e-mail technology provided a means by which at least some level of appropriate relationship and relatedness could be maintained. It could be thought of as 'better than nothing' in the same way that a letter or phone call can be seen as a 'better than nothing' substitute for people who would prefer to be physically in the same place but circumstances prevent it.
The case revealed that managers habitually availed themselves of the connectivity potential of e-mail in their 'all staff' e-mails. Also managers used it extensively to communicate with each other but paradoxically, the consultants, who were most likely to be working away from colleagues, actively avoided using it to initiate contact with colleagues or for contact with managers. I experienced the result of this avoidance myself when my attempts to exchange e-mails with case study group members were frustrated and I had to resort to telephone calls.

I hypothesise that there is a connection between this 'e-mail avoidance' phenomenon and the eager acceptance by staff of any opportunity for a face to face encounter with colleagues. In the case I noted the preference for off-site coffee shop meetings and staff members' keenness to attend lunchtime meetings, including the lunchtime focus group session that I organised towards the end of the field-work. I postulate here that staff 'knew' at some level, partly conscious, partly unconscious, that the maintenance of relationships using e-mail was fraught with danger. As Civin (ibid.) points out, despite technology's capacity to enable connections between people, 'we remain between the fragmented and the whole, between connection and isolation' (p. 32-33). Given the fragmented nature of most of their existence in this organisation, the attraction of a connection with whole persons seems compelling.

In their responses to my queries about their infrequent use, case study group members insisted that e-mail was not appropriate when issues were 'complex or emotional'. By inference therefore, most matters were deemed to be complex or emotional. Members had told me that they were aware of the 'flaming' potential of e-mail (Aram 1998, Turkle 1995) and seemed to fear that greater participation in e-mail mediated discussion would lead to this. I make a connection now between their stance on this matter and Greg's mandate that 'emotions' did not belong inside the organisation. I suggest that, since Greg was omnipresent in their e-mail world, along with other managers who were likely seen to be policing his policies, e-mail may have been seen in a collective phantasy as a very unsafe place to express oneself. However carefully one words an e-mail, the recipient's response is unpredictable and uncontrollable; it may invoke unintended responses in the recipient and those responses are not available for working through in the here and now. An example of unintended responses to e-mails is the 'all staff' e-mails from GTC and from Gillian. GTC e-mails can be though of as emerging out of their role as new owner, Gillian's out of her role as National Manager, Consulting Staff. However in both cases those mass mailings were interpreted against the unconscious dynamics that have been discussed in this chapter. In contrast with an e-mail mediated exchange, the face to face encounters that staff sought, were seen as the place where relationships could most safely be built and therefore the relatedness necessary for task performance could be nurtured.
I further argue here that the combined effect of a strong emphasis on relationships in this business, coupled with an apparent absence of attention to role as it has been defined here was a significant factor in consultants' e-mail avoidance. Roles, in the sense of 'job' or position in a hierarchy, were clear; for example, consultant or managing consultant. However, an understanding of role in the sense of 'person-in-role' and the dynamic 'finding, making and taking' of role as defined by Reed (2000), with its associated relatedness through task was not, on the whole, operating in this organisation; role functioning was seen 'simply in terms of personal capacity and personality' (Long, Newton, and Chapman 1999).

As references provided in this thesis have shown, the idea of role as distinct from person (Rice 1969, Reed 1976) and of the organisation as a system of roles within sub-systems (Miller and Rice 1975, Emery and Trist 1965) substantially pre-date the ubiquitous application of e-mail in business yet, as this work has illustrated, they provide helpful frames of reference for thinking about the work of an organisation and the manner in which people come together to work.

Building on what has been said in this chapter about the impact of e-mail on individuals in this organisation, I will argue in 7.4 for an urgent application by contemporary managers seeking to manage the 'virtuality' (Handy 1995) of organisations, of the ideas of role, the dynamic processes of finding, making and taking role and the relatedness of roles in the context of task. This would diminish the current attention to personality, individual psychology and relationships as a primary basis for working together.

The evidence that this would be a worthwhile undertaking centres on the anxiety that was discussed at length in Chapter 6 and the significance of containment for effective work. I have already discussed how e-mail seemed to be avoided, lest it complicate role relatedness. At the same time it was embraced, for purposes that have been discussed, as a mass communication tool. This latter application was, I argue, also a defence against anxiety.

### 7.3.3. E-mail use in dealing with anxiety

On the basis of the data emerging from this case, I argue here that e-mail was used as a social defence. In a manner akin to research findings about nurses who defended against the anxiety of their work by referring to patients as body parts (Menzies Lyth 1988), e-mail was used here to avoid directly dealing with the confusion, anxiety and dread that existed in the organisation. For example, the 'round-up' e-mails sent to all staff about arrangements for the office move, may

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8 An association here with a weed-killer by the same name (Roundup) may have occurred to Australian readers!
have provided the sender with a comforting sense of having dealt with any issues of concern but
was seen by recipients more to have fuelled concerns. Furthermore, in the absence of an
appropriate space in which organisational members could come together to think about matters
on which nobody may have a definitive answer, questions remained and uncertainties escalated.

E-mail content suggested that the sending manager may have acted in such instances out of her
introjected 'consulting-group-in-the-mind' in that a list of questions that might be asked by
recipients of her e-mail were listed and answered as if, in so doing, the staff themselves rather
than their representations in her mind, had been answered. It seems to me that something
similar is operating on web sites with FAQ's (frequently asked questions) or in automated
telephone systems, on which one must listen to vast amounts of information, before space is
available for one's own question. Staff referred in the case to the 'papering over' of issues in
such e-mails, as if they knew of the cracks in the 'walls' that wallpapering temporarily hides.

7.4. A new approach for managing organisational virtuality

In introducing this thesis and positioning its potential contribution to knowledge, I have pointed
out that the action research approach seeks in-depth understanding of a particular situation and
that the applicability of its findings to other situations is available for exploration rather than
presented as generalisable. At the same time, I have found that aspects of the findings
presented here have illuminated for me, the intriguing e-mail related dynamics that I have
encountered in other organisations and I therefore conclude this chapter by noting these
associations and my own reflections on them.

First, I have noticed that it is not uncommon for senior and middle managers to send detailed e-
mails about far-reaching issues to large numbers of staff. In some cases, staff react angrily to
the content, lamenting the lack of opportunity to have their say on the matter. I believe that, as
in the case, e-mail might be used in these situations as a social defence. Business objectives
often demand that a matter must be dealt with expeditiously yet the matter is anxiety provoking
for all, including the manager. I assert here that the manager derives personal comfort from the
creation of an uninterruptible 'e-mail monologue', which is then dispatched to staff, enabling the
manager to remove yet another item from their ever expanding 'to do' list. Meanwhile staff's
anxiety about the same matter is unresolved and potentially escalated, since they have effectively
been silenced. The 'right of e-mail reply' is often denied, in a policy of restricted access to the
company's 'all staff' distribution list.

Second, although ISPL's e-mail policy was exceptionally liberal, all e-mail enabled organisations
are boundaryless in the sense that, subject to virus checking and other technical interventions, e-
mail traffic can pass freely from outside to inside the organisation and vice-versa. It crosses internal boundaries with similar ease. Whilst formal e-mail policies might provide needed solace to those who have commissioned them and the terms of such policies might preclude particular pursuits such as the circulation of jokes or pornographic material, I argue now that they are an inadequate response to e-mail's effect on organisational functioning. This case has illustrated how e-mail can operate independently of both organisational and role boundaries. Its involvement in the socio-technical system therefore heightens the need for attention to boundary management throughout the organisation, including the dynamic processes involved in finding, making and taking roles.

Third, e-mail messages call not only on a person's cognitive capacity but also on their inner world of objects and part objects, as illustrated in the case. In this respect, e-mail can be likened to many other human communication media. As Civin (2000) points out 'from the rock carvings of antiquity to the pen, the printing press, the telegraph, telephone, television, and telefax, humankind has availed itself of technology to alter our vehicles for relating to each other'. However, e-mail's difference from all of these is in its capacity for enabling an infinite number of connections to be made, crossing boundaries of time, task, territory and role with ease and at an unprecedented pace. Although the case study organisation did not afford the opportunity to work with individuals who were dealing with hundreds of e-mails per day, I continue to encounter people who are attempting to deal with such volumes. On the basis of what was learned in this case study, it seems to me that, without adequate boundaries of time, task, territory and role, such volumes and their content might provoke intolerable anxiety in individuals with the compounding effect being to the great cost of their organisation.

It seems to me now, in reflecting on what has been learned from this work, that management of the 'virtuality' (Handy ibid.) of organisations requires an understanding of inter and intra-psychic factors. I suggest that 'person-in-role' as distinct from 'person as a whole' and relatedness distinguished from relationship are most helpful concepts for dealing more effectively with the virtuality dimension of e-mail enabled organisations.

7.5. Conclusion

In contrast with Chapter 6, which focussed primarily on the psychodynamics of the system as a whole, this chapter has advanced an analysis from the perspective of e-mail's effect on individuals. A framework for this perspective on the data that emerged from the study, has been set out by extending the concepts of 'in-the-mind' and role as they were explained in Chapter 3.
The theme of relatedness that ran though earlier chapters has been a key focus here and its significance to organisational functioning has been discussed and illustrated with material from the case. The significance of the tension that was evident in the case between relatedness and relationships and the involvement of e-mail has been explored. The assertion that these findings are significant to management of other e-mail enabled organisations has been substantiated.
Chapter 8. Reflections on the Study

8.1. Scope
In this final chapter, I cover four related topics. First, in section 8.2, I present my views on this study's contribution to the body of knowledge on organisation dynamics. Second, in 8.3, I review the study design and method, reflecting on its application to the research in practice and on the practicalities of implementing the chosen method. Then, as this project has been undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate programme, the thesis is concluded with some commentary on the significance the research component of the degree, for my professional development and for praxis in the field of organisational consulting. This is covered in 8.4. Finally, in 8.5, I provide my view of the scope for further research into the system psychodynamics of e-mail.

8.2. Contribution to the body of knowledge

8.2.1. Three forms of contribution
I believe that this thesis contributes to the body of knowledge on organisation dynamics from three perspectives. First, it has provided an in-depth case study analysis of e-mail use in a contemporary business, during a period of radical change for the organisation. In addition, as a result of the case study approach, the relevance of the findings extends beyond what the thesis has to say about e-mail, to a broader significance for contemporary business. Second, within the context of the case study, this research has illustrated the usefulness of a system psychodynamic approach to organisational research and analysis. Third, it has shown the value of, and provided data on, the practical application of action research methods, for better understanding the complexities of organisational functioning. These three forms of contribution are dealt with in the next three sections.

8.2.2. Knowledge about organisation dynamics
Organisation dynamics has been defined as 'the complex relations between people, task and structure in organisations' (Swinburne University of Technology 1997). Whilst this study set out to spotlight one component of these complex relations; that is, e-mail, inevitably it also sheds light on many other aspects of the case study system. In one sense, the findings are not divisible into discrete findings; it is their interrelatedness that renders this case interesting and worthwhile. This is the essence of the philosophy set out Chapter 4 where I differentiated the intent of this study from potential alternatives. I explained that this study sought in-depth understanding of one particular situation but that I also hoped that readers of these findings
would find them helpful in thinking about other situations in other organisations. In this concluding chapter, it seems appropriate therefore to provide a little more specificity about the types of organisational issues that might be informed by this study's findings. This is the purpose of Figure 8.1 below.

The left-most column of Figure 8.1 specifies the broad topic area of organisation dynamics. The second column in the same table nominates the specific issues relating to each topic, that feature in this thesis. Within the body of the thesis, commentary has been provided about the implications of e-mail use on each item in the second column.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation Dynamics Topic</th>
<th>Specific issues featuring in this case study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Entrepreneurship           | • The profile of an entrepreneur and his significance in the business.  
                             | • The entrepreneur’s approach to management of the business.  
                             | • Significance of the entrepreneur to the organisation’s identity. |
| Acquisitions                | • Effect of an earn-out based contract of sale.  
                             | • Meaning for staff who do not stand to make economic gain from the sale.  
                             | • Business risk arising from acquisition related activity. |
| Restructure                 | • The significance of a restructure to staff.  
                             | • Productivity implications of restructure. |
| Business communications     | • The role of e-mail in communication systems.  
                             | • Management choices in communicating with staff  
                             | • Links between e-mail and sentience |
| Knowledge Work              | • Knowledge work in practice  
                             | • Implications of being more connected with the client system than with colleagues  
                             | • Working in isolation from colleagues  
                             | • E-mail in knowledge systems |
| Place of Work               | • Implications of hot-desking or hotelling  
                             | • Being theoretically available for work, twenty four hours a day, seven days per week. |
| Job satisfaction            | • Dealing with work related dissatisfactions  
                             | • The manager’s role in addressing job satisfaction |

**Figure 8.1 Issues of Organisation Dynamics featuring in this study**

### 8.2.3. Knowledge about the application of system psychodynamic theory

The work of this study has involved the combined application of socio-technical systems theory and psychoanalytic ideas about organisation dynamics to a whole organisational system. It has aimed, through collaboration with participants in the study, to relate findings from distinct parts

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9 Unlike elsewhere in this thesis, where I have deliberately avoided gender specificity, I have nominated the male gender here since the particular literature referenced in this thesis relates to male entrepreneurs.
of the organisation and from work with individuals and small groups, to hypotheses about the system as a whole, using data from multiple sources to validate the hypotheses. I believe that this case study has illustrated the usefulness of this approach.

In contrast with this approach, management theory often seeks to make sense of an organisation by looking at certain aspects of the organisation, at the same time excluding others. Alistair Mant's comparison of the organisational system that he likens to a bicycle with one that is more like a frog is a powerful metaphor, emphasising the limitations of this approach. He argues that complex systems are more like frogs than bicycles because it is possible to completely disassemble a bicycle, clean and oil all the parts, and then reassemble it, confident that it will work as before. Frogs, he points out, are different (Mant 1997).

Equally, it has been argued that the value of the socio-technical systems approach to organisational work enables both psycho-social variables, such as leadership style and techno-economic variables to be worked with concurrently (Miller 1985), in order to deal with the organisation as a complex system of interrelated human and technical parts, which cannot be well understood by dealing with them separately. This study has aimed to work with this holistic view of the organisation. I admit that, when the study was conceived, I had imagined that it would be possible to work with one sub-system of the organisation and to concentrate on its group dynamics, in some way separated from the organisation as a whole. Conceptually this may be feasible. However, as Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have explained in detail, this particular study evolved into an exploration of the organisation as a whole and therein lies one of the defining characteristics of its contribution to the body of knowledge. It has been a psychoanalytically informed exploration of e-mail in the system psychodynamics of an entire organisation, rendered even more complex as a result of the organisation having being acquired and therefore being in the process of becoming part of an even larger system.

References to the socio-technical systems approach to organisational work invariably cite the seminal work of Trist and Bamforth, which was discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis (De Board 1978, Amado and Ambrose 2001). However, examples of its application to contemporary organisations, in the context of the organisation as a whole, are much less in evidence. Of most relevance to this study has been the work of Pava which has also been referenced in the body of the thesis (Pava 1983). Pava's work is significant because of his inclusion of office work in applying the theory. This study has shown that the socio-technical systems approach is as applicable to late twentieth and early twenty first century organisations, in which the product of work is not tangible products but intangible outputs such as knowledge and services and in
which a significant element of the technical system is computers and telecommunications technology.

8.2.4. Knowledge about psychoanalytically informed action research

Engaging with living action research projects is complex and involves some chaos and pain (Long 1999). A psychoanalytically informed approach to action research supports an in-depth working through of the experience of engaging with the organisational system and all that that entails. Although the primary task of this project has been the process of learning about the organisational system, and this has been achieved through the application of a psychoanalytically informed method, I also believe that a contribution has been made to the growing body of knowledge about psychoanalytically informed action research in practice. No two action research projects are the same, so the learning that has been documented here does not constitute a replicable blueprint for another project. However, by incorporating an account of the method’s contribution to the findings, a contribution has been made to the body of knowledge about action research praxis.

8.3. Study design and method

8.3.1. Introduction

Action research takes place in the field, not in the laboratory (Long 1999) so, however careful the preparatory work has been, this form of research must cater for unpredictable and unforeseen circumstances in the research setting. Some of the particular unforeseen circumstances here arose out of the fact that this was my first major action research project so, as well as learning about the topic that was the focus of the study, I was also learning about doing action research. In the next two sections, I consider the study design and method in terms of their suitability for this project as it turned out in practice and suggest some modifications that merit consideration for future studies with similar characteristics. The state of my developing understanding of action research methods in practice was clearly a factor, both in creating and implementing the design and method. In the sections that follow, I have indicated which issues I would handle differently, whatever the research setting.

A separate section, 8.3.3, still reviewing the design and method, is devoted to what has been learned about certain logistical aspects of the project that may benefit similar projects in the future. This includes commentary on the challenges associated with attending to a major research project in parallel with full time employment.
8.3.2. Application of participative action research methods

In this section, I discuss five issues, all relating to the fundamental nature of action research, each of which was a source of unforeseen and to some extent, unpredictable difficulties. They are:

- the nature of collaboration and how it is obtained
- responsibility for learning
- negotiating terms
- being clear on what is data
- project boundaries

8.3.2.1. The nature of collaboration and how it is obtained

From the outset, I was aware at a theoretical level, of the collaborative intent of action research, as described in Chapter 4 and this was reflected in documentation that I provided to ISPL staff, when I was negotiating entry to the organisation and in the way I described the study in face to face sessions with staff members. On reflection, I have realised that I also often used the word participation, synonymously with the word collaboration. In my mind, these words encapsulated significant meaning about how the action research would proceed. I hoped that there would be a joint working through of what was being learned in the study, a sharing of ideas and a process of thinking together. As I had initiated the project and had proposed action research methods, I expected to lead the research process and had hoped that members of the case study group would join with me in the search for meaning. At the same time, I was apprehensive about my novice status in the field of action research.

In Chapter 5, I discussed my reservations about the way in which participants took up their roles and my reasons for making choices relating to that experience. With the benefit of hindsight and a period of reflection on the study as a whole and on the organisation dynamics discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, it is now clear that I could have more rigorously questioned what was understood by the words collaboration and participation, by ISPL staff involved in the study and more specifically articulated what was in my mind. ISPL staff participated in all the ways I had requested; in one on one interviews, in focus groups and by generously granting permission for me to access their e-mail messages. However, as I reflect on the study as a whole, I have lingering reservations about the extent to which our respective views on the meaning of collaboration and its implications for the research work, were explored.
The manner in which I would deal with this differently in future is now clear. This particular organisation was one in which the dominant consulting model was the provision of 'business solutions'. Gaps in the expertise needed to undertake a project were dealt with by appealing to the shared knowledge base of information. Based on the experience of this project, I believe it would be helpful to explore individually and collectively held interpretations of what collaboration means in practice and if necessary, spend some time earlier in the project discussing what form collaboration might take within the context of the research. With hindsight, I believe that I was so anxious about keeping the project alive that I defended against a more robust exploration of different interpretations, by avoiding rather than working through the uncertainty. It has been suggested that this response paralleled the anxieties faced by the senior managers inside ISPL about keeping the earn-out alive. I believe that part of my anxiety was also associated with my unfamiliarity with action research in practice.

8.3.2.2. Responsibility for learning

The second aspect of action research that was more difficult to deal with than I had imagined, is the issue of the learning that takes place in the research. Part of the attraction for me of the method was the notion that learning could be a shared occupation, that researcher and researched would both contribute to and benefit from the learning opportunities. This approach was consistent with my consulting work. A retrospective view of the case study organisation reveals that a more specific articulation of this expectation would have been beneficial. My reasons for this assessment are as follows.

I had taken great care to identify myself as a student although I did not conceal the fact that I also worked as an organisational consultant. My status as a student was readily accepted by Greg, who also told me that ISPL was usually an enthusiastic host for research projects, including staff members’ projects. In this respect, it now seems to me that I had identified myself to some extent with the Associate Consultant group, the trainee consultants. These staff, as I noted in the analysis in Chapter 6, were split off from the rest of the consulting community, in that they were seen to be learners, in contrast with the main body of consultants, who provided expertise. By unintentionally identifying myself with the internal learning group, I believe that I also came to be seen as a learner and therefore responsible for the learning in this project. In addition, it was also known that I worked as a consultant. I believe that this led to the concomitant expectation that I would provide answers. These interpretations are consistent with the case study evidence in Chapter 5.
8.3.2.3. **Negotiating terms**

The process of negotiating entry to the organisation merits exploration here because it turned out to be more complex than I had envisaged. As discussed in Chapter 2, I had prepared for the search for an appropriate case study organisation very carefully, thinking about the needed characteristics and evaluating various potential case study settings until I found ISPL, which seemed to be a good match against these criteria. The unexpected complexities arose in the progression from negotiated entry to the organisation to entry into the specific case study setting; in this instance Division V1.

There were two unexpected dimensions to be dealt with. First, as the research moved step by step toward the point where the fieldwork could begin, the organisation was rapidly changing. Richard, the original division manager for V1 was seconded to a marketing role, resulting in the need for me to negotiate at the division manager level again with David. Then the restructure was announced and this led to the choice point discussed in Chapter 5, about whether to continue with the same participant group, even though they no longer comprised a single group in the organisation.

The process by which these changes informed the research was discussed in Chapter 6. Here, my purpose is to highlight them as examples of the complexities with which one is faced, in electing to use action research methods. Also, this experience shows that negotiating entry is more than an issue of moving from outside to inside the organisation. Entry to ISPL turned out to be a progression of stages, from high level sanctioning of the project, to the point where entry was gained to the specific research setting. Along the way, one is dealing with issues of organisational and personal authority as well as the influence of the former on the latter. As a result of experience in this project, I am more likely to see entry as an on-going negotiation, thereby incorporating not only gaining entry but also staying in the research setting.

8.3.2.4. **Data creation**

In Chapter 4, I discussed how data is created in action research, noting that it emerges gradually through working collaboratively with research participants and through interpretation, the results of these processes being made available for further input to the continuing research process. The theory seemed straightforward and I believed that I understood the concept. In practice, I discovered the complexities of applying the theory.

Data is an essential component of research. It is input to the processes of analysis and without it, the project had no value. As the work progressed, this became a source of great anxiety for me, which was amplified by the various technical difficulties discussed in Chapter 6. The source
of the most debilitating anxiety for me in the whole project was the e-mails themselves. I accumulated thousands of them on my PC and although I was clear that they were not, in themselves, data, it seemed important to retain all of them, until enough useful data had emerged from the project as a whole. At the end of the first six months, I had accumulated fifteen thousand e-mails from the study on my PC, when the technical difficulties discussed in Chapter 5 resulted in my losing all of them. I felt overwhelmed by the loss but I had to deal with it in order to proceed.

Ultimately, the loss was helpful to the research. It led to my thinking about the real data that I had accumulated, contained in my diary notes, interview notes and subsequent process notes. I now believe that the time I had spent filing and sorting the e-mails had been a defence against the uncertainty surrounding what was emerging from the project. They had provided a safe focus because they seemed safe on my computer's hard disk, available to be read and re-read in the effort to make sense of this organisation. The alternative was to confront a state of not knowing what would emerge from the project, or worse, whether anything at all useful would emerge.

I note this personal revelation here because I believe it to be valuable learning about action research in practice. The questions of what really constitutes data and what strategies need to be adopted in order to preserve it for analysis, are ones to which I would give more critical attention in future action research projects. In addition, this project has afforded the experience of working through the state of not knowing to a state of improved understanding of what Lawrence meant when he pointed out that human behaviour is so complex that a researcher can never be certain that they have 'captured the truth of a social situation' (Lawrence 1985 p. 231).

8.3.2.5. Project boundaries

Well thought-through boundaries are important in action research (Gabriel 1999) and in Chapter 4, I discussed how I approached this aspect of the research. Here, it is appropriate to note both the usefulness of that attention and the resultant tension arising in the project. The choices that had to be made around participant group membership are illustrative. I have explained how and why I excluded Greg from the participant group yet both Greg and other managers such as Gillian, who were not directly participants in the study, feature throughout the case and its analysis. From time to time it was tempting to request interviews with each because of their presence in the experience that was included in the study and my desire to hear their perspective first hand. However, the prior thinking through of boundaries enabled me to avoid doing this since the focus of the study was participants' experience. I was therefore interested in Greg and Gillian indirectly, through participants and my experience of their effect in the
business, particularly their use of e-mail. Both of them were, as discussed in the case, strongly represented in the study via their e-mail messages to participants.

Effective project management always involves attention to scope and if the scope is to be extended, this becomes a focus of negotiation between project owner and project manager. As a result of this project, it seems to me that the ideas here around role and boundaries have extensive applicability in project management in general, particularly projects relating to organisational development.

8.3.3. Project Logistics

I undertook the fieldwork component of the research while working full-time as an employee organisational consultant. As I had also completed both a Masters degree and the coursework components of the Professional Doctorate while in full-time paid employment, I considered myself to be familiar with the challenges of juggling employment and academic commitments. In this section therefore, I consider those aspects of the fieldwork that became problematic, despite this experience. There are two categories; computer related and people related.

8.3.3.1. Computer related problems

From the outset, I aimed to maintain a clear boundary between work I did as an employee consultant and this project, which was part of a self-funded academic programme. Therefore, when I arranged to have access to participant's e-mails as described in Chapter 4, it was important to keep them separate from my employment related e-mails so I arranged for them to be received on my personal computer system at home. This also enabled me to comply with the confidentiality agreement I had established with ISPL.

I knew that I had sufficient hard disk space to cater for the anticipated volume but it was only after the project started that I discovered that my Internet service provider (ISP) could not support the volume, and it became necessary to set up a business level service for the duration of the project. At this time, I also discovered that ISPs do not retain back-ups of customers’ e-mail so when my own system failed, I had no way of recovering the fifteen thousand e-mails. Although as discussed earlier in this chapter, I came to realise that this was not as big a disaster as I initially feared, the experience led to my purchasing a back up facility for my home computer, providing much greater storage capacity than a 3¼ inch floppy disk drive.

With hindsight, I went to great lengths to ensure confidentiality of ISPL's e-mails and this was ultimately a significant cost to myself both in terms of my time and in a monetary sense. I now believe that a more effective method would have been to request access to ISPL's system,
perhaps with a temporary e-mail address set up for me, so that pre-existing back up and security systems could have been utilised in the project.

8.3.3.2. People related difficulties
I have discussed already, the challenge of organising face to face meetings with participants, in particular the difficulty of assembling the whole group. An added dimension of difficulty was my own time, in that meetings with case study participants needed to be scheduled alongside my own work commitments. The one on one interviews were easier to arrange in that they involved coordinating only two diaries. Given similar circumstances, it would be more effective to create a design that either eliminates the need for group meetings, or to deal more specifically with the logistics of coordinating multiple diaries, during the negotiation phase.

8.4. Contribution to Professional Development
During the five years I have been involved in the Professional Doctorate programme at Swinburne University in Melbourne, I have effected a career change from business management in the computer industry to organisational consulting. I embarked on the doctoral programme with the intention that it would be a major source of support for professional development in my consulting career. This research project comprised fifty percent of the overall programme and the thinking that led to its inception began about four years ago. In many respects therefore, it is impossible to separate this project's contribution to my professional development from the significance of the doctoral programme as a whole. Important aspects of the learning have been awareness of self and impact on others, greater appreciation of the influence of my own inner world on the way in which I take up various roles and growing understanding of the usefulness of system psychodynamics of organisations for thinking about organisational problems. All of this personal and professional development has become work-in-progress, that will continue long after I graduate from the formal programme. In the following three sections, I highlight the major areas of learning in this project, that I have found most applicable to my consulting work. They relate to role, working with the organisation as a system and the value of reflective space.

8.4.1. Management of self in the role of researcher
In the conceptual framework in Chapter 3, I discussed the distinction between the individual and their organisational role or roles and the ideas of the 'person-in-role' (Armstrong 1991) and 'management of self in role' (Lawrence 1979) and noted the importance of these concepts for managing myself in the role of researcher. Within the research setting, these ideas provided a helpful basis for making choices when organisational forces or my own valencies were pulling me into some other imagined role. As Armstrong has noted, these are dilemmas of interpretation and one needs to be clear on whether one is importing something from outside,
linked to one's own image of the organisation's history and identity or whether one is speaking to what is present in the room (Armstrong, ibid.).

My choices and actions also needed to be based on whether I would be violating the boundary of the action research. For example, when participants sought to use interview sessions to talk about their concerns, I considered whether, in allowing the conversation to flow in that direction, I was taking up the containing function of a manager in the business as if I was a manager in the business and whether that would have violated the research boundary. Alternatively, would the choice I had made further the research? I discovered that the choices were not easy and sometimes it was only by inadvertently violating the boundary that I came to recognise what belonged inside the research boundaries and what did not.

Another example of falling out of my researcher role was when I encountered expectations that I was there to provide answers. It was difficult to sustain a spirit of enquiry even though I had formally negotiated one in setting up the project. ISPL’s primary task involved solving problems and I found myself colluding with the organisational system, which constantly sought to eliminate uncertainty, by imagining that I was seen as a provider of answers.

These are just two examples from many instances during the project when ideas around management of self in role, both sustained my involvement and informed the work. I believe that the experience has extensive applicability to my work as an organisational consultant. It has enriched my thinking about the role of consultant and its interaction with the client system, the relatedness between the psychodynamics of the client system and the consulting system and the potential for the consulting system to provide an object for unwanted material projected from the client system. Equally I am now much more cognisant of the potential for my presence in the research to both contribute to, and contaminate the work.

8.4.2. The organisation as a system

Most of the commercial organisations with which I have worked as a consultant, attach great importance to structure and to roles and responsibilities. Often, when asked to talk about their organisation, people start by defining the organisational structure and then identify their department and role within the structure. In my experience in Australian businesses, many-layered hierarchies are common, particularly in large publicly owned organisations. Miller's characterisation (Miller 1998) of the hierarchical organisation as a steepened pyramid, like a 'steeply pitched pagoda' (p. 7) reflects my experience of many multi-divisional organisations. I find that a structural representation can be a helpful aid to understanding lines of authority, responsibilities and power structures, and for differentiating between line and staff functions in
the organisation. However, I find that structure does not provide the most helpful way of understanding the core work, that is, the primary task of the organisation or the way in which the various component parts of the organisation contribute to its primary task. Indeed the primary task can be obscured by structure.

Through this project, I have discovered the usefulness of thinking about the organisation as an open system, comprising multiple interrelated sub-systems, not as a substitute for understanding structure but as a way to also gain insights also into task and process and their relatedness to structure. Equally, I refer often these days to the idea of role as distinct from person and role as distinct from position on an organisation chart.

8.4.3. The value of reflective space

My experience in many organisations has been that time is seen to be as critical a resource as labour and capital. Time is seen primarily as a scarce resource and this leads to pressure at all levels to do more in the time available and if necessary to make more time available so that more can be done. As organisations have cut costs by reducing staff, this has further increased the pressure on staff left in the organisation. Time pressure was evident in ISPL, where staff took laptop computers home and worked when they were on vacation. I find that in business in general, action is valued but making time for reflection in order to take appropriate action is often problematic.

I noted earlier that during the course of being involved in this doctoral programme, I have made a career transition from management into consulting. I now consult to organisations as an external consultant. Through the programme I have come to appreciate the meaning and value of reflective space and, in the context of this project, am particularly appreciative of the experience afforded by academic supervision.

Unlike in my Masters level thesis, when academic supervision took the form of expert assistance in the mechanics of assembling a research project and writing it up, supervision in this programme has involved the creation and holding of space in which thinking and reflection can take place; a containing function, so that the experience of working in the project and in the researched setting could be worked through. By reading psychoanalytic texts, I obtained an appreciation of containment at a cognitive level. Through supervision I experienced containment.

Unlike colleagues on the doctoral programme, I had not experienced supervision in the sense that it is provided in clinical settings and this is the model I have now come to appreciate as a
student of the psychodynamic approach to organisations. This translates in my consulting work into recognition of the value of this form of supervision, particularly if I am working with the client but without co-consultants. Equally I am now aware of the value of, and the factors that tend to inhibit, creation of reflective space in client organisations.

8.5. Scope for further research

At the conclusion of this piece of research, I see three broad directions for potential future work.

First, I think it would be interesting and useful to return to the original intent behind this study, that is, exploration of e-mail's use in a work group. As a direct result of the experience of this study, I am mindful that certain criteria would need to be satisfied. I would be looking specifically for a group with a substantial shared work task, e-mail would be used for deliberations (Pava 1983) between group members, not just for sending attachments, and at project set-up stage, I would more precisely negotiate the terms of the research. In particular, assuming an action research methodology, I would seek to engage in early in-depth discussions with participants about respective roles and contributions to the study.

Second, I believe that the system psychodynamic related findings from this study could provide the starting hypothesis for a subsequent study. This project has indicated that contemporary businesses need containment and that without good enough containment, the business is at risk. Another interesting piece of action research would be to examine the nature of containment in an environment with the boundaryless qualities of ISPL; for example a knowledge based organisation such as a legal practice, accounting firm or business consultancy. The exploration could proceed into looking at the nature of sentience in the organisation, the extent to which sentience aligns with the primary task, the manner in which work and organisation related anxieties are dealt with and the challenges associated with creating and managing an effective organisational system under these circumstances. E-mail use, effect and cost in terms of organisational functioning would be useful factors to explore.

Finally, although it did not set out to do so, this study has contributed to understanding of acquisitions. Mainstream management approaches to integrating acquisitions tend to emphasise rational process and to regard the acquired entity as having a fixed form that can be 'integrated' into the acquirer's business (Ashkenas, DeMonaco, and Francis 1998). This case has illustrated that the act of selling an organisation that is so dependent on its founder, can trigger cataclysmic change in the acquired business. Further research, particularly if it takes a system
psychodynamic perspective, could reveal more effective ways of managing an acquisition, particularly if, as is frequently the case these days, there is an earn-out component in the deal.
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Appendices

Appendix 1  Definitions

Appendix 2  Project Outline document provided to prospective case study organisations

Appendix 3  Project Outline document provided to participants in ISPL

Appendix 4  Working Note
Appendix 1. Definitions

This appendix provides more detailed definitions of some industry terms that were used in the body of the thesis and described only briefly there.

**Earn-Out**

When life was simpler than it is today, a firm's sale price would be calculated on the basis of the value of its assets and this would include an element of goodwill, an amount above the value of the net tangible assets to be acquired, to cover intangible factors such as the good name of the business, customer contacts and secret processes. Goodwill appeared on the assets side of the balance sheet, with a value attached to it, along with plant and machinery, cash reserves and other more easily quantifiable assets. These days, purchasers are much more cautious and seek proof of the value of these intangible assets when a business is sold. Rather than agreeing a single 'up front' price for the business, sellers often use an 'extended payment' method, in which the purchase price is a combination of up front consideration and an **earn-out**. The earn-out represents the balance of the purchase price after the up front payment and is paid over an agreed period, often three to five years. It is also variable, payable in annual instalments, according to the acquired business' performance during the period of the earn-out. The 'deal' generally requires that key people (typically owners) will stay involved in the business, the expectation being that they will ensure the business realises its full potential (ie not make a quick exit). Of particular relevance to this case study is that the inclusion of an earn-out component is common in the sale of professional services organisations.

The contract between GTC and ISPL involved a three year **earn-out**. Of particular note is the fact that the earn-out revenue targets were higher than had ever been achieved by ISPL previously.

**Billing Level**

It is common practice in consulting services organisations in which consultants are employees, for management to set target levels of revenue achievement. This is sometimes implemented as a salary multiple; for example a consultant earning $100,000 gross per annum might be expected to generate three times that value in revenue for the organisation. Another way of setting the 'billing level' is to nominate the proportion of working time that must be spent generating income for the firm. This was the method used in ISPL and was set at eighty percent which meant that, assuming a five day working week, consultants were expected to be generating revenue for four out of the five days. The effect is similar to the 'salary multiple' method because a consultant earning $100,000 per annum would be charged out at a higher daily rate than a consultant earning say $60,000 per annum. However, the 'eighty percent' method was seen to be more equitable in ISPL because it meant that a consultant assigned to work for which a higher daily rate was charged, still had to generate revenue four days out of every five.

**Pastoral Care**

This was a term used widely within ISPL to refer to staff members' needs in terms of their general well being at work. However, it had not been formally defined. It seemed to include attention to matters such as their desire to undertake work that was interesting to them as well as satisfying the company's need to generate revenue; what might in another setting be called 'job satisfaction'. During the field work I also discovered that pastoral care also included professional development of staff, 'quality of life at work' and 'value add' by managers to consultants' work.
'Availability'

In order to ensure that its labour resource, that is the consulting staff, was utilised optimally, management attention was paid to 'availability'. Records were maintained for each consultant of staff commitments to consulting work on a day by day basis and their availability to undertake additional work. The organisation set a target for each consultant to be undertaking consulting work for 80% of the available time.

Provided the 'availability spreadsheet' was kept up to date, and this involved a complex administrative process, managers could see how many 'billable hours' had been booked by customers for each individual consultant and how many hours out of total working time were still 'available' to do more work. Consulting staff were expected to provide regular and accurate forecasts of committed work, in order that projections about likely revenue for the period could be calculated.
Appendix 2. Project Outline document provided to prospective case study organisations

In the document reproduced here, the words 'Prospective Case Study Organisation' were replaced with the name of the organisation with which discussion were being held. In the first instance, this meant a number of organisations that were candidates for participation in the research and then later, the same document was used in discussions with ISPL staff.

The Impact of E-mail on Group Dynamics

An Action Research Project

Researcher – Janet Fitzell – Swinburne University

Contact Details:
E-mail: (My e-mail address)
Mobile:

Purpose of this Document

This document has been prepared for Prospective Case Study Organisation and is an invitation to participate in an action research project to study the impact of e-mail on group dynamics. This project is a component of my Professional Doctoral programme in Organisation Dynamics at Swinburne University.

In order to enable Prospective Case Study Organisation to make a preliminary assessment of interest in the project, I have provided in the sections below, an overview of the project scope, the intended methodology, anticipated staff involvement and my view of the potential value to Prospective Case Study Organisation.

About the Project

Why this Topic?

E-mail is used extensively in business today and in many organisations it is displacing other forms of communication, including face to face. E-mail is fast and convenient, facilitates effective time management and is seen to address the difficulties of time and geographical distance, in connecting individuals and groups. It is an essential tool for doing business globally and a mandatory building block of the ‘virtual corporation’.

On the surface, it seems that e-mail is good for business.

However, many e-mail users also experience its downside. Often, a high proportion of the working day is spent using a communication medium, in which all expression has been reduced to the written word on a computer screen. Anecdotal evidence indicates that misunderstandings and misinterpretations occur more frequently with e-mail than with any other form of communication and escalate exponentially faster. Meaning is assumed, emotions are triggered often unintentionally and anxiety is heightened and at what cost to the organisation?
Many organisations with broad experience of e-mail usage have introduced rules and protocols in an attempt to minimise the downside impact. However, in my view these initiatives address the issues only superficially. The deeper psychological and social implications of living ‘organisational life on the screen’ remain poorly understood and, as far as I can determine, little researched.

Meanwhile business leaders continue to invest billions in the enabling technology, with scant attention paid to the human impact and its effect on the health of the organisation.

**Focus of the Study**

My fundamental curiosity is around the real and potential value of e-mail to business. When the psychological and social implications are brought into the equation, does e-mail still make people more productive? Are the downside aspects outweighed by the upside value such as its immediacy and its potential to keep very wide audiences ‘in the loop’?

Essentially, I am interested in how human interaction in the business world is impacted by the use of e-mail. What works well? What is the shadow side of e-mail usage? How could business make more effective use of this technology?

**Method to be used for the Project**

This project is an exploration of the unknown. My intention is to go beyond current knowledge about the value and limitations of e-mail, by taking an in-depth look at a group of people at work, for whom e-mail is an essential communication tool. The data for analysis will be their experience of using e-mail, their experience of each other via e-mail, the ways in which they individually and collectively make meaning via the tool and the impact of using the tool on the way in which they do their work.

This will be a single case study within one organisation, but my hope is that the learning from the study will have much broader relevance across the organisation and to other organisations.

**Criteria for Participating Group**

The core business of the case study group is not a criterion in selection of the group. However, the project is more likely to succeed if the participating group satisfies some other important criteria:

1. It should have a collective ‘spirit of enquiry’ that is an interest in discovering something new, a preparedness to tolerate a state of ‘not knowing’ and a willingness to experiment with actions relating to e-mail usage which seem useful, based on learnings during the project.

2. The group should preferably comprise:
   - both local and remote (geographically) members.
   - members at different levels in the organisational hierarchy
   - connections with external parties (e.g. customers, suppliers, etc.)

3. E-mail should be in common use and used for multiple facets of the job.

4. Willingness to participate in data gathering methods such as interviews, focus groups etc.

5. NOT looking for immediate answers to a pressing problem relating to this project.

6. Senior management sponsorship. This project will place some demands on participants’ time and it will be important for commitment to continue right to the end.
Potential Benefit for Case Study organisation

To my knowledge, there are no manuals or textbooks on ‘how to make optimal use of e-mail in business’. Most organisations are learning from mistakes and from experience but mostly having faith that overall the technology is to the benefit of the business.

This project is an opportunity for first-hand involvement in creating a new body of knowledge about the social and psychological implications of e-mail usage and to participate in some creative thinking about how the technology might be more effectively applied to the benefit of both the business and individuals.

Logistics of the Project

Overall Timeframe

The exact duration of the project would be determined in project set-up discussions. It needs to be long enough for e-mail communication to be mapped against the primary task of the project group but not so long that the volume of data becomes unmanageable. Ideally, the project scope and duration will not only meet my research requirement, but will result in a project that is useful to the participating organisation. At this stage, three months seems a reasonable overall duration for the data gathering phase, but this is a point for discussion. I would like the project to begin as soon as possible.

Participant Involvement

The core work of the project group will be exactly as it would have been if members were not participating in the study. However, in order for the experience of using e-mail to be studied, members would be expected to participate in some discussion with the researcher. Some of this could take place using e-mail, but it would be advantageous for some face-to-face discussion to also take place. Individual interviews and focus groups would be necessary at intervals during the project.

In order to study the use of e-mail in the group, I would need, in some way, to get sufficiently ‘inside’ the group in order to study its use of e-mail, rather like an anthropologist might live with the subjects of her study. At the same time, it will be necessary to maintain a boundary between researcher and researched. Given the focus of this study of course, my participation in the group, would be partly virtual.

Data Collection

At the end of the day, a research project is about collecting data and analysing it. As this is a Social Research project, I anticipate that data will take some or all of the following forms:

- The e-mail communications which support the work of the group
- Observation notes taken while I am observing participants using e-mail
- E-mail communication between me and group members, discussing the work of the study
- Notes from individual interviews and focus groups
- My own experience as a participant in the group

Example of Project Milestones

The following is an example of the sort of project milestones I have in mind.
1. Project scope meeting with sponsor(s), to include:
   - Determine project group permanent members
   - Others who may be involved during the course of the project
   - Other boundaries of the project

2. Project set-up to include:
   - making contact with and briefing all participants
   - addressing any concerns
   - ensuring clarity of understanding

3. Project start

4. Early review (after say one week) with sponsor and sample participants, to ensure project is on track.

5. Rolling one on one interviews with participants to explore their experience in the project.

6. Focus group with as many participants as possible, using video conferencing facility if necessary. Focus group to be conducted say at half way point and on conclusion of the project.

7. Reflections and learnings to be shared between group members during the project. This is action research and an integral part of the methodology is to feed learnings back into the project and review the impact.

8. Project write up.

9. Discussion of findings with project sponsor.
Appendix 3. Project Outline document provided to participants in ISPL

The Impact of E-mail on Group Dynamics
An Action Research Project
Researcher – Janet Fitzell, – Swinburne University

Contact Details:
E-mail: (My private address)
Tel: Telephone contact number

Purpose of this Document
This document is about the research component of my Doctoral studies at Swinburne University. It was initially written in preparation for a meeting with Greg (surname removed), at which the broad scope of my proposed research was discussed. At the end of that meeting, Greg confirmed his interest in Information Services Pty Ltd (ISPL) being a case study environment for an action research project into the impact of e-mail on group dynamics.

The purpose of this document is now to provide a basis for further discussion with Greg and others, in order for potential participants to make an informed decision about whether to participate and for them to be clear on what the research would involve.

In addition, subject to agreement in principal to proceed, this document also provides framework for discussion about the next steps in the project.

What exactly is the Project about?
I intend to undertake an action research based exploration of the impact of e-mail communications on the dynamics of a case study work group, with a particular focus on the ways in which e-mail impacts the work the organisation. I would also like to study the effect on individuals but this will be within the context of the work of the organisation.

Using a combination of actual e-mail communications, individual interviews and focus groups in which participants will be invited to reflect on their experience, I intend to engage in an iterative process of hypothesis generation, data collection and analysis, hypothesis testing and ultimately generation of some conclusions. My own experience as researcher and as a participant observer of the case study group, will also be taken into account.

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10 Action Research is differentiated from other forms of research in the appendix to this document.
I have planned that the core case study group will be project based work team. In addition, other members of the case study organisation will interact via e-mail with the core group. E-mail communication with persons external to the case study organisation will also be involved but only in so far as they become part of the work of the case study group.

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the business value of e-mail.

My Reasons for choosing this Topic

E-mail is used extensively in business today and in many organisations it is displacing other forms of communication, including face to face. E-mail is fast and convenient, facilitates effective time management and is seen to address the difficulties of time and geographical distance, in connecting individuals and groups. It is an essential tool for doing business globally and a mandatory building block of the ‘virtual corporation’.

On the surface, it seems that e-mail is good for business.

However, many e-mail users also experience its downside. Often, a high proportion of the working day is spent using a communication medium, in which all expression has been reduced to the written word on a computer screen. Anecdotal evidence indicates that misunderstandings and misinterpretations occur more frequently with e-mail than with any other form of communication and escalate exponentially faster. Meaning is assumed, emotions are triggered often unintentionally and anxiety is heightened. This study will explore the cost to the organisation of this response as well as the value of the technology to the business.

Many organisations with broad experience of e-mail usage have introduced rules and protocols in an attempt to minimise the downside impact. However, in my view these initiatives address the issues only superficially. The deeper psychological and social implications of living ‘organisational life on the screen’ remain poorly understood and, as far as I can determine, little researched.

Meanwhile business leaders continue to invest billions in the enabling technology, with scant attention paid to the human impact and its effect on the health of the organisation.

My fundamental curiosity is around the real and potential value of e-mail to business. When the psychological and social implications are brought into the equation, does e-mail still make people more productive? Are the downside aspects outweighed by the upside value such as its immediacy and its potential to keep very wide audiences ‘in the loop’?

Essentially, I am interested in how human interaction in the business world is impacted by the use of e-mail. What works well? What is the shadow side of e-mail usage? How could business make more effective use of this technology?

What is Involved?

This is a collaborative research project. As participants, you would be invited to participate in the exploration. Unlike other forms of research, this is not a study in which I am going to collect data independently of you.

You would be invited to engage in discussion of your experience of using e-mail during the study. My main interest is in your experience and the issues that have emerged for you during the study.

The effort I am anticipating for you in your participation, is more fully described below.
Procedures

The core work of the project group will be exactly as it would have been if members were not participating in the study. However, in order for the experience of using e-mail to be studied, members would also be asked to participate in:

- Individual face to face discussion with me at times to suit you, the participants.
- E-mail discussion with me and with other participants.
- Focus groups at intervals during the project.

During focus groups, I would facilitate discussion of your experience, in order for common themes to be explored and for linkages with others’ experience to be shared.

In addition I would create an electronic file of the e-mails as they are made available to me on my own computer system by participants. By ‘made available’, I am referring to the e-mails sent to me by participants. These may include ‘forwarded’ content from others. All such e-mail content will be regarded as data for analysis in this study.

Interview and Focus Group Protocols

During focus groups, I will facilitate discussion of participants’ experience, in order for common themes to be explored and for linkages with others’ experience to be shared.

As facilitator of these discussions, my role will be to:

- Ensure that discussion is focussed on matters relating to the project.
- Agree with participants the way in which matters arising during the meeting, but not relevant to the research will be handled. For example, a particular e-mail interaction may trigger discussion of a matter which is of great importance to a participant in the overall context of their role in the organisation, but which is not helpful to this project.
- Encourage dialogue and exploration.
- Discourage conflict and confrontation.
- When necessary, liase with project sponsor.
- Keep the project sponsor informed.
- Manage important boundaries such as time and limits of content.

Value of the Research

I anticipate the following benefits for individual participants:

- Improved understanding of the value of e-mail to your organisational role.
- Greater awareness of the ways in which your use of e-mail impacts others.
- The opportunity to experiment with alternative ways of using the technology.
- Broader appreciation of the implications of the technology for the workplace.

And the following additional benefits for Information Services Pty Ltd:

- New insights into the productivity implications of e-mail
- Improved understanding of how emotional content effects the organisation
- New knowledge which could be used in the service of customers.
What will I do with the data?

The main purpose to which the data will be put, is my doctoral dissertation. I have already agreed with Greg (surname removed) that neither Information Services Pty Ltd, nor any of the participants in the study will be mentioned by name in my thesis, unless by prior agreement.

During or after preparation of my thesis, I may draw on findings within other work intended for publication. The same agreement concerning non-identification applies.

If it becomes advantageous for Information Services Pty Ltd to be identified within a particular published piece of work, this would be agreed between us at the time. **The default condition will be absolute confidentiality.**

The Project Phases

It is my intention that the project will comprise four main phases. These are as follows:

1. Project Set-Up
2. Hypothesis Generation and Data Collection
3. Interpretation of Findings and taking actions
4. Report preparation and publishing

Note that there is a ‘loop’ between phases 2 and 3 in that they will be iterative for the duration of data collection.

Project Set Up

This phase includes the following:

**Project scope meeting** with project sponsor and others, to include:

- Determine project group permanent members
- Others who may be involved during the course of the project
- Determine work focus of the project (e.g. ISPL project, specific customer relationships etc.)
- Agreement on the most appropriate ways to connect with the participants. This includes the way in which I will connect with the group’s e-mail communications

**Briefing** for all participants. This includes:

- addressing any concerns
- reviewing the process of the research to ensure understanding
- review participants’ roles, role of sponsor (see below)
- review researchers’ responsibilities
The System Psychodynamics of E-mail: A Case Study

Initial interview with participants in order for me to

- obtain a broad understanding of the ways in which e-mail is used by individuals
- inform myself about the purpose to which e-mail is put by this group
- ensure that I understand participants’ expectations of me and of the project
- agree on timing and organisation of process steps such as focus groups

Data Collection Phase

I anticipate that data will comprise any or all of the following:

- The e-mail communications which support the work of the group
- Informal ‘social’ e-mail communication in the group
- Observation notes taken while I am observing participants’ use of e-mail
- E-mail communication between me and group members, discussing the work of the study
- Notes from individual interviews and focus groups
- My own experience as a participant in the group

Project Review

Review of progress will be on-going for the duration of the project but I anticipate that formal review of findings will occur as follows:

1. Early review (after say one week) with sponsor and sample participants, to ensure project is on track.

2. Rolling one on one and/or group discussion with participants to explore their experience in the project. These may take place face to face or via e-mail, depending on participants’ preferences and on the needs of the project.

3. Focus groups with as many participants as possible. These will take place at agreed intervals during the project, to be agreed with participants. Subject to discussion with participants, at least a focus group at the half way point and on conclusion of the project are desirable.

Project Boundaries

I am already clear that e-mail is an integral part of organisational life in ISPL and that large volumes of e-mail communication are transmitted and received daily. It will be important to, in some way, put a boundary around the project, so that:

1. The volume of data collected is manageable and

2. The link between e-mail communication and the primary task of the organisation remains the focus of the research

I believe it is important to consider the following parameters during project set-up:

1. Identify a small core of group members
2. Determine the potential numbers of others with whom e-mail connections will be made within ISPL, within the context of this project.

3. Estimate the number of others likely to become involved outside the organisation.

4. Agree an appropriate duration for data collection, linked to one or more business timeframes.

5. Agree how I will connect in with the group at a technical level, (create an e-mail group, use of 'cc' etc.)

**ISPL Staff Involvement**

The primary focus of this project is to study the impact of e-mail on group dynamics and as such, most of the data to be analysed will be created during the course of ISPL conducting the normal course of its business. I anticipate that participant effort beyond that which they would have expended anyway, will be limited to:

1. Project set-up discussion described above
2. E-mail interaction directly with me and (optionally) with others about the subject matter of the study
3. Occasional one-on-one short interviews
4. Occasional focus groups as described above.

In addition, depending on the progress of the research, it may become desirable to more formally obtain data from participants, via a survey. This would be brief, electronically distributed and would comprise multi-choice responses. It is not my intention at any time to engage participants in the creation of long narrative responses.

Participation in the project would be voluntary and participants would be free to withdraw at any time.

**My Obligations to ISPL and to the Participants**

For the duration of this project and after its completion I will:

1. Either ensure that my expectations of ISPL staff do no escalate beyond the negotiated commitment, or ensure that any additional demands of the project are discussed first with the project sponsor before being actioned.
2. Report all findings anonymously, in that, unless specifically agreed to the contrary, I will not refer to Information Services Pty Ltd or to any of the participants by name.
3. Maintain confidentiality on all matters relating to the business of Information Services Pty Ltd. This includes communicating on e-mail within the framework of this project, only with those Information Services Pty Ltd staff who are involved in the project. This may
include staff external to the core project participants, as dictated by the needs of the organisation.

4. Maintain confidentiality on all information provided to me by individual participants.

**Project Sponsor - Greg (surname removed)**

The role of the project sponsor is to:

1. Sanction Information Services Pty Ltd participation in this project
2. In collaboration with me, determine an appropriate set of participants
3. Invite agreed staff to participate
4. Agree the ‘rules of engagement’ with me. This includes constraints on and expectations of me as well as my expectations of participants.
5. Review research findings from time to time with me
6. Collaborate with me and with participants to ensure that the organisation benefits from engagement in the research
7. Participate in a process of review if an unanticipated conflict arises between the work of the organisation and participants’ involvement in the research
8. Be familiar with the overall academic purpose of the research

**Proposed Project Scope meeting**

**Attendees**

I propose that this meeting be attended by:

1. one or more members of the intended case study group
2. Greg (surname removed) and
3. myself

**Agenda**

I propose that discussion needs to take place on the following topics:

1. Explore whether there are particular aspects of e-mail usage within ISPL, which it would be useful to incorporate and explore further in this project.
2. Review this in the context of my ‘participating group’ criteria in Appendix B.
3. Determine an appropriate work-based focus for the project. This could be a specific project or a particular topic for which e-mail communication is used. Alternatively, the focus may be all interactions between members over an agreed period of time. (See 'project boundaries' above)
4. Timeframes – for the whole project, for first review with individuals and with a focus group of participants.

5. Provision of clarity on participants’ involvement, particularly details of any time commitments necessary for the project, which are additional to normal workload (also refer to ‘My Obligations to ISPL’ above)

6. Review roles of sponsor and participants.

**Timing for the Project Phases**

The ideal timing for me would be to complete project set up by the end of July, so that data collection can commence soon after that.

The duration of data collection needs to be appropriate to the work of the selected group. At this stage, I have nominated a three month period, simply in order to have a starting point for determining the most appropriate duration.

**Complaint Procedure**

If at any time during or after completion of this study, you have any queries that I have been unable to satisfy or if you wish to lodge a complaint about the way you have been treated during the study, please direct your query to:

The Chair,
Human Research Ethics Committee,
Swinburne University of Technology,
P.O. Box 218
Hawthorn 3122

Telephone: 03 9214 5223

**Appendix to the Briefing Document**

**What is Action Research?**

Action research is a form of social research and differs from traditional 'scientific' methods in that it is:

1. Largely qualitative
2. Explores a particular situation without attempting to predict outcomes
3. Uses hypothesis generation as a vehicle for improving understanding of particular events or phenomena
4. Is developmental in that the process of data gathering and analysis may result in revision of initial hypotheses
5. Accepts that not all data can be created in digital or numerical form
6. Allows human experience and emotions as valid forms of data for analysis
7. Takes account of change over the duration of the project
8. Recognises and works with complex systems, including non-linear causal systems
It will be important for participants to understand that at the conclusion of this research, more new questions may have emerged than answers to problems. However, I also anticipate that interested participants will discover a wealth of useful learning during the process and that the business will have had the opportunity to benefit from these findings.

Criteria for Participating Group

1. It should have a collective ‘spirit of enquiry’ that is an interest in discovering something new, a preparedness to tolerate a state of ‘not knowing’ and a willingness to experiment with actions relating to e-mail usage which seem useful, based on learnings during the project.

2. The group should preferably comprise:

3. both local and remote (geographically) members.

4. members at different levels in the organisational hierarchy

5. connections with external parties (e.g. customers, suppliers, etc.)

6. E-mail should be in common use and used for multiple facets of the job.

7. Willingness to participate in data gathering methods such as interviews, focus groups etc.

8. NOT looking for immediate answers to a pressing problem relating to this project.

9. Senior management sponsorship. This project will place some demands on participants’ time and it will be important for commitment to continue right to the end.
Appendix 4 - Working Note

The Impact of E-mail on Group Dynamics

A Working Note

and

An Invitation to Comment

Introductory Remarks

I am offering this document to participants in this project as a summary of my reflections to date on the use of e-mail by the case study group, within the context of life in Information Systems Pty Ltd. It is based on:

- My own observations of your e-mail communications.
- Information conveyed during various conversations with participants since the study started in September 2000.
- Information conveyed to me by other ISPL staff who are not participants in this study.
- My own experience of the ISPL working environment inside the physical office space, in external physical spaces used for meetings (e.g. local coffee shops) and in the ‘virtual space’ of my Internet connection.

I would like to point out that some of the observations in this document are not directly about the use of e-mail. This is because this is a case study and so the context is important. Where I have chosen to explore broader organisational issues, it is in the belief that they are in some way related to the use of e-mail.

I am interested in any responses you care to make to this document. More specifically I want to encourage:

- Both initial ‘gut’ reactions and more considered responses.
- Reflections on your own experience as it relates to the material in this document.
- Commentary on how you have been impacted by the e-mail related behaviour to which I make reference.
- Discussion of any other aspects of the application of e-mail in your business, whether or not your thoughts are obviously associated with the material in this document.
Participants in the Study

When this study was first set up in August 200, there were 11 participants. They were:

(List of Participants was included here in the original working note)

When members of the study have left ISPL, I have no longer been receiving their ‘inbound’ e-mails. However they remain part of the study in that I made certain commitments to them and these remain in place.

Technical difficulties (at my end) have resulted in project interruptions and delays.

In May, as you are all aware (via e-mail!), the group was reduced down to a smaller membership comprising members marked in the list above with a *. The primary purpose of this was to enable me to examine e-mail-related dynamics via a ‘manageable’ volume of e-mails. The choice of membership of the reduced group was driven by my preference to incorporate PC, MC and consultant roles and have a smaller group for the 2nd phase.

This ‘working note’ is being provided to all the participants who are still on staff and as many of the others who can be contacted.

What this document is NOT……

This is not a report in the sense of being a summary of findings. You might recall from when this project was originally set up that this is action research and as such, the focus is on exploration and ‘teasing out’ of issues rather than a search for definitive answers. I appreciate that its intent is different from the ‘search for answers’ which characterises much consulting work.

My hope in choosing this methodology is that the study will reveal something which had not previously been known, about the impact of e-mail on group dynamics, even if this is only a discovery about ISPL at this time in the life of the organisation. The case study approach is reflective of my interest in probing a specific situation and my acceptance of its uniqueness, in contrast with other methodologies, which might seek to apply findings to similar situations.

At this stage, I simply want to invite you to engage in some exploration of ‘the impact of e-mail on group dynamics at Information Systems Pty Ltd’.

Please note:

1. All commitments already made about confidentiality continue to apply to all material provided to me in relation this project. In other words, feel free to speak your mind!
2. I am providing this document only to participants in the study.

How to Communicate with me

Any of the following:
E-mail:  (My e-mail address)
Telephone:  (Contact telephone numbers)
Fax:  (Private fax number)

In addition I hope to meet with some or all of you, in one or more small group settings to discuss the issues face to face.

**The Working Note**

**Your ‘place of’ and ‘space for’ work**

**Where will you work today?**

Unlike staff who go to the same physical office space for eight or so hours a day, a typical ISPL staff member’s ‘place of work’ can mean a range of places. Apart from working on the customer’s site a lot of the time, you also, from time to time, work from home, in local coffee shops (where you hold meetings) and of course you work ‘in cyberspace’.

I understand that ISPL staff are provided with a PC and networking facilities as part of their ‘package’ and that, as a result of the dispersed ‘place of work’ the ‘electronic desktop’ is an essential ‘tool of the trade’.

My e-mail ‘window’ into your world has left me with the impression that it can be very difficult to organise face to face meetings with colleagues and this is seen to be due to the demands on each of you to achieve your billings targets. Indeed meeting time is ‘lost billing time’ so in some senses, e-mail offers a convenient substitute for face to face encounters.

I have been surprised therefore, to not see more e-mail interaction between you on work-related matters and am left wondering where the dialogue takes place. I assume some of the work is done in isolation but also understand that many projects involve team effort. Later in this note, I discuss the nature of the e-mails I have seen in the study to date. The point I am making here is that **I expected to see more informal discussion about client work**. Certainly the mail system is used for sharing documents with each other and the provision of a report ‘for review and comment’ is common. My curiosity has been aroused about why you do not use e-mail more, for informal dialogue. Perhaps you meet with each other more than has been evident through my ‘window’? Or does the pressure to ‘do the numbers’ mean that informal dialogue must be sacrificed? Or something else?

**The 24 hour day**

Not so long ago, none of us had e-mail and it seems to me that there used to be a clearer boundary between ‘work’ and ‘home’. That boundary is blurred these days and your e-mail date stamps suggest to me that your ‘work time’ and ‘not-work time’ are less clearly differentiated. You each have a portable computer, access to a common server and free (in a monetary sense) Internet access and this, in theory at least, makes you available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to be ‘on the job’. Of course professionals in most fields can take a ‘briefcase full’ of work home. However the technology keeps you constantly ‘available’.

I am left wondering how you individually and perhaps collectively, make decisions about the boundary between work and ‘not work’.
Furthermore, it looks like even the boundary between ‘too sick to be at work’ and ‘fit and well enough to work’ is equally blurred. My curiosity on this matter has been further fuelled by comments from staff at all levels about being ‘sick’ but still available to work via the mail system.

Also it appears that ‘vacation time’ can become ‘work time’ for some.

**Are you at work or home?**

Unlike other organisations with whom I am familiar, I have been informed that ISPL imposes few rules on staff about their use of e-mail. The ‘@ispl.com’ address may be used for both ISPL work and private purposes. I have noted that the extent to which private use is taken up varies very widely. I understand that some staff have only one e-mail address and use it for all their private and personal e-mail. Others opt to keep them separate and I have the impression that the desire for confidentiality is the main underlying reason for this.

I have wondered what criteria staff might use in deciding the extent to which private e-mail is dealt with during the working day and work e-mail during ‘personal time’. As you are available for the work at any time, is there a (perhaps informal) understanding that private matters can be dealt with during business hours?

In the course of observing the group’s e-mails from my own computer, I have discovered how easy it is for me to be distracted from my main task by following a link offered to me on one of the group’s inbound news or advertising items and wondered whether this is paralleled within the group itself? Maybe the distraction is sometimes welcome relief from the work. Maybe it even helps you do the work in the sense that ‘A change is as good as a rest’!

**Where will you sit today?**

I am informed that MC’s and all consultants are expected to ‘hot desk’ and that others, including PC’s and other senior managers are provided with a permanent desk. However it seems that, at least while you were at old ISPL address, those who were allocated to the hot desk facilities have claimed ‘ownership’ over their preferred seating. I understand that it is expected that this pattern will repeat in the new office.

I understand the logic of ‘hot desking’. In a purely economic sense, it enables more people to be accommodated in less space. Most of you need in-house desk space only when you are not on site so the plan makes business sense. However, I have also been thinking about the broader implications of ‘hot desking’ and particularly the psychological impact on you. I am interested in the motivation for ‘claiming ownership’ of desk space and wondering whether this creates a stronger sense of ‘having a place’ in the organisation.

**Time with colleagues**

For consultants and managing consultants, the opportunity to spend time with colleagues outside of billable work is limited. Unlike the PC group and the senior management team, other staff have few opportunities to meet face to face with work group colleagues. I have been surprised by the volume of e-mail generated each time a member of the organisation is leaving and a ‘leaving lunch’ or drinks are being organised. It seems that such occasions have become an important opportunity for face to face encounters. In contrast, I have come to the conclusion that work teams rarely meet face to face as a group and wonder what impact this has on individuals.
Organisation Structure and Roles

Role confusion

Organisational structure, roles and responsibilities provide a framework within which the work of an organisation can be undertaken and the challenge facing management is to organise for optimal performance.

During the relatively short life of this project, significant organisational change has taken place. Some participants in this project have taken up two or more different roles at different times. Toward the end of 2000 a major organisational change was implemented and this seemed to affect everyone in the business in some way.

My understanding is that much of the change that took place was communicated to staff through e-mails. Was there an expectation by some, that the detail, the implications and the needed adjustments would be understood by all as a result of e-mail communication?

I have the impression that some staff were left with feelings of confusion about the overall purpose of the reorganisation, anxiety about the personal implications and some anger about imposed change. I have formed the view that there was (still is?) little opportunity for this emotional material to be worked through so that individuals can make personal and collective sense of it. Managers themselves have had to grapple with what it all meant, leaving little capacity for supporting staff to reach their own understanding.

It seems to me that even now, several months down the track there is still confusion about the roles and possibly a considerable gap between senior management’s expectations of specific roles and the incumbents’ view of what is possible and/or expected. My evidence for this assertion is that, over time I have heard several debates about the role of say Managing Consultant.

I have wondered whether the high volume of cartoons, jokes and other humorous material has in some way been a form of expression for matters that can not otherwise be discussed.

The Work

I have the impression that there is much anxiety around the sometimes conflicting objectives of bidding for work, ‘doing interesting work’ and achieving acceptable billing ratios. The focus of concern varies according to various hierarchical levels in the organisation.

The most senior level seems to be primarily focussed on ‘the earn out’ and associated revenue goals. Associated with this and involving other levels in the organisation is a level of preoccupation with bidding for business. There seems to be a belief that the organisation should be more selective about which work is tendered for and that, having chosen to tender, the quality of the proposal will be a significant factor in securing the business against competing bids.

Consultants are keen to do ‘interesting work’ and there seems to be some concern that the need to optimise billing levels can compromise individuals’ potential to work on preferred project types.

One of the main reasons for the structural change that occurred towards the end of 2000, was the desire for an optimal mix of these factors. It seems ironic therefore that the organisational change, which carried so much hope for the future, appears to be an ongoing source of tension and confusion.
I have noted the term ‘on the bench’ in the organisation’s lexicon, used to refer to non-billing consultants. It has been made clear to me that ‘no-one has ever been sacked for being on the bench’ but I am left wondering about how it feels to be there and how one copes with the embarrassment of being in that position.

Identity

ISPL has had a strong brand image, evidenced by the web page, the front office ‘look’, documentation standards etc. all reinforcing the ‘Different’ image and reflective of the ‘Different’ culture. The change of ownership seemed to bring with it a new culture evidenced by another style of e-mail from the new parent company. Many of these communications seem impersonal, policy related and not necessarily relevant to all staff even though they have been addressed to all. The regular e-mails about the staff share scheme are an example. Presumably not all staff are shareholders yet everyone receives the e-mails.

These e-mails from GTC have seemed to be unwelcome and ISPL staff at all levels seem to have regarded the new organisation with a mix of distrust and contempt. I have wondered whether this is a convenient way of expressing a more deep seated resentment about the new ownership and strongly held fear within ISPL about loss of identity in the new organisation.

Other concerns about the new owner have included direct and indirect commentary on the congruence between their espoused values and those of ISPL, their perceived North American focus and their motivation for purchasing ISPL.

Again, there did not seem to be a space in the ISPL organisation where anxiety around the new ownership could be worked through and I have wondered whether recent staff attrition has been a collective flight from the disliked or feared new parent. It seemed to me that some of the feeling has been expressed via e-mails in jokes and cartoons.

Communications

At this point, I would like to remind you that the source of my e-mail data for this study has been the inbound e-mail for the volunteer group. Inevitably this has exposed me to outbound e-mail from others but only to the extent that through the ‘forward’ facility, it became ‘inbound’ to one or more of the case study group.

Volume of E-mail

I have been surprised by the volume of inbound e-mail to the case study group. Based on my experience of other organisations, I had expected it to be higher. The total daily number of inbound e-mails to the group of eleven has been between 110 and 150 which translates to 10 to 15 per person per day. My surprise at this volume was because I have encountered other organisations in IT related fields in which 100 to 200 e-mails is normal. Furthermore, approximately one third to one half of these inbound e-mails would be communications about administrative matters from management, personal e-mails, inbound jokes and other humorous material and items from newsgroups to which individual members of the case study group subscribe. The total number of e-mails relating to ISPL consulting work has therefore been relatively small.
The System Psychodynamics of E-mail: A Case Study

Management communications to staff

Senior managers seem to routinely use e-mail for communicating with all staff on a variety of matters. These communications have been very diverse and I have been curious about why managers have chosen to use this medium in preference to available alternatives and about the extent to which the e-mail communications might be supplemented by other forms of communication. Three cases illustrate this observation:

1. Senior management has used e-mail extensively for communicating grave concerns about matters such as billing ratios and revenue projections. I am curious about the impact of these e-mails on staff and the ways in which the concerns expressed in them are worked through. I am informed that there are few regular face to face meetings so at this stage have concluded that e-mail is the primary medium used for dealing with such issues.

   More recently, the office move has been dealt with similarly.

2. Managers seem to include staff in issues relating to the general working environment and the debate about the on-hold music is an example of an issue that stimulated a flurry of e-mails. I am puzzled by the contrast between this and the apparent silence which greets e-mails on more concerning matters.

3. Humour has been generally prevalent and this is referenced elsewhere in this document. Under this specific heading, I am interested in the motivation behind humour sent by senior managers selectively to others.

I am particularly interested to understand:
- The impact of these communications on you
- What might be missing in these communications.
- Your view of the impact on the business.

Communication in general

E-mail is routinely used to communicate facts, in the form of attachments for review or comment. Equally ISPL seems to make extensive use of it for dealing with routine administrative matters such as expenses and payroll.

Occasionally it is used to communicate ‘global’ requests for help, to which responses are generally rapid and generous – the recent request for three bicycle tyres was an example. Staff also seem to respond energetically to e-mails carrying intellectual challenge and I have noted a number of these coming from Greg.

I have been surprised that, in this case study, e-mail has rarely been used for any other open discussion and exploration and wonder if any readers of this note can throw any light on this. I recall comments made in early interviews and focus groups when participants stated a preference to avoid any ‘emotional’ content and wondered if this is a clue. As an example, in a recent review of the organisational change undertaken by the MC’s, it was noted that “Managing and Principal Consultants have no mechanism for communication” and I wonder “Why not e-mail?”

Occasionally, relatively brief e-mail ‘flurries’ have occurred on certain ‘hot’ topics. Words of anger have been expressed but these have been prefaced with a disclaimer about ‘letting off steam’ as though the message sender wants recipient to ‘take the punches’ without retaliating.
I am left wondering whether there is an unspoken fear about what might happen if e-mail is used more informally.

**Knowledge Management**

It has become clear to me that there is collective commitment to creating and sustaining a ‘knowledge bank’ of information which can be accessed by all staff and IT systems play make an important contribution. The manner in which resumes are kept up to date with the ongoing narrative of consultants’ projects are examples of the commitment to keeping this knowledge bank alive.

As noted under ‘communication’ above, it seems there is a sharp focus on facts and data and that information must be accurate. There seems to be less space (as observed through the e-mail window) for dialogue, uncertainties and exploration of the potential and the possible. I have become curious about whether there is any space for this in the organisation.

I have formed the impression that informal discussion, whether about performance in role, team dynamics or the work itself tend to take place off site in local coffee shops or similar venues. It seems that some conversations can only take place away from the formal work environment. I wonder what factors influence these choices.

**Changes over time**

Finally I offer some commentary on changes I have observed in the use of e-mail during the course of the study:

1. The number of inbound jokes has dropped dramatically. This may be a reflection of group membership.
2. The appearance of P.A. to P.A. communications organising meetings between respective bosses. In a recent exercise I noted an exchange of TEN e-mails before a mutually satisfactory meeting time could be agreed!
3. Certain reports that seemed to be distributed regularly have not appeared for some time e.g. bids in progress.
4. Out of 11 original participants in this study in September 2000, five have now left the organisation and this will increase to six by mid June. I am curious if this level of attrition is typical of the organisation and perhaps the industry or reflective of other factors.

**And Finally…**

I value your participation in this study. It is intended to be a learning exercise for participants as much as for the researcher. The field is not yet well researched so we are all learning. Page one includes a list of participants if you wish to copy them on any communication to me.

I invite your reflections, your comments, your ideas and your experience.