

Twinning as an innovative practice in public administration: An example from the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to assess twinning as an innovative experiment in interagency collaboration. We do this by describing the twinning of two Dutch governmental agencies, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) and the Social Insurance Bank (SVB). We focus on the rationale behind this partnership and the activities undertaken and evaluate the twinning using two different frameworks, a means-ends approach and a multiple process model. By doing so we not only assess whether the twinning of IND and SVB can be seen as an innovative experiment in interagency collaboration but also how such practices can best be evaluated.

Key words: Interagency collaboration, twinning, evaluation.

Introduction: collaboration as a challenge

Over the last ten years or so, judged by the vast number of academic and practical books and magazine and journal articles published on the subject, collaboration between organizations has become a key issue in both the commercial and public sector. As resources are scarce and the action autonomy of any individual actor limited at best, alliances and networks become increasingly important for the success and, ultimately, the survival of any organization.

In both the public and the private sectors, organizations hope to achieve innovation and synergy by working together across their boundaries. Enterprises collaborate to develop new products, open up markets, share risks, make investments and develop knowledge (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Doz, 1996; Reuer, 2004). Public agencies form alliances and networks to provide better services to clients with complex problems and to achieve a joint effort in tackling wicked social problems. Collaboration is also used as a tool to open up bureaucratic organizations and to let them learn from more successful ones (Bason, 2010; De Ridder, 2007; O'Leary & Blomgren Bingham, 2009; Yoshino, 1996).

Collaboration is widely used as a *buzzword* today, but some critical work has been published (cf. Lotia & Hardy, 2008). Organizations trying to cooperate with each other often find this a challenging enterprise. The time and money cost of organizing cooperation often seem to be the main constraint in the private sector. Not surprisingly most collaboration initiatives fail in the commercial world: according to Darby (2006) up to 70% of partnerships do not deliver on their promises, a truly staggering percentage.

In the public sector, collaboration often is difficult due to the fragmented nature of government as a result of the shortcomings of both traditional bureaucracy and New Public Management (NPM). Traditional bureaucracy, with its focus on functional differentiation, often impedes collaboration as it leads to departmentalism and the creation of silos or stovepipes. New Public Management practices are equally prone to hampering collaboration, as NPM's focus on performance tends to favour competition rather than cooperation (Christensen & Lægread, 2007; Head & Alford, 2008).

In order to unlock collaboration's promises and to overcome its difficulties, organizations in the public and the private sector are on the lookout for new, innovative practices which help them overcome the challenges of collaboration. We discuss one such practice in this paper, the twinning between two Dutch agencies, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND¹) and the Social Insurance Bank (SVB²). We describe the rationale behind this partnership and the activities to which it led and follow this by an evaluation using two different frameworks: a means-ends approach and a multiple process model. By doing so, we not only discuss whether the twinning we describe can be seen as an innovative practice but also how experimental forms of collaboration could best be assessed.

Method

This article is based on an action research project (Lewin, 1946; Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985; Stringer, 2007) we conducted at the behest of IND and SVB during the entire course of their twinning. Our role was to serve as advisors to the boards of both organizations and to facilitate the twinning process by providing academic insights. We were asked to follow each step taken and to make recommendations for amendments. Our brief was to be critical and help IND and SVB to improve their collaboration by also drawing attention to its shortcomings.

We monitored the organizations' collaboration over a period of two years, first of all by studying public as well as confidential documents to reconstruct how the twinning had developed and taken shape. Second, at several stages in the process we conducted in-depth interviews with those directly involved, including the boards of both organizations, as well as those employees at the street-level that were expected to collaborate with their counterparts from the other organization. Third, we organized five meetings, at which we discussed our findings with those directly involved, other academics, as well as with the two junior ministers that were IND's and SVB's political principals.

In the next section, we describe the concept of twinning and how it has been employed in the Dutch context. We then evaluate the success of the twinning of IND and SVB, first by employing a traditional means-ends approach and second by using what we see as a multiple process model. We conclude with a discussion of two questions (1) which model provides us with a realistic interpretation of the twinning's success or failure and (2) which lessons could be learned from this for the assessment of innovative forms of interorganizational collaboration in general.

A twinning between two Dutch agencies

Twinning can best be described as a mutual exchange between entities with divergent cultural backgrounds aimed at learning and better understanding. Many cities conduct town twinnings (for example Council of European Municipalities and Regions, 2007) and the Internet enables teachers and students from all over Europe to maintain friendly relations by eTwinning.

¹ The Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) is the quasi-autonomous law enforcement agency responsible for the implementation of immigration policy in the Netherlands. It assesses all applications submitted by foreign nationals who wish to stay in the Netherlands or who wish to become Dutch nationals. See for more information <http://english.ind.nl>.

² The Social Insurance Bank (SVB) is an independent governing body implementing social insurance schemes and regulations for several government agencies in the Netherlands, such as the National Old Age Pensions Act, the National Child Benefit Act and the Remigration Act. See for more information <http://svb.nl/int/en/index.jsp>.

These twinings are based on an equal relationship but others take the form of a master-trainee relationship, in which one of the partners helps the other to achieve a certain goal or to better or elevate itself. Cross-organizational cooperation by twinning then often is a form of development aid. The World Bank employs twinning as an instrument for institutional development (for example Ouchi, 2004) and the European Union uses it as a tool to bring its new member states' institutions up to the level of the old.

The twinning examined in this discussion paper also had the form of a master-trainee relationship but differed from those described above, as it concerned two governmental agencies operating in the same country. This makes the organizational cooperation we describe in this discussion paper rather unique; we have not found another example of a twinning in which two agencies working for the same government collaborated with the express goal to increase the quality of the service provision of one of them. As such the twinning between IND and SVB can in our opinion be seen as an interesting example of an innovative practice in the search for organizational excellence in the public sector.

The twinning has its origins in an evaluation of the performance of IND undertaken in 2005 by the Netherlands Court of Audit (NCA) at the behest of the Minister for Alien Affairs and Immigration (NCA, 2005). The NCA's report drew a bleak picture of IND as an agency that had not been functioning well for quite some time. IND's new information- and communication technology systems were not up to their task and there was both a lack of clarity and deficiencies in its work processes. Consequently the IND worked with contaminated data, had little insight into how many employees it needed and monitored insufficiently the status of each visa application. The NCA also criticized IND's inward looking culture, which prevented it from collaborating successfully with the other organizations in the immigration chain. Because of all these deficiencies, the quality of IND's service provision was poor, which led to much criticism from parliament.

In its report, the NCA not only listed and analysed IND's problems but also made recommendations about how to improve the situation. Contrary to what many had expected, it did not recommend swift political action but rather argued that IND should be granted the peace and quiet to sort out its problems itself within a period of two years by undertaking a twinning with SVB, another organization with a large group of clients and a complex IT-architecture.

The twinning between IND and SVB started in 2006 and concluded three years later. During this period, exchanges were organized between employees in both organizations at all levels: the boards of SVB and IND met to discuss the strategic plans drawn up by the latter to improve the organization's performance and those charged with improving IND's IT-systems met with their counterparts at SVB to discuss the best ways of doing so. In order to combat IND's inward-looking culture, regular regional meetings were organized, where employees from both organizations from all over the country met and discussed various self-chosen topics. Most of the discussions concerned the question of how to best provide public services in a politicized context, an issue with which both organizations struggled. IND's employees could also sign up for internships at SVB to totally immerse themselves in the other organization's culture and to learn by observing their counterparts directly.

Analysis of the twinning

Many activities were undertaken during the twinning period but was this collaboration an overall success? We discuss this question by taking a closer look at the benefits created by the twinning between SVB and IND. Two important provisos have to be made. First, it was not the intention with the twinning to ask IND to simply copy everything SVB did. This would have been quite a challenge, as their work processes and the sector they operated in differed considerably from each other. IND was also free not to heed the advice of SVB, as long as it could formulate valid reasons for not doing so.

Second, the twinning can be seen as a positive example of interorganizational collaboration but also had its drawbacks. SVB ran the risk of being submerged in IND's problems and, by accepting the invitation to act as a twinning partner, also ran the risk of being held accountable should there be no improvement in IND's performance and the quality of public service provision.

Issues concerning evaluating twinning

What were the practical benefits of the twinning? This sounds like a straightforward and easy to answer question but is anything but, as it is not clear what exactly should be counted as a benefit. Is intensive contact between the two organisations in itself a benefit or is a result only a concrete change in quality control systems? Should only substantive or also procedural results count? Do we just look at direct benefits from the twinning or could indirect benefits also be taken into account? Should only deliberate effects be considered or also effects that arise incidentally or more or less accidentally? Should only the benefits be considered that arose during the course of the collaboration (eg. the employees of both organizations discussing their organizations at regional meetings)? Can they also be seen as having positive future benefits after the twinning ended?

The attribution of benefits to actions is also problematic. For example, IND did not always follow the advice it got from SVB when there were valid reasons not to do so. Is that a benefit of the twinning or a sign of arrogance? How should benefits be treated that arose during the period the twinning took place but can only be indirectly contributed to it? For example, IND used the peace and quiet created by the twinning to bring its own house in order without direct help from SVB. This vastly improved the punctuality and quality of its decisions allowed for the implementation of a rigorous organizational modernization programme. How should contextual developments be treated that also affected the quality of IND's service provision? For example, during the course of the twinning fewer asylum seekers applied for a visa to the Netherlands. This reduced IND's work load immensely, freeing up resources it could use to work hard on eliminating backlogs. How should such contextual developments be taken into account when evaluating the success of a process like twinning?

We address these questions by evaluating the twinning using two different frameworks: first, by using a means-ends approach that focuses primarily on direct and tangible results, and second, by using what we call a multiple process model, which also takes stock of contextual, indirect and accidental effects.

Twinning benefits using a means-ends approach

It is quite possible to evaluate the twinning following a simple means-ends approach, in which the twinning is understood to have created several activities which led to several benefits for each partner's performance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Twinning using a simple means-ends approach

| | | | | | | |
|---------------------|---|------------------|---|------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Twining arrangement | → | Twining activity | → | Twining benefits | → | Partners' performance |
|---------------------|---|------------------|---|------------------|---|-----------------------|

During the course of the twinning, a lot of interaction and exchange took place between SVB and IND, as the latter's employees met with their counterparts to discuss how to modernize the organization's service provision. Some of these exchanges led to tangible benefits, especially in the field of IT. IND could for example introduce a new computer system to measure the quality of its work processes by simply copying that of SVB. Another tangible benefit was that, following constant urges by SVB and its support, IND could appoint a Chief Information Officer (CIO) to oversee the implementation of the new system.

Other direct benefits of the twinning were the regular consultations between the boards of both organizations on strategic issues and the reprieve it created from political intervention. This gave IND the opportunity to bring its house into order without constant (understandable but nonetheless destructive) meddling by politicians.

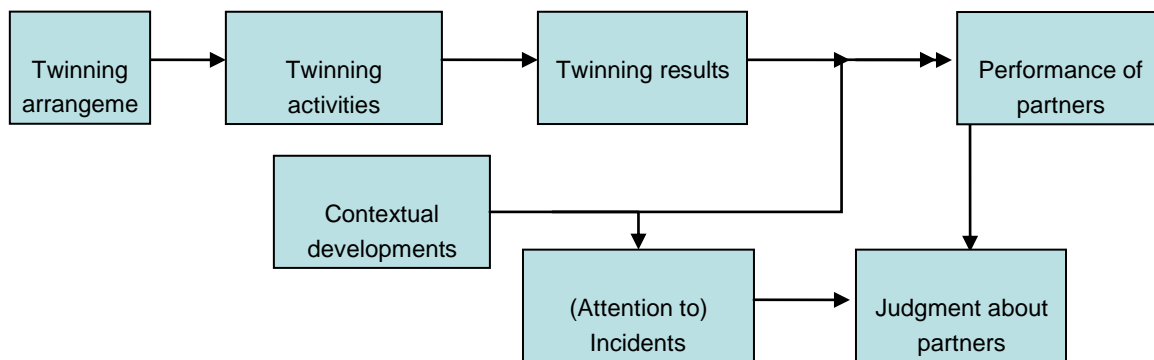
This all led to a vast improvement in the performance of IND, as the NCA acknowledged in a follow-up report (Netherlands Court of Audit, 2010). In most cases however, the effect of the twinning on the performance of IND was not so clear-cut. For example, a team leader from SVB was taken on by IND as the new head of its complaints department. He naturally took his knowledge, expertise and experience with him. Can we label this as a direct positive effect of the twinning?

The same question can be asked concerning the regional meetings that were organized at which employees from both organizations met to discuss strategic and operational subjects and to exchange insights into each other's work processes and dilemmas. The SVB and IND employees we interviewed told us that they experienced these meetings as a liberation, as they were now, for the first time ever, encouraged to discuss their work and exchange ideas with colleagues from another agency. Can such meetings be seen as direct positive effects of twinning? How can their impact be measured in a simple means-ends scheme? We think that in order to properly value such activities another evaluatory framework is needed, which takes into account other, less direct and less tangible effects of interorganizational collaboration. We describe one possible such framework in the next section.

Twinning benefits considered on the basis of a multiple process model

Means-ends models share an alluring elegance and simplicity but in our opinion they also shows several shortcomings, because they only focus on direct, causal effects. In practice, collaboration between organizations is often more ambiguous and obstinate than such models suggest and tolerate. That is why we think that a model for evaluating interorganizational collaboration such as the twinning between SVB and IND should always be multifaceted and should also take those influences and effects into account that are indirect, unplanned or have arisen by pure chance. Such a model could be drawn as follows (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Twinning in a multiple process model



This multiple process model shares several steps with the means-ends model we described before. It will always be necessary to take a partnership's direct effects into account when discussing whether it has contributed to the desired outcome, but contextual developments should also be considered. After all, the success of a partnership between organizations can be enhanced by developments in their surroundings but these can also hamper success. The same is in our opinion true concerning attention paid to incidents. If incidents are blown up and become scandals, this will impair the success of interorganizational collaboration. Finally, how collaboration is assessed depends on the image an organization has both in politics and society. Even big transformations could be looked at rather critically, when an organization had already endured a lot of criticism in the past, as was the case with IND (which had, for a long time, the image of a badly run, untrustworthy agency). By contrast, SVB had a very positive image. IND could therefore hope to be able to benefit from the positive image of its twinning partner.

The performance of the two Dutch twinning partners was not only influenced by what happened in and during their collaboration. Other developments in their direct and indirect surroundings influenced the twinning. One could for example argue that the twinning was already a success before it even started, due to two conditions SVB attached to its willingness to twin with IND: (1) IND was only one of the organization dealing with visa applications. Dutch municipalities also had a role, which led to constant friction and problems with the exchange of information. Following SVB's urges at the beginning of the twinning, IND was made solely responsible for dealing with visa applications. This put an end to the fragmented nature of the process of visa applications in the Netherlands. (2) To help IND learn from other agencies, SVB persuaded its political masters to let it join a group of enterprising agencies, that had laid down their own citizens' charter in an attempt to be more horizontally accountable towards the individual citizen and client. This enabled IND to learn from other agencies on an ongoing basis following termination of the twinning.

By employing a multiple process model rather than a traditional means-ends approach, not just the concrete and direct first-order effects of the twinning count, but also indirect effects and incidental benefits. As already described, the twinning gave IND not only the time but also the peace and quiet it needed to tackle its problems without constant political intervention. This can be seen as a big benefit for an organization that operates in a highly politicized environment. In the past, politicians had reacted heavy-handedly to problems at the immigration service. This led to a risk-averse culture at the organization and constant fear of political intervention. Another positive effect of the twinning, which might be overlooked by a simple means-ends approach, is the room it created for cultural transformation. IND had traditionally been an organization with the typical inward orientation of a traditional bureaucracy (cf. Rainey, 1997).

According to the staff we interviewed, they now felt liberated as they were for the first time allowed to use their working time to exchange ideas with their counterparts at SVB and to develop new ideas together. Twinning created a more open and entrepreneurial culture at IND, in which collaboration within the organization itself but also with outside partners was actively encouraged.

Discussion

In this article we described the twinning between two Dutch governmental agencies as an innovative form of fostering collaboration in the public sector. There already are quite a number of examples of twinning being used as a tool for learning in the context of development aid, where agencies collaborate with each other in a master-trainee relationship. The twinning we described here also started out with one organization teaching the other but is rather unique as it concerns two agencies of the same government. We see this as an interesting use of twinning as a form of neighbourhood aid, in which organizations that are peers or colleagues in the sense that they operate for the same master help each other out in times of crisis. In our opinion, it is worth the trouble to discuss whether twinning should not be used more often in this new and innovative form and whether twinning should not be added to the toolbox of governments aiming at improving the quality of the service delivery of their agencies.

The twinning of IND and SVB surely is an interesting experiment but has it worked? We evaluated this partnership first by using a traditional means-ends approach and then by using a more sophisticated multiple process model. The means-ends approach was perfectly viable as a way to examine direct and concrete benefits of the twinning between IND and SVB. On the basis of such an evaluation one would conclude that their collaboration has not led to many direct substantial results, besides bringing people together and facilitate discussions. Some of these activities have led to tangible benefits but most have not, at least when examined using a means-ends approach. So has this twinning failed?

We argue that this is not the case. By employing a multiple process model, which takes indirect effects and incidental benefits into account, we also identified benefits due to twinning that might otherwise have been overlooked, such as the fact that its cooperation with the Social Insurance Bank gave the Immigration and Naturalisation Service the peace and quiet it needed to deal with its shortcomings without constant political intervention. Another positive side-effect of twinning, which might easily be overlooked by employing a means-end scheme, is the cultural transformation process it instigated at IND. For the first time, IND's staff was actively encouraged to compare their working routines with those of the employees of another agency. This broadened their horizons and gave them fresh energy to tackle their organization's shortcomings and problems. Using a multiple process model for assessing the cooperation, the twinning has, on several fronts at least, been at least a modest success.

Conclusions

So what should we make of these two rather conflicting findings? The main conclusion we draw after evaluating the twinning using two very different models, is that what we measure is what we see. If we only look for direct and tangible results, we will not see all the indirect and unexpected benefits of collaboration that might also occur. Such a conclusion sounds like a truism but also describes a blind spot we see in much evaluatory research. Governmental evaluatory commissions as well as public institutions like courts of audit too often use a rather limited perspective when assessing the success or (by using a narrow focus more likely) the

failure of many attempts at cooperation between organizations. The fact that a limited number of direct and tangible effects have been achieved does not necessarily mean that cooperation has been futile, as we tried to illustrate by looking at the twinning between IND and SVB. Another, equally plausible explanation is that the system used for evaluating the cooperation has some severe shortcomings.

A second claim we make on the basis of our research is that indirect and accidental effects of cooperation should be considered on an equal footing with direct and planned results. In the case we studied one could even argue that the fact that IND got the peace and quiet to deal with its problems without political interference and the cultural transition it brought about among its staff were much more important than the handover of computer systems from one organization to the other, one of the more direct positive effects. Bringing one's house into order and making sure that an organization's employees keep on learning from best practices employed elsewhere will, in our opinion, contribute to the long-term development of the organization, as well as to the quality of its service provision.

Finally, accepting that indirect and especially unintended or unexpected benefits might occur, makes it necessary to accept that not all possible effects of cooperation can be defined in advance. This makes it not only necessary to adopt a broad perspective but also to keep track of what is happening as it might be necessary to adjust the partnership, either to mitigate unintended negative effects or to help unintended positive effects to come to fruition.

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