

Participatory Design in Complex Organizations

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INTRODUCTION

This panel addresses the issue of what it takes to do participatory design in complex organizations. All the speakers have experience developing projects—either software design, work design, or change strategy projects—in large institutions. In this panel, we wish to open discussion about the nature of “participatory design” by asking what we are trying to achieve in requesting “participation” from people in organizations. We will address the fact that the design of systems, from software development to work design, invariably extends beyond initial phases of design into implementation and ongoing use. What sort of participation is required to make these systems effective? From whom? What sort of relationships do we need to establish with people in organizations in order to achieve successful system design and use? The members of the panel will not only focus on PD techniques, but on issues such as the political realities of doing PD in complex settings, how taking an advocacy stance for changing organizations gets played out in PD,

and what problems this produces. We will discuss how doing PD in these settings makes one a political actor, and we will address the ways in which becoming a political actor is itself a form of participation.

All members of this panel have used PD techniques in their work. Marsha Ellis, a computer scientist at NYNEX Science & Technology, is project leader for a software system under development (and in trial) for use by engineers in the telephone company. Brigitte Jordan is an anthropologist at Xerox PARC and IRL who is developing change strategies within Xerox. Riitta Hellman is a practitioner at the Norwegian Computing Center in Oslo, who has studied multi-host cases of the impact of new technology on organizational forms, and who works to produce change in these organizations. Patricia Sachs is an anthropologist at NYNEX Science & Technology who directs the Work Systems Design Group, which develops technology and work systems in collaboration with people in the telephone company.

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