

# Knowledge Worker

## Four Dimensions of Intervention

(March 2021)

### We Are Interventionists

Whether we think of ourselves as organization development specialists, performance technologists, trainers, consultants, managers, executives or any other kind of change agent, we are *Interventionists*, which is to say, *we change things with a purpose or outcome in mind*.

### The Context for Intervention: The Organization as a System

Interventions by the professionals mentioned above are typically situated in organizations of one kind or another. Organizations are systems; more specifically, they are *open* systems. They take in inputs, they transform some of those inputs into outputs (e.g., products and services), they use other inputs to maintain and sustain the system (e.g., money and services), and they engage in various transactions (e.g., exchanging products and services with customers for money, and money with suppliers for products and services), thereby repeating the cycle of events that characterizes and defines an open system.

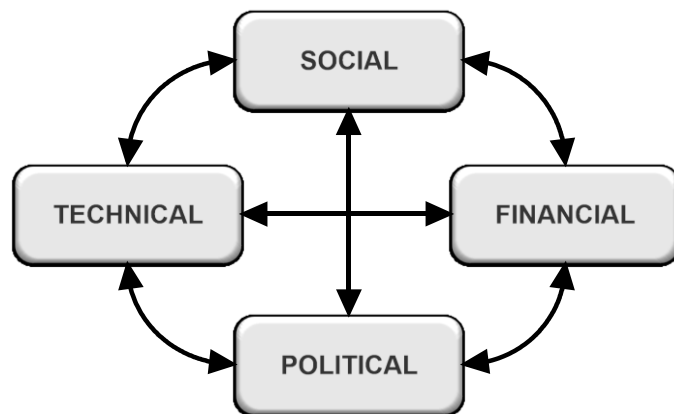
### Four Important Subsystems

As systems, organizations are made up of subsystems. Four of the more important subsystems making up any organization are the social, financial, political and technical subsystems. These subsystems interact with each other and in various combinations. When contemplating an intervention, think of each of these four subsystems as a dimension of the intervention, regardless of which dimension or subsystem is the target or focal point.

Over the years, the social and technical subsystems have received a great deal of comment under the general heading of “socio-technical” systems. Curiously, the two dimensions of organizations receiving the least amount of attention in treatments of organizations as systems are also two of the most important – the political and the financial. This gap in subject matter might explain why some interventions fail or fall short of expectations. Politics and finances are organizational realities and extremely relevant to those who intervene in the work-related affairs of people and organizations.

As interventionists, it is useful to adopt a view of organizations as systems that integrates not only their social and technical aspects but also their political and financial aspects. The diagram above depicts these four interrelated subsystems, and each subsystem constitutes a dimension of an intervention.

### Four Dimensions of Intervention



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with its design, its inputs, its outputs, its efficiency and effectiveness and with the technology, equipment and other resources the work requires. (The two preceding sentences illustrate the importance attached to the “socio-technical” view.) The financial dimension is concerned with variables like costs, revenue, profits, returns, debt, assets, liabilities and the like. The political dimension is concerned with management and governance, the exercise of authority and leadership, and the balance and distribution of power and resources.

### Some Useful Questions

It is quite common for a given intervention to focus on a particular subsystem or dimension (e.g., the reengineering of a specific process, a revamping of the performance appraisal system, the design of a sales incentive system, the roll-out of a new computer system, or the restructuring of the organization). Interventionists are well-served by examining the fit or connections between the dimension in which they are intervening and the other three subsystems or dimensions. In this vein, it is useful to ask questions like the following:

- Which of the four dimensions have we targeted for intervention? How are the other dimensions linked to what we are changing? What is the impact or effect of the changes we are making on those other dimensions?
- Turning things around, how do those other dimensions affect what we plan on doing?
- Given the changes we envision in the dimensions we are targeting, what corresponding changes will be required in the other dimensions?
- Whose support and cooperation do we require in those other dimensions?
- Who in those other dimensions might be opposed to the changes we envision in the dimensions we have targeted?

Additional questions could and should be formulated and asked consistent with the specific circumstances. The important thing is that all four dimensions are examined with respect to an intervention in any one of them. Perhaps more important, keep in mind that so-called “whole system” interventions likely require major changes, coordination and support in all four subsystems or dimensions.

To sum it up, intervening in all or any part of an organization is a multi-dimensional undertaking.

### About the Author

Fred Nickols is a toolmaker, a knowledge worker, a solution engineer, a writer, a consultant, and a former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated Chief Petty Officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer* at [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His web site is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. Fred writes this column on a monthly basis. All previous Knowledge Worker columns are accessible by clicking [here](#).

