The Imen-Delphi Procedure in Practice

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Objective

After a decade of using the Imen-Delphi procedure, the objective of this research note is to evaluate its potential for Social Futures thinking. The paper highlights a) the changes the ID procedure took that emerged in the course of the procedure's practice, and b) discusses their benefits and justification for future development and usage of the ID.

The Imen-Delphi (ID) procedure was designed, based on the foundations of the Applied Social Systems Theories (Bahg 1990, Woudenberg 1991), and relies upon the strengths of later versions of the Delphi technique (Ranch 1979, Turoff 1975, Press 1983, Harkins & Kurth-Schai 1983, Poolpatarachewin 1980). The ID procedure was developed in the early 1990's in order to facilitate discussions among panelists sharing a common future interest, and in order to help them develop shared future images.

The main objective of the ID procedure was to enable a group of panelists to establish a collective future mission, and to efficiently cope with complex problems regarding their future. The ID procedure was geared to promote the responsibility and the self-awareness of the participants towards their probable and preferable futures. The ID procedure, as opposed to the classical Delphi technique did not direct the participants to foresee future events. Instead, the ID was designed to guide them towards general agreement for future growth. The participants were directed to reach one of the following five types of agreement: total agreement, majority, bipolarity, partial agreement, or total disagreement.

ID procedures

In the last decade, we have been conducting a variety of studies using the ID procedure to engage people to reflect on their collective futures. Many of these studies were published in academic venues and other business management venues (Passig 1993, 1996, 1997, Passig & Adler 1998, 1999, Gilad 1999, Passig & Sharbat 2000, 2001). In this paper we will discuss the procedural variations we have implemented in each of them. The contribution of this paper lies in its attempt to clarify the rational behind the variations in the procedure that emerged in time. Here are briefly, a sample of studies and their differences in the procedures. A discussion on the necessity and the potential of the procedure's variations for the future of the Imen-Delphi will follow.

A future mission for communal services

As opposed to the original ID procedure, in which the panelists didn't know the list of participants, the ID procedure in this study involved people who were familiar with each other, and who used to have similar discussions in various other settings. The procedure, however, forced them to focus their discussions on very defined categories on a tight timetable.

This study (Gilad 1999), mandated by the Israeli Society of Communal Services (ISCS), was an effort to facilitate a future oriented interaction among a group of 60 managers from its top directorial ranks working to develop and run community centers and services. The project aimed at helping them generate new future images of relevant and improved future community services.

The issue that the board of the ISCS faced was how to use the knowledge that has been accumulated by various future studies in order to renew its future working mission for better reflecting undergoing changes in the Israeli society. For that matter, we used the ID to facilitate a structured discussion on the following community related issues: social processes, leisure, technology, values, structural organization, and community topography.

A future mission for Virtual Reality (VR) in schools

As opposed to the original ID, in which the interactions were conducted by snail-mail, this study, sought to examine whether it is possible to enhance the efficiency of the discussions through the network. This study wished to harness the ID procedure for conducting managed group discussions on the net.

The purpose of this study (Passig & Sharbat 2000, 2001) was to lead a debate and reach an agreement among a worldwide group of experts, concerning the future of VR in schools, which can be both preferable and possible. We offered a group of experts who are involved with VR and education an opportunity to take part in an on-line future oriented discussion concerning the rationale of using VR in schools in the future. The study was conducted with 50 worldwide experts from the U.S, Canada, UK, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Greece, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Venezuela.

A future mission for vocational training

As opposed to the original ID procedure, in which the panelists were discussing their very futures, this study involved members from the Israeli Industrialists' Union who engaged to draft a future mission for other institutions who are providing national high-tech vocational training (Passig & Adler 1998).

Eighty-five panelists including educational headmasters, entrepreneurs and senior managers from a broad spectrum of the Israeli industries participated in this project. The ID procedure attempted to motivate the participants to draft an agreed upon future oriented vision for vocational education, as well as to suggest means of its implementation. The objective was to examine technological and industrial trends (2020) and their impact on training programs. Its aim was to suggest a model for cooperation among the Industrialists' Union and vocational training entities. The panelists agreed upon a vision under the following five categories: Technologies to be part of the core curriculum, skills to be developed, new study programs to be developed reflecting cutting-edge technologies, best and most efficient training methods to reflect future technologies requirements, and models of cooperation among the industries at large and vocational training institutes.

A future mission for direct banking

As opposed to the original ID procedure, in which the panelists worked on the materials anonymously apart from each other, this study, which has been invited by the largest bank in Israel—Bank Hapoalim—aimed to establish a think tank forum from a group of senior managers who met regularly once a week for more than 18 months. Its objective was to draft a working vision for the Direct Banking department. The group included 25 senior managers from all of the bank departments. The study (Passig 1999) was based upon the assumption that the bank capability to lead the market of direct banking products, will depend a great deal upon the relevancy of its activities, which result from their accord to future trends as well as a clear vision.

The think tank panel engaged through the ID procedure in order to study the nature of the emerging 'new economy' in a variety of aspects: future communication technologies, future customers life styles, and national and international trends in banking regulations.

The procedure intended to produce a preferred and agreed upon list of future mission statements for the Direct Banking Dept. The statements will then be translated into real products and services.

Differences and Justifications

Since the ID procedure is an applied social methodology for the enhancement of future imagery (Passig 1996), it was necessary in the various studies to be attentive to the needs of the participants and modify the procedure to fit the issues in debate and the nature of the group. What came out of this special attention was a series of variations in the procedure that covered a range of aspects. At the end of each study we have assessed the new modifications in order to evaluate their effectiveness in improving the overall goals of the ID procedure. The following is a list of deviated modifications.

Participants

In the original ID procedure (Passig 1993), the participants were volunteers from the particular group being researched who agreed to take part in a future oriented discussion regarding their common future. The ID procedure did not intend to involve participants that will statistically represent the entire group. It was designed to just engage the participant to take a pro-active approach to their future.

In the course of the various studies, a genuine need has evolved to involve in the procedure a larger number of participants or even the entire group concerned with the issue at hand. In the Direct Banking project, all the employees of the Direct Banking Dept. took part in the discussions. Since the head of the department thought it will be consistent with the department's corporate culture if everybody would participate. In the Communal Service study, the Vice President of the ISCS believed that the opportunity to take part in such a future oriented debate should be proposed to all the departments of the ISCS. However, since we could not involve in the procedure thousands of people, we decided to have each department come out with a handful of representatives willing to take part in the study.

We have found that it is necessary to be attentive to the diversified needs of each group in the process of forming the final ID list of participants. Since the nature of the ID is to engage people to think about their common future, we have realized that we should be

alert to the organization's inner politics and corporate culture. That culture is the background to the common effort to draft a new future mission. It was clear that the organization will take seriously the suggestions of the participants if no constrains will be presented at the initial stage of the panel formation.

Facilitators' role

In the original procedure, the researchers defined their role as *facilitators*. The initial idea of facilitating the ID procedure was to enable the streaming of the questionnaires. In the initial ID procedure, we were in charge of collecting the triggers (excerpts from a variety of resources to trigger and initiate the discussion), organizing them into categories and distributing them among the participants for their input. This pre-round stage was designed to enable the participants draft questions for the first round questionnaire. The role of the participants throughout the entire procedure was to suggest a list of questions and draft their answers. The role of the facilitators was to collect, organize, crunch numerical data, and present them to the participants for their further input.

However, in the course of the various studies, we have found the participants willing to take part in the collection of the triggers as in the case of the study intended to draft a future mission for VR in education. In other projects, as in the cases of the Direct Banking and the ISCS, the participants clearly stated that they would like to take over the aspect of data processing. Indeed, the facilitators in those cases became more of heads to an extensive teamwork, which involved almost the entire procedure.

The reason for such a change in roles derives from the nature of the ID procedure. The ID aims at engaging a group of people to reflect deeply on their future images and debate those images with their fellow participants. The participants found it easier to delve into their future aspirations through the process of sorting and analyzing the entire group's reactions. It did not suffice to mark down their answers to the questionnaires. They have learned more about their future preferences by analyzing the group's other future ambitions and dreams.

Means of communication

The flexibility in the means of communication resulted from the main objective of the ID itself. The ID aimed at streaming a process that will enable a group of participants

retrieve and refine their opinions regarding a future mutual interest. It is aimed at generating communication among a group of individuals, which enables them to study experts' forecasts, to create new future images, to find common ground and determine a common future mission. Therefore, in the original ID procedure, face-to-face communication between the facilitators and the participants was necessary. The assumption was that with an absence of a direct connection among panelists due to anonymous constraint, face-to-face interaction between facilitators and each member of the group was required. Yet in the various projects that had been conducted we found that this assumption had been disproved.

In the study regarding VR in education, a wide world communication stream through e-mail had to be established. In the study regarding future vocational education, the communication between the facilitators and the participants has been established through snail-mail. Alternatively, in the Direct Banking project as well as in the Community Services project, face-to-face meetings between the facilitators and participants has been especially proven to be efficient probably due to the personal acquaintance among participants.

During the course of the ID studies, we found that it is possible to reach the participants through various means. Constraints such as: distance, budget, location or special needs brought about a change in the original mean of communication between the facilitators and participants.

The procedure intends to promote responsibility, self-awareness as well as group emergence. The subjective character of an obtained agreement is the most important element of the collective development. Therefore, the flow of the procedure ought to reflect the genuine needs and constraints of the participants. In any case, the procedure should remain under the assumptions and basic rules of anonymity.

Discussion

The ID procedure is an applied social methodology for the enhancement of future imagery (Passig 1998). As such, we found it necessary in the various studies to be attentive to the needs of the participants and modify the procedure to fit the issues in

debate. What came out of this special attention was a series of practical variations covered here.

We took this free approach to modify the procedure from the foundations of Applied Social System's Theories. For years Applied Social System's approach claim that science need to work for the betterment of human systems.

Bohm and Peat (1987) suggested that the increasing fragmentation and specialization of science have led to 'the point where the whole activity is losing its meaning'. Therefore, they said: 'we need to change what we mean by science', and bring about basic changes that: 'would represent significant move toward liberating the surge of creativity that is needed if science is to help in confronting the deeper problems of humanity'.

We found this approach powerfully articulated in Mitroff and Churchman's 'Manifesto' (1992). They provided definitions and concepts of science that are very different from the prevailing tradition. They believe that the institution of science should 'exist primarily to serve humanity, and not the narrow specialized interests of disciplines. 'Any science or discipline that loses sight of this fundamental principle not only forfeits its legitimacy, but its basic right to existence'.

Conclusion

Standing on the shoulders of Mitroff and Churchman (1992), this free approach to permit variations to a scientific procedure is a response to their manifesto of Systems' service in the following 3 aspects. It is our belief that this endorsement demonstrates that scientists can realize the challenge of their manifesto without sacrificing scientific standards. The ID could emerge as a dynamic procedure that reflect the constraints and needs of the participants without loosing the core of its intents. All the more so, this loose approach to modify the procedure on the go, helped further strengthen the procedure as a genuine social technology that can assist a group of panelists mature and further develop common future imagery.

We hope the ID procedure will continue to evolve and take a variety of shapes to keep fealty to its original aim—guiding panelists towards general agreement for future growth.

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