Individual Reflective Report for An Examination of the Recruitment Process at Valcon

Company: Valcon

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Introduction

All in all, I think our project went well. We got the problem early, blazed through the initiation and in-line phases, spent a good amount of time in-depth, and worked hard at identifying the best solutions.

In my experience, the most useful tools we were given were the business canvas, the MUST structure, and the ethnographic tools for interviewing and observing.

The business canvas helped us get a quick understanding of what was important to Valcon, and led us to understanding later additions and changes to it without problems. I don't know that Business Model Generation (Osterwalder et al., 2010) specifically talks about this, but I believe it is one of the greatest strengths of the canvas: that even if I have misunderstood some part of the company, it's easy to find and correct the mistake and I quickly understand the correction.

We followed the MUST phases. We decided early that we wouldn't be too bound by them, as the amount of time we had with the company was limited. We started the in-line phase before the initiation phase was complete and the in-depth phase before the in-line phase was complete. We thought of possible solutions from the start to the end. This worked out very well, though we may have lost some of our overview because of it. Generally, the phases gave us a clear path to follow, while allowing the flexibility of going quickly through less relevant areas. I discuss the principles below.

The following sections are my analyses of some of the topics we encountered during the project.

Working with an insider

One of our group members, Michael, works at Valcon, and was there once a week during the project. This had both positive and negative effects.

It meant that we had a person at the company once per week, to ask small questions, chat with his colleagues about the project, and so forth. It also meant we had access to internal systems, the mailing lists, employee database, TechAdm, chat and others, which we then did not have to get permission to use for our project. (Maybe we should have asked permission anyway. That would have been more political.) Finally, it helped in that we could just ask him when faced with interview answers we didn't understand or some information was missing, saving precious time.

Some of the benefits also came with negative effects. Since he was at the company once per week, there was little reason for the rest of the group to go after the first two visiting days. Without him, we would have definitely gone a third time, to the benefit of the analysis. The third benefit had a hidden side effect. As we got used to just asking Michael about things we didn't understand, we all ended up sharing his understanding of the process, which might not be correct. As Bødker (2004) writes on page 71, we developed 'insider reasoning', letting Michael's opinions affect the project more than I would have liked. We discussed this, but decided that the gain in time was worth the loss in depth.

In future projects, I will do my best to avoid insiders in the project group.

Ethnographic literature and field methods

While much of the literature on the course was focused on giving us tools to use or paths to follow, the ethnographic material, for the most part, served a different purpose. It supplied us with background knowledge of what we were doing and why, gave us terminology to communicate our analyses with, opened our eyes to many different facets of organizational practises, and made us aware of our limited and preconceived knowledge of other cultures or workplaces. As such, it wasn't directly useful, but I am sure our analyses would have suffered without it.

Interviews and observations

One place where the ethnographic literature proved directly useful, was in the description of and preparation for interviews and observations in Blomberg (1993).

We prepared for the interviews in a very structured manner, listing first the information we knew we wanted, the questions we would ask to get it, and some thoughts on how to ask the questions. During all this we designed the questions to be open and the interview loose, such that any information we didn't know to ask for had a chance to come through. I think this is some of the reason why we could get by with as few interviews as we have. In most cases, probably due to our analyses beforehand and our insider, we were right about the information we sought, and in the few that we weren't, email and casual communication were sufficient to expand upon our data.

The observations in our case seemed of little use. As recruitments happen quite rarely, we were unable to observe it 'live', so our gains from observation seemed limited to a general feel of how the departments interacted with each other, what the environment was like. This, of course, was still useful, but a way off from how important it was presented in the literature. I agree, though, that observations are necessary in many cases, and that for the sake of learning we should, in this case, do it even if it gains us little.

The MUST principles and my experiences

The MUST method builds on 4 core principles:

- Coherent vision for change
- Genuine user participation
- Firsthand experience with work practices
- Anchoring visions

We tried to cover all of these, but found especially user participation and anchoring hard to fulfil. User participation, specifically, I think we failed mostly because management was not very interested in the project. Had they been more invested, we could have been able to get more time from the employees to discuss our understandings and ideas. Taken from Participatory IT Design (Bødker et al., 2004) p. 59: "Management is responsible for allotting the time and information resources necessary for making user participation happen." But we have not been very persistent, so some of the blame lies with us as well.

Another reason, and also a problem for anchoring visions, is that Valcon is an hour away with a car, and longer without. This led to us only taking 2 trips there and relying on Michael, who works there, to include his colleagues in the project and anchor our visions.

My last thought on this is that there was not much two-way communication. We expressed our ideas to Danni, the head of IT, and he understood, but the remaining employees involved in the process we only ever interviewed, never conversed with. I do believe we explained our project to each of them at the beginning of the interviews, but there was never any follow-up.

What could we have done differently to improve this?

We could have upheld the principles during the entire project. In fact, I had forgotten they existed until the last lectures of exam preparation, where the entire course was revisited. If we had tried to uphold them through the entire project, we could have acted sooner on the issues mentioned above - we could have insisted on going a third time, chatted more with the employees about the project, or worked our way around the limitations set by the management a little better.

But in the end I believe we did the best we could. The only thing I think would have actually helped here is more experience, and that is what this course is here for.