

## Abstract

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### MANAGING IN AEROSPACE Inquiries into Executive Work Practice

Despite the flood of literature on management and leadership, there are very few close-up empirical studies, especially ethnographically informed studies, of executive work. This organizational ethnography is focusing the work of a group of industry executives at the Swedish-based Volvo Aero Group in the year and a half following 9/11. The years around "Y2K" were exceptionally good for producers of commercial jet engines. The profit surge, however, camouflaged a long-term transformation, in which "cost" gradually replaced technological progress as the driving force in the evolution of the aerospace industry. With the *al-Qaeda* attacks in the United States in September of 2001, the market for passenger aircraft turned from boom to bust in an instant. At Volvo Aero (described in the Annual Report as "one of 3 players in components for aircraft engines") the post-9/11 recession demonstrated the urgency of productivity improvements and "process work," but also highlighted the need to re-position the company strategically in its industrial network by adding more value to the produced components, thus reducing exposure to price competition.

The study is based on video recordings of top management meetings and project meetings, supplemented by interviews. The book addresses not only practice but also the theorising in which practice is embedded. The ideas of management thinkers Donald Schön and Chester Barnard provide guidance in the analysis. The study shows that, although many senior managers eagerly depict themselves as *leaders*, their job is little about leading people but much about finding and creating "ways forward" in messy situations of entangled problems and opportunities. Industry executives are, above all, knowledge workers. Their job involves a concurrent striving to reduce uncertainty (by building or enabling the building of robust organizational and inter-organizational processes) and stimulate uncertainty (by a game-like or design-like step-by-step progression of trial-and-error). Each step forward creates intended and unintended effects – some good and some bad – that must be managed.

**Key words:** Aerospace, 9/11, work practice, workplace study, executive work, managerial work, Schön, Barnard, organizational ethnography, metaphor

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