

## Experience in Using Action Learning Sets to Enhance Information Management and Technology Strategic Thinking in the UK National Health Service

PAUL N. FINLAY & CHRIS G. MARPLES

Loughborough University Business School, Loughborough,  
Leicestershire LE11 3TU, UK

**ABSTRACT** *This paper gives a descriptive summary of activity in what was the Trent Region of the UK's National Health Service (NHS), which was designed to support an increase within individual NHS units in the benefits being derived from the effective use of information. Spanning some two years, this activity led to IMAGINE, a programme of action learning on the topic of strategic thinking in information management and technology. IMAGINE was intended to guide delegates towards the goal of developing or enhancing their units' Information Management and Technology (IM&T) strategy, as a stage in the process of making more effective use of information systems. The paper describes the various phases of IMAGINE, including the action learning process which was an integral part, and comments on the effectiveness of the IMAGINE programme.*

### Introduction

*The UK National Health Service—a period of transition*

The National Health Service underwent major reforms throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, to satisfy government policies: individual units now possess more autonomy while regional management has become less significant; purchasing and provision of health services have been separated; and an increased level of competition has been brought about via an internal market for services amongst the provider units.

Historically, regions took responsibility for provision of common information systems across all units, founded upon a 'corporate information systems' approach promulgated at national level. In line with many industries, this strategy has been abandoned in favour of distributed information systems in individual units: several reasons are apparent:

- technology has advanced to enable local information systems to be provided in a cost-effective way;
- the difficulties of providing regional systems to satisfy the needs of units and individuals had led to widespread disaffection with the experience of information systems thus far;
- the new, autonomous, competitive environment demands freedom at unit level to seek advantage wherever it might be achieved: unit information

systems represent a particular opportunity to support the evolving business in achieving enhanced efficiency and effectiveness.

The abandoning of older strategies has created the opportunity to absorb recent thinking in information management and technology (IM&T) strategic issues. However, some units have been ill-equipped to take advantage of the opportunity because of the inadequate level of understanding of IM&T issues within the unit, while for others, IM&T issues have not been a high priority, given the effort required from staff at all levels to adjust to a more dynamic, sometimes turbulent, environment.

#### *The NHS Information Management & Technology Training Initiative*

The way forward towards better and more effective use of information is through training and staff development (Sir Duncan Nichol, Chief Executive, NHS Management Executive in his introduction to the IM&T Training Strategy, 1992).

The National Health Service Training Directorate (NHSTD) and the Information Management Group (IMG) of the NHS Management Executive produced a training strategy document, 'Information Management and Technology (IM&T) Training', in 1992. The strategy stated that delivery of IM&T training should be a local responsibility, but receiving stimulus, guidance and support from the NHSTD. A cascading process of IM&T strategy formulation and implementation was established from national to local levels, and thence to individual units.

NHSTD and IMG (Adams *et al.*, 1992) drew upon the 'Management in the 1990s' research programme conducted at the MIT Sloan School of Management under the directorship of Scott Morton (1991). Seen to be particularly significant were:

- the strategic alignment model, whereby organisations should seek to have clear business, human resource and information strategies that align in support of one another;
- the five levels of business transformation—localised exploitation, internal integration, business process redesign, business network redesign and business scope redefinition;
- the value chain of Porter (1985), referenced within the MIT research, wherein information systems and communication technology are recognised to have the potential to integrate the segments of the chain.

Measures taken by NHSTD to implement national strategy included part-funding of initiatives to put in place local IM&T training programmes, and the establishment of a group of IM&T Training Co-ordinators covering all regions of the UK to promote IM&T initiatives.

#### **The IMAGINE Project**

The IMAGINE project, managed by the IM&T Training Co-ordinator in the Trent Region and part-funded by NHSTD, was established to carry the national initiative for the formulation of appropriate IM&T training strategies, throughout Trent Health and down to individual units. IMAGINE

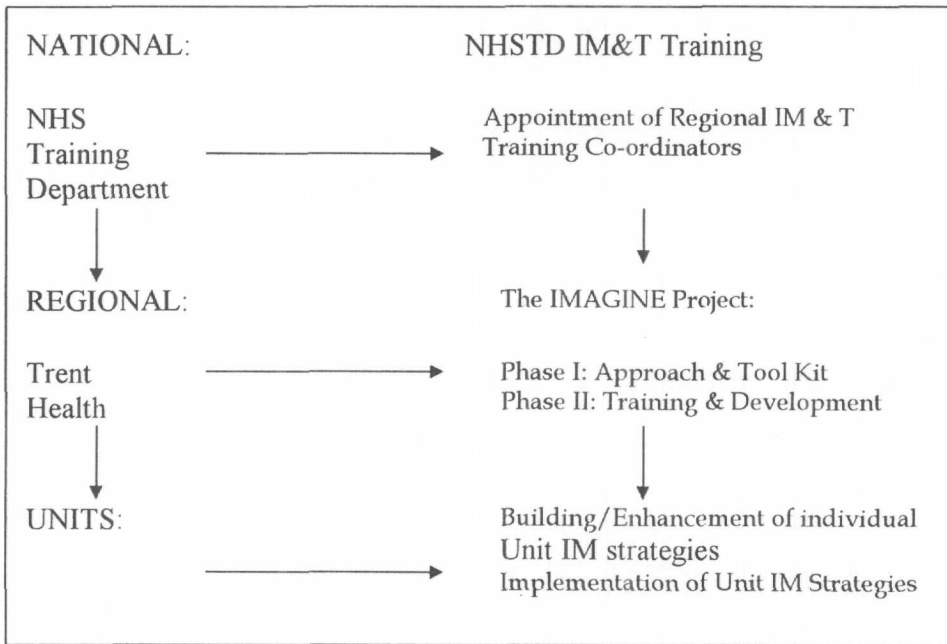


Figure 1. The cascade of IM strategic planning activity.

evolved from January 1992 through to January 1995, bringing delegates from units together in a participative way to define how IM&T training might best be encouraged and supported. Figure 1 shows the cascading of IM&T strategy formulation down through organisational levels, and the corresponding initiatives, including *IMAGINE*, at each level.

Early work was aimed at putting IM&T issues on the agendas of participating middle managers. A series of workshops helped delegates focus on limiting factors in their current IM&T activity, and to accept responsibility for an action which would in some small way enhance local IM&T performance. The process revealed concerns and shortcomings which were shared among the delegates, and which are typical of many organisations, including:

- extent of senior management commitment;
- ageing information systems no longer doing what was required;
- lack of training in the use of information systems;
- no incentive for accurate data input;
- distrust of the resultant output.

Other issues were voiced by delegates which were more specific to their particular units.

#### *The IMAGINE Project Group*

These workshops created a subset of unit representatives who were committed to IM&T 'reform'. Under the leadership of the IM&T Training Co-

ordinator, an *IMAGINE* project group of about a dozen of these committed individuals was brought together, supported through the expertise of consultants from the private and university sectors in the areas of IM&T, change management, project management, strategic management and action learning.

The project group reasoned that unit IM&T training strategies, in isolation, would be out of place. IM&T training strategy was thought to be one facet of an encompassing unit IM&T strategy. Accordingly, it defined its task to be to support unit representatives, to enable them to facilitate the development or enhancement of unit IM&T strategies, including, but not limited to, training. *IMAGINE* phase I was concerned with the formulation by the project group of an approach and tool kit for unit IM&T strategy building. Phase II exploited the fruits of phase I in delivering training and development activity to unit representatives.

*Phase I: formulating the IMAGINE approach and framework*

The project group met on some half a dozen occasions: its work was informed by the NHSTD IM&T training strategy and, through that, the 'Management in the 1990s' research programme, and by the thinking of Earl, Friend and Hickling, and Galliers, as described below.

Three facets of strategy in information have been proposed by Earl (1989): an IM strategy focused on management and organisational issues including training and development, an IS strategy addressing the business need for applications, and an IT strategy concerned with the delivery of service through available technology. In turn, IS strategy is said by Earl (1987) to be derived from a multiple methodology: a 'top-down' review of how business plans can be supported; a 'bottom-up' analysis of current systems; and an 'inside-out' probing of how technology developments can best be exploited.

Galliers (1987) has placed emphasis on wide involvement of staff in information systems planning. The process is seen as a corporate activity involving managers and user staff as well as IS professionals. Senior executive 'sponsors' should be prepared to pave a way for smooth implementation, and to make resources available for IS developments. The many stakeholders each bring individual motivations to bear, and the process of strategy building should value the achievement of consensus. Education is thought to be an integral part of IS planning, to make managers aware of the potential. The planning process is perceived as ongoing, concerned with incremental change and continuous adaptation. With Galliers' thinking in mind, the project group adopted an approach which places emphasis on group facilitation and change management skills, as much as on strategic management and information management techniques.

The *process* of IM&T strategy building was based on the Strategic Choice approach (Friend & Hickling, 1987). The issue was thought to consist of a series of interlinked decisions, giving rise to a large number of possible schemes. At a point in time some pressing issues will be at the forefront of attention while others can be left in the background. Progress can be made by choosing strategies for in-focus issues which enhance predefined comparison criteria. In so doing, the need arises to investigate uncertainties to inform the decision process: for example, clarification may be sought of business

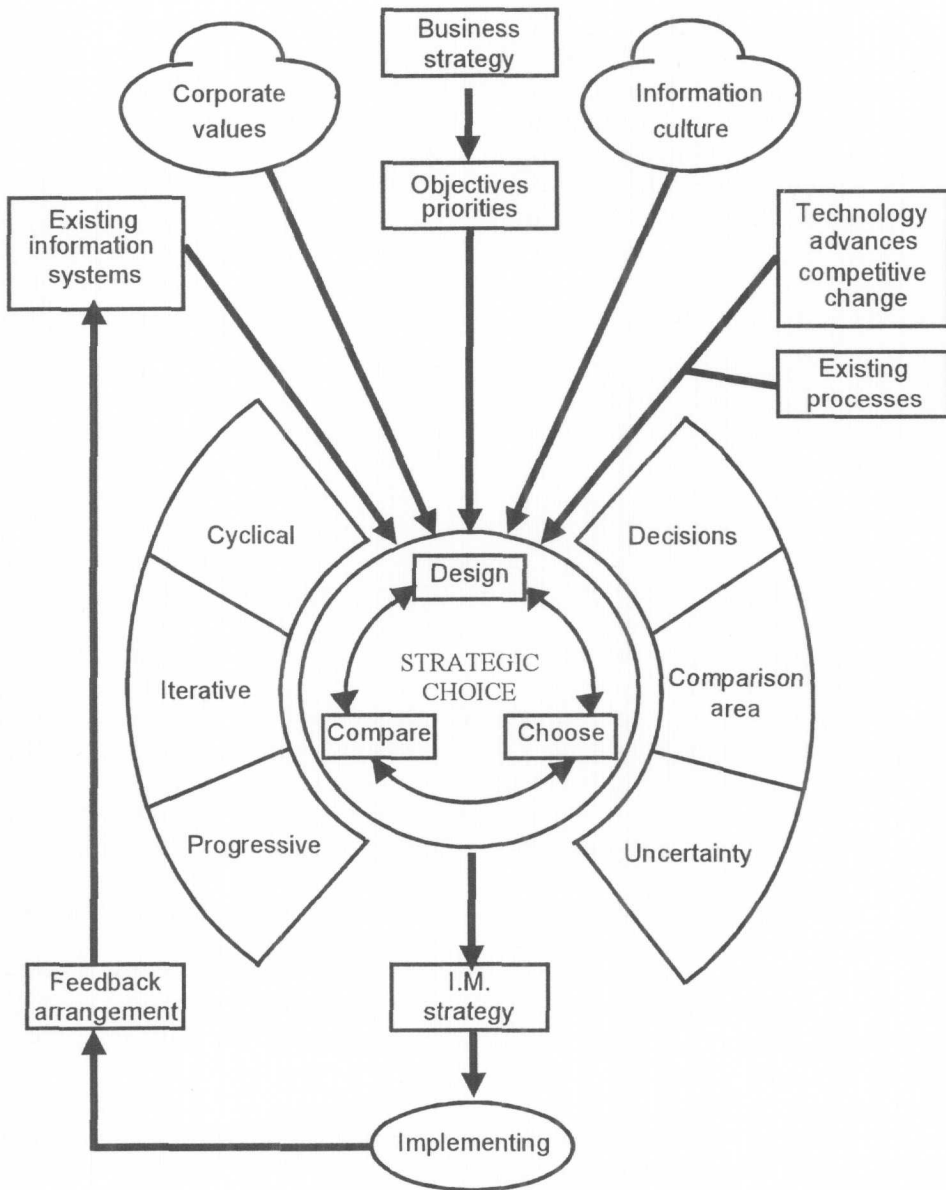


Figure 2. The framework which emerged from *IMAGINE* phase 1.

strategies or cultural values. As time goes by, some choices will be made, at least for the present, while a new set of pressing issues will come into focus from the background. This process is fully compatible with cyclical, iterative strategic thinking based on collaboration among a group of stakeholders.

One difficulty faced during phase 1 of *IMAGINE* lay in the diverse vocabulary and understandings that the members brought to the project group meetings, and some care went into defining terms for use within meetings, based on earlier work from the Central Computer & Telecommunications Agency (CCTA, 1990).



The most tangible result of the project group's deliberations in phase 1 was the publication in October 1993 of the *IMAGINE* handbook (Carr, 1993). The handbook introduced some fundamentals of strategic management; defined key terms relating to information management in order to avoid misunderstandings in discussions; and documented the approach for unit IM&T strategy building that was to be the framework for the forthcoming training.

*Phase II: the IMAGINE action learning programme*

A programme of action learning was designed for delivery in the remainder of 1993 and early 1994, to equip senior managers with the necessary skills for them to work within the *IMAGINE* approach, developing their capabilities at the same time as their IM&T strategies.

There is no shortage of high-quality IM&T training materials in the NHS. For the most part, these materials remain on the shelves; staff have shown little inclination to go to a training room, away from their desks, to read notions of IM&T best practice which give little practical insight into the real problems they face.

Writing about 'Where action learning fits in', Casey (1983) comments, 'Classrooms in which the trainer decides what managers ought to know and in which the trainer presents them with the result of his own learning, can do little more than light up a few torchlights dimly and temporarily. By contrast, action learning is capable of so positioning a manager that he seizes ownership of what he needs to know and releases a powerful chain reaction of effort within himself and others which is quite independent of the trainer.'

The need for greater ability within NHS units to encourage strategic thinking in IM&T issues was real and urgent. Casey's 'powerful chain reaction' is what was sought. The action learning programme, lasting for about six months, was designed to emphasise the importance of supporting the delegates in their endeavours in strategic thinking, and comprised:

- a briefing event of an afternoon, evening and morning, to establish the programme and give an overview of the areas to be covered. For the evening, delegates were to be joined by their senior management sponsors in order to seed commitment at the higher level;
- a training event of three days, covering topics of strategic management, IM strategy setting and small group working on key topics;
- the division of the delegates into four action learning sets, each of about seven or eight delegates who were thought to be bringing similar aspirations to the programme;
- ongoing action learning set meetings held every three or four weeks for whole days under the guidance of a change management facilitator. Each set had about six meetings in all, to help members maintain momentum on IM&T strategy building or enhancement within their individual units, to share experiences and problems, and to develop IM&T strategic thinking and interpersonal skills;

- a recall event of one day to cover issues arising from the action learning sets, and to summarise delegates' progress on strategy development.

#### *Does IMAGINE Fit the Established Mould of Action Learning?*

Casey continues, 'Action learning works on the premise that managers learn best from their work, from and with each other.' However, he comments on '... one condition for learning which is not necessarily present in a manager's working life—that is the regular opportunity to pause and reflect before having another go'. The *IMAGINE* sets were intended to provide opportunity for pausing and reflection.

Sutton (1983) has listed six varied programmes where the action learning approach has been taken. In each case, the development of individuals has been one objective. In four of the six cases, a further objective was the tackling of a particular problem. Lawlor (1983) claims that 'Flexibility in programme design is endless ... [but] all the programmes described are based on the concept of combining the solution of real problems with individual/organisational development.' Thus, the *IMAGINE* approach of developing skills at the same time as working upon IM&T strategies was congruent with reported practice.

However, Sutton's cases show a wide variety of approach in other respects. Lawlor has listed main programme variants to be:

- part time or full time participation;
- in-plant programmes, where participants from a single organisation work on a common problem, or external programmes where participants drawn from a number of organisations work on different, though often related, problems;
- duration: six months has often been used;
- form of preparatory activity, including gaining organisational commitment and introductory workshops;
- the way problems are selected: by sponsor, jointly agreed by sponsor and participant, or defined during a preparatory workshop;
- set size: Lawlor argues for four or five participants;
- frequency of meetings: Lawlor's norm is every one to two weeks.

Within the *IMAGINE* programme, questions of economy and availability of time from busy individuals, dictated a part-time approach, less frequent meetings and larger set sizes. The need to involve many units called for an external programme, with the theme of IM&T strategic development. The detailed selection of problems was left to participants at the workshop, though the sponsors would have been more involved had it proved possible to mobilise them.

Casey (1976), from his personal experience, has recognised four distinct tasks for the set facilitator:

- to facilitate giving;
- to facilitate receiving.

These first two relate to the quality of debate between participants. Within *IMAGINE*, the first meeting of each set laid ground rules for interaction

which were intended to promote an effective, yet sensitive, exchange of opinion.

- to clarify the various processes of action learning.

This task was explicit within *IMAGINE*.

- to help others take over the first three tasks.

This fourth task is debated by Casey, who admits that it may be controversial among other set facilitators. Within *IMAGINE*, the task was not made explicit.

The conclusion is that, while there are many different flavours of action learning, the style adopted for *IMAGINE* fitted well within established practice and suited the particular needs of the occasion.

What follows describes each component of the *IMAGINE* action learning programme in turn.

### *The Briefing Day*

The programme was nominally for 26 delegates, but only 24 attended. Tutors present were from Trent Health, Loughborough University Business School, and a consortium of four independent consultants offering teaching in project and change management, and working in support of the action learning sets. The Loughborough tutors briefly introduced the material within the *IMAGINE* handbook with additional supporting materials, delivered in lecture style.

During the first evening, the principles of action learning and the role of the facilitating tutors were introduced. Action learning was defined by the facilitating tutors to be 'a means to bring people together to work on important organisational issues or problems over a period of time and to learn from their efforts to change things. It is based on ... thinking about how experienced people in organisations can learn in ways which will be of benefit to them and to their organisations' (Cottam *et al.*, 1993). Exhibit 1 lists the beliefs which underpin action learning activity, as expressed by the facilitating tutors.

---

#### Exhibit 1: Action learning operates on the beliefs that:

---

- we often need the help of colleagues to tackle difficult problems;
  - it is productive to bring together groups of managers and skilled professionals to help each other think through the issues, create options, agree action and learn from the effects of that action;
  - self confidence is reinforced through mutual attention and support—and the opportunity to listen and to hear; be listened to and to be heard;
  - it is useful to provide an environment where it is safe to admit to having made mistakes and having weaknesses, and to ask for help;
  - reflection and review within the group broadens horizons—through the sharing of experience of situations and sharing solutions to joint concerns.
- 

In order to allow action learning sets to coalesce, delegates were invited to complete a brief statement relating to their project aspirations, in the form:



I want to ... in order that ...

Some of the delegates' ambitions related well to the objectives of the *IMAGINE* programme: for example:

I want to determine an information strategy in liaison with other managers and key staff, in order to support and improve service delivery and patient care.

Others aligned less well, perhaps concentrating on a particular project:

... successfully implement/introduce our departmental information system, in order to assist managers to manage their ... resources more effectively.

Yet others had organisational issues in mind:

By the end of the programme I want to have found a way of influencing management in accepting that my role/function is actively integrated into the IM strategy ...

Delegates were given unstructured, free time during the evening and the following morning, to study each others' statements posted on a wall, and to pass among one another, to allow sets to gel. The sets which formed were compromise groupings representing both common aspirations and the geographical convenience of further meetings. They were an *HR Group* with particular concern for HR implications of IM&T, an *Implementation Group* for a number of delegates who were anxious to progress existing IM&T strategies, a *Pan-Trent Group*, well matched in terms of stage of development and level in the organisation, and a *North Trent/Project Management Group* blending geographic convenience and a particular project management focus. The set formation process was successful. There was no need for intervention by tutors to suggest particular delegate groupings.

### *The Role of the Sponsor*

Sponsors were invited to be present on the evening of the first day. In the event, just four sponsors arrived, and a view began to emerge that while each delegate nominally had a sponsor, only a few sponsors accepted deep commitment and responsibility for the effective formulation of IM&T strategy, while others did not accept any role beyond that of freeing up delegate time for attendance and providing the attendance fee.

The question of sponsorship was thought by the consultants to *IMAGINE* to be of major importance if delegates were to be successful in facilitating unit IM&T strategic thinking, particularly because many were some way removed from senior management positions and may well have needed a sponsor to 'make things happen'. A document, 'The Role of the Sponsor' was created to give delegates a view of the sponsorship they should strive for, or at least to gain from the sponsor a declaration of his/her particular interpretation of the role. The main features of the text of the document appear in Exhibit 2. It was decided also to feature a guest speaker at the following training days to speak on 'The Importance of Sponsorship'.

---

**Exhibit 2: The role of the sponsor**

---

Much has been said about the distinction between *Sponsor* and *Champion*. The sponsor is thought of as a senior (board level?) enabler of an activity. The champion may be at a lower level, but with the time, commitment and energy to drive the cause forward in very practical ways. Sponsor and champion may be the one individual, but more likely, they will be two collaborating people. In our terms, the *IMAGINE* delegates are likely to be the champions.

The sponsor may be:

- a mentor;
- a smoother of access paths;
- a spokesperson on the board;
- a holder and giver of funds;
- a point of contact for the champion at times of difficulty;
- a sounding board;
- a guide for the champion on the relative priority of the IM&T task vs. competing work.

The sponsor should instigate the formation of a cross function steering group, which he/she should chair. The steering group should:

- approve project plans;
- monitor project milestones;
- formally agree the release of funds;
- as individuals, arrange appropriate participation of the staff from their own functions;
- interpret NHS and Regional policy, and monitor conformance;
- approve and interpret unit policy which bears on IM&T strategy.

The champion owes it to the sponsor to:

- report project exceptions to the steering group;
- give early warning of difficulties to the sponsor.

The sponsor and champion should together foster a close informal working relationship for the more satisfactory completion of many of the objectives alone.

---

### *The Teaching Days*

The 24 delegates were divided into two groups to attend two separate teaching events, each lasting three days. Each group received broadly the same agenda. The first day was devoted to a more detailed consideration of the *IMAGINE* handbook material, with considerable opportunity for delegate intervention. The second day took place under the title, 'Doing Something About It', and comprised small group working prompted by a list of 16 questions such as 'What is the national strategy?', 'What are my organisation's priorities?', 'Who do I need to get involved?' and 'How will my own style help or hinder me?' The evening featured a senior guest speaker, addressing the topic 'The Importance of Sponsorship'. The final day again comprised group work, to develop delegates' understanding of what further guidance could be found within existing textual sources, whether NHS internal training modules or other texts.

### *The IMAGINE Action Learning Sets in Practice*

Each set operated under the guidance of one facilitator, whose responsibility it was to consider whether the set is meeting its tasks; building its capacity

to work effectively; achieving a positive learning process; and involving all its members. At the initial meeting of each set, it was expected that the group would:

- confirm its membership and agree 'ground rules' for working together;
- identify and clarify individual expectations from the set;
- consider the differences in the preferred ways of learning of individual members of the set;
- begin to develop ways of working together;
- agree a work plan and timetable—which could be modified later.

At subsequent meetings it was expected that the set would agree time allocation when each member ('problem holder') could raise individual issues. Within each time allocation, there was to be a succession of activities:

- the problem holder describes his/her issue;
- the set asks questions to clarify the situation and discuss their understanding of the issue presented;
- the set helps the problem holder to identify options from which to choose a course of action;
- the set encourages the problem holder to set an achievable goal and declare to the set the next steps that she/he will be taking.

Towards the end of the day when each member had taken a turn as the problem holder, the facilitators were briefly to review the process. If particular needs for more formal input had been agreed by the set, the early part of the next meeting was to be dedicated to satisfying that need, perhaps by having an expert guest, or by input from one member after preparation between meetings.

The two authors 'sat-in' on the Pan-Trent and Implementation groups, respectively. Some of the more interesting points to come out are reviewed below.

#### *The Pan-Trent Action Learning Set—first meeting*

The seven delegates in the set were of similar seniority, two or three levels removed from executive level. The facilitator determined that the first task of the first meeting was to define the set's ground rules. An agreed list of rules was quickly prepared by the members. The rules were:

- confidentiality;
- give each member a half hour of individual space;
- each to accept by the end of the day, a specific commitment to action;
- respect the individual;
- be relaxed and comfortable—each to his/her own style;
- personal notes, but no formal written record;
- be positive;
- question and probe—don't tell or assert;
- seek common ground;
- time for reflection and review at the end of each meeting.

The facilitator then gave the group a view of learning theory, based on the learning pattern of Kolb (1984) and the learning cycle of Honey & Mumford (1982), as the formal input for this first session. Members were each given their space in turn. A brief review of each delegate's situation follows.

*Member 1*—spoke of an IM&T strategy having been scripted previously—as a back-room job—for the NHS trust application. Now everything was changing so fast: staff, organisational structure, locations, and services provided. His responsibility was now to review the strategy to match the new situation. He wondered how to help others to contribute to his thinking: 'a problem I have is that anything I produce will simply get rubber-stamped'. He also wished for a model IM&T strategy to guide his unit's work. An immediate outcome was that the members of the set agreed to circulate the IM&T strategies or drafts which they already possessed, for comparison.

*Member 2*—was a member of a newly constituted Primary Care Information Systems Team, made up of business people rather than IT specialists, to establish best practice for providing GPs with access to patient records, and to disseminate that best practice. Her concerns were about the constitution of the team, about having a successful first meeting, and the perceived aim of some members to delve into technical issues rather than remain business focused.

*Member 3*—recognised that her unit was investing in new information systems without any satisfactory IM&T strategy in place. She felt highly committed to leading a process of collaboration to develop a strategy, but had no authority: there was no consensus that such was the job of herself or her department. She felt that there was a relationship problem with a director: 'he is somewhat dictatorial'.

*Member 4*—faced demands for quite detailed plans to be written, which he felt related more to tactics. He asked 'What is strategy?'

*Member 5*—worked for a small unit which had historically relied upon a larger hospital to run its systems. It possessed an IM&T strategy document at very high level, proclaiming, for example, 'a need for links with GPs', but technically the unit was recognised to be very weak. It faced a dichotomy: to develop independent systems with its very limited resources, or to secure the existing arrangements with the hospital, despite the Trust status of each having effectively put them into competition. He felt that his directors were not interested.

*Member 6*—felt that his unit had developed an effective IT strategy 18 months previously, through the efforts of a successful IT strategy group. Latterly an IT consultancy house had been commissioned, which recommended the disbanding of the group, and the appointment of a new information manager to whom the delegate should report. The consultancy also recommended the further development of the IT strategy into the areas of information, systems and training, which task it offered to complete. The delegate felt demoralised.

*Member 7*—explained that Trust status was approaching for his unit, and that ‘people are feeling nervous’. A recent systems implementation had not been fully successful. A corrective project had also failed. A consultancy house brought in to remedy the situation criticised the absence of a project plan, but the delegate possessed very limited project management experience. He faced loss of credibility, but nevertheless was told to ‘sort it out’. How?

*Member 8*—felt that her efforts to contribute to the IM&T debate were being frustrated by difficult relationships with her director: ‘my boss is not a listening person—and I’m not a shouter’.

Each member in turn agreed to one short-term action to take back to the workplace. The general agreement to circulate their own strategy documents or drafts as models for each other’s endeavours took place.

The most apparent feature of many of the delegates’ issues was that the inhibitors to progress being described were generally not technical, but organisational issues. Some were beset by turbulence, others had unclear responsibilities or unsympathetic reporting lines. Many felt that IM&T had a low profile amongst unit directors. Most wished for a clearer understanding of the contents and level of a ‘good’ strategy. All were united in a desire to make progress in IM&T thinking.

#### *The Pan-Trent Action Learning Set—second meeting*

The first part of the meeting was a review of existing IM&T strategy documents which had been contributed by members, to help establish what a good strategy might contain.

During the time allocated to individual space, a new mood seemed to prevail: ‘I’m very confident now’; ‘I feel I’ve moved on quite well’ (and ‘I’m clear in a foggy way’). Several indicated progress in previously intractable organisational issues. Comments were somewhat more focused on IM&T strategic issues. Some members were more open than before: ‘I have real difficulty selling myself at higher levels: what can I do about it?’ Others expressed satisfaction with the action learning set process: ‘Quite a lot has happened, perhaps because of my greater understanding coming from the action learning set’; and ‘I got great benefit from this morning.’

It was agreed that the third meeting should offer some project management input to the set. Unfortunately, the observer was unable to attend.

#### *The Pan-Trent Action Learning Set—fourth meeting*

Members reporting back their progress continued to be positive. One spoke of a very challenging but useful meeting involving senior managers discussing information issues. Another had created a list of information projects which was being prioritised by senior staff. However, there was a new dimension to the meeting; the organisational turbulence recognised in the first meeting was having its tangible effect. One member was to go to a new job, another was committed to seeking fresh fields. One remaining in his same job had dropped all IT responsibility. A fourth could no longer give IT priority in the face of new challenges. Given the fact of organisational

instability in the NHS at that time, it seemed likely that any initiatives taking place over a few months would suffer attrition.

A fifth meeting was called but was not well attended. It seemed unrealistic to call a sixth given the likelihood of greatly diminished attendance. Two tributes were forthcoming: 'I have a clearer understanding of what IM&T is, and what I ought to do about it'; and 'I've enjoyed talking across units, hearing from others with similar problems and what they're doing about it.' Despite a premature close to the widely dispersed Pan-Trent set, the mood was one of satisfaction.

### *The Implementation Action Learning Set*

The Implementation group consisted of six delegates with similar backgrounds to those of the Pan-Trent group. Although the Pan-Trent and Implementation groups were led by different facilitators the two initial meetings followed a very similar pattern and very similar ground rules were established. The Implementation group had established itself because it saw implementation of IT strategies that their units already had as their major concern, rather than the creation of such strategies. With this common focus it was agreed that it would be valuable for each delegate to describe their and their unit's situation at one of the subsequent meeting. Thus the agenda of these meetings was set in this way. As with the Pan-Trent group, the identified inhibitors to progress were organisational.

The subsequent meetings were held at the main speaker's location. Four of the situations concerned the implementation of a single IS: typical were a small payroll system and a large personnel system. Two situations were somewhat different: one involved the managing of a facilities management arrangement at a small hospital and the other a change in strategic direction for a hospital that had successfully implemented IS through a slow but sure evolutionary approach. Prior to the meeting this delegate had distributed his unit's own strategy document and this was most appreciated by the other delegates.

As with the Pan-Trent group not all delegates attended all meetings. At the third meeting two delegates said that their jobs had changed and, although they enjoyed the meetings and found them generally useful, the meetings were not now of direct interest to them. Another delegate said that although his job hadn't changed, a review of his hospital's overall strategy had indicated to the chief executive that the hospital wasn't mature enough to implement the proposed IT strategy, and thus all but the smallest implementations were on hold.

All delegates had liked the action learning meetings and had found them generally useful. One delegate said that she had resolved the issue that had most been troubling her and that the action learning set had definitely helped her.

### *Action Learning Sets—summary*

There was a sense that benefit had arisen from cross-unit dialogue. Some participants called for meetings to continue, though changing jobs and

priorities inhibited further meetings for most. Feedback from delegates gathered during *IMAGINE* and offered back to delegates at the recall day gave a clear indication that the action learning days were seen to be the most valuable part of the exercise.

### Success of the *IMAGINE* Programme

Towards the end of the *IMAGINE* programme, questionnaires were sent to the 24 active delegates. The aim was to gather data concerning developments in unit IM&T strategies since the start of the *IMAGINE* programme in October 1993, and the individuals' views of the value of aspects of the programme. Usable responses were obtained from 18 delegates. Most of the delegates who had not returned their questionnaires had done so because of their own changed roles within Trent or having left the region.

Some of the questions sought to measure progress over a six month period towards an IM&T strategy that was well nested within the normal management processes of the unit; that had encompassed the involvement of line as well as IT staff; and that could be thought to provide strategic alignment of business with IM&T. The questionnaire drew upon a Stages of Growth Model (Galliers & Sutherland, 1991) and Critical Success Factors for IS Planning Success (Galliers, 1992). Further development in this thinking is reported in Finlay & Marples (1996).

The remainder of the questions sought to capture the subjective feelings of participants concerning the value of the programme. The significant findings are given below.

No delegates had yet to start developing an IM&T strategy. There was a fairly even spread of delegates in different phases of development and implementation of their strategies. Unit managers, and particularly delegates, were generally in agreement that an effective IM&T strategy was seen as having key business importance.

Delegates were asked about the perceived contribution of each element of *IMAGINE* as they sought to develop mature strategies. The *IMAGINE* handbook appeared to have contributed little. This view is perhaps not an indictment on the concept of a handbook. In its first issue the presentation of the handbook was not good. Furthermore, while the university-based consultants who had contributed to the handbook content were well disposed to it, the others, essentially the action learning set facilitators, were not so. In consequence there was no consistent delivery of the handbook's message during the several phases of the programme. In retrospect there was a clear need for all aspects of the programme to emphasise the handbook's theme consistently.

There is some mixed feeling about the value of the training days. Many of the delegates were unused to receiving tuition for extended periods, and a phasing of formal input throughout the action learning set meetings may have been preferable. The delegates generally expressed the view that the action learning sets themselves were of great value, allowing them to share their knowledge and experiences of IM&T strategic thinking, and to overcome the shortcomings of individuals.

Change, in the form of changing personal roles and organisational priorities were the issues that were identified as causing significant impediments

to progress. This matches the experience from the action learning sets, where members were indicating that organisational turbulence was a limiting factor.

On being asked how the *content* of the *IMAGINE* programme should be revised, many of the comments related to recognised inadequacies in hand-book presentation and use during training. More meaningfully, needs for additional material, either written or presented, were stated (*sic*):

- provide case studies, theoretical references;
- include national strategy details, and include links of national & local strategy;
- more group work rather than sat in lectures all day;
- should include examples of what a strategy includes and looks like.

Comments on the *process* of the programme mentioned perceived administrative shortcomings. Some of the more enlightening comments related to the mix of participants. One felt that there were too many differing knowledge and interest bases for the group to concentrate on any one topic where the whole group could understand and contribute. Another suggested two groups—IT and IM—claiming ‘I was either bored or confused most of the time.’

The questionnaire gave delegates the opportunity to make free-form comments of their own; comments made were as follows:

- Length of programme, given that it is focused on one individual being a catalyst for major change in organisations (presumably meaning too short).
- More focus on how to get others on board; how to take the issues into an organisation.
- Focus on the development of IM&T strategy. Use a specimen strategy or content headings; emphasise the practical.
- It would have been helpful if an exercise into developing an IM&T strategy for a fictitious organisation was included. However, the design of such an exercise is a major task if it is to be stage managed and of real benefit.
- I felt that the A/L sets should have been extra to some sort of formal consolidation of the course programme. Because of the varied roles of the group, the meetings were friendly and marginally informative, but overall lacked any useful outcome for me personally. Perhaps the only positive comment I can make is that I have the confidence to approach IM&T with less awe than I did previously, after mixing with other members of the group.
- Your basic assumption is that there should be a single IM&T strategy. The prime objectives of this Trust come under the category of operating within financial resources. To this end, the Trust has implemented devolved budgetary control and a large amount of devolved administration and strategic planning. This means that in this Trust there is now more IT related development being carried out by individual Directorates or Departments than are being carried out by the central IT department. Since the use of Service Level Agreements is still embryonic, the revenue consequences of IT developments are not allowed for. The central IT Department is thus unable to be strong enough to hold IT developments in the Trust together. The effect of this is that while a ‘central’ IM&T



strategy exists on paper, the actual IT developments do not necessarily relate to this.

A number of respondents wished to indicate their appreciation of the programme:

- The programme overall was both useful and enjoyable and I would recommend its use to others. Needs some reordering of contributions and some real exploration of the change management/politics dilemma.
- Our organisation had already produced a strategy, but the knowledge gained (especially re. sponsorship) was very valuable.
- The idea is good and deserves greater support from hospitals.
- I found the action learning sets very useful, not only in helping with my project, but in increasing my knowledge of the business/cross fertilisation of ideas/confidential setting.

### Summary and Conclusions

The *IMAGINE* programme served to raise the profile of IM&T strategic thinking among the delegates. Their view was that the action learning sets provided most support in helping them develop unit IM&T strategies, and that the more formal elements of the programme were of little benefit. From the point of view of those facilitating the programme, however, it is difficult to conceive the establishment of the action learning sets without some prior activity to help groups coalesce, and to provide direction for the action learning set activity. Briefer formal sessions, with better administration and with a more complete handbook, may have contributed to more favourable comment overall.

This paper should help practitioners who need to expose the IM&T initiative in business units to more strategic thinking, and who need to develop the related skills of unit representatives. Reiteration of a number of points may be helpful to those contemplating action learning set activity, as follows:

- Delegates' perception was that the action learning sets formed the most valuable part of the overall *IMAGINE* experience.
- While delegates were sought from senior levels and with major strategic issues to work through, reality is that many delegates were somewhat lower in their organisations' hierarchies, bringing with themselves a wide range of IM&T related issues.
- The reluctance of sponsors to become involved, even for a short evening session during the briefing day, typifies management thinking that IM&T is for technologists and need not concern the Board. As organisations mature in IM&T exploitation, more strategic uses for systems and technology are likely to surface, with an attendant increase in the need for high-level IS strategic thought.
- While the programme was formulated in the expectation of helping delegates to address technical issues in IM&T strategy development, the problems which actually surfaced were mainly of a human resource nature. Nevertheless, the action learning set approach was flexible enough to meet this challenge.

- Over the six month period of the programme, many delegates moved to new locations, took on new responsibilities or assumed different priorities, to the detriment of attendance levels at the action learning set meetings. The duration of any action learning set programme needs to bear in mind the prevailing level of organisational volatility.

Action learning is thought to address, on the one hand, the development of participants and, on the other, the solution of specific problems. The overall view to emerge from *IMAGINE* is that the action learning programme contributed to each of these for most participants.

A note of caution. In the practical, 'action research' environment reported in this paper it proved impossible to establish a control group of units which were engaged upon IM&T strategic thinking but which did not participate in *IMAGINE*. Furthermore, the delegates were self-selecting, in that each had chosen (or had been encouraged by their sponsor) to join a programme which had been widely publicised amongst local units. What is not proven is the extent to which units would have progressed without participation in a programme such as *IMAGINE*.

## Notes

It was during the currency of *IMAGINE* that the NHS abandoned the regional structure, giving units more local autonomy. However, for the purposes of *IMAGINE* there remained a loose affinity between the units which had comprised the Trent Health Region, and this paper uses the phrase 'Trent Health' in that context.

Since the paper's original scripting, the NHSTD has ceased to exist.

## References

- Adams, P., Conway, M. & Owens, N. (1992) *The Strategic Use of Information Systems and Technology* (NHS Training Directorate).
- Carr, I. (Ed.) (1993) *IMAGINE*, Trent Health internal handbook.
- Casey, D. (1976) The emerging role of set adviser in action learning programmes, *Journal of European Training*, 5(3), pp. 8-11.
- Casey, D. (1983) Where action learning fits in, in: M. Pedlar (Ed.) *Action Learning in Practice* (Aldershot, Gower), pp. 39-53.
- CCTA (1990) *Managing Information as a Resource* (Crown Copyright).
- Cottam, D., Taylor, G. & Hindle, J. (1993) Action Learning, Unpublished note.
- Earl, M. J. (1987) Information systems strategy formulation, in: R. J. Boland & R. A. Hirschheim (Eds) *Critical Issues in Information Systems Research* (Chichester, John Wiley), pp. 157-179.
- Earl, M. J. (1989) *Management Strategies for Information Technology* (Cambridge, Prentice Hall).
- Finlay, P. N. & Marples, C. G. (1996) *A Research Instrument for the Measurement of Information Management and Technology Maturity in the UK National Health Service*, Loughborough University Business School Research Series.
- Friend, J. & Hickling, A. (1987) *Planning Under Pressure, the Strategic Choice Approach* (Oxford, Pergamon Press).
- Galliers, R. D. (1987) Applied research in information systems planning, in: P. Feldman, L. Bhabuta & S. Holloway (Eds) *Information Management and Planning* (Aldershot, Gower), pp. 45-58.
- Galliers, R. D. (1992) Strategic information systems planning: concepts, methods and critical success factors, *AIS* 92 (March), pp. 17-19.
- Galliers, R. D. & Sutherland, A. R. (1991) Information systems management and strategy formulation: the stages of growth model revisited, *Journal of Information Systems*, 1, pp. 89-114.
- Honey, P. & Mumford, A. (1982) *The Manual of Learning Styles* (Maidenhead, Peter Honey).
- Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential Learning: experience as a source of learning and development* (London, Prentice Hall).

- Lawlor, A. (1983) The components of action learning, in: M. Pedlar (Ed.) *Action Learning in Practice* (Aldershot, Gower), pp. 191-203.
- Porter, M. (1985) *Competitive Advantage: creating and sustaining superior performance* (New York, Free Press).
- Scott Morton, M. S. (Ed.) (1991) *The Corporation of the 1990s: information technology and organisational transformation* (Oxford, Oxford Press).
- Sutton, D. (1983) A Range of Applications, in: M. Pedlar (Ed.) *Action Learning in Practice* (Aldershot, Gower), pp. 65-73.