



In Memory of Jay Galbraith, Organisation Design Trailblazer

Jay R. Galbraith, who transformed the field of organisation design, and was the creator of the highly influential Star Model of organisation development passed away on April 8, 2014, at the age of 75.

I first encountered the ideas of Jay Galbraith as a doctoral student in the late 1990's, nearly a decade before I encountered him in person.

At the core of Jay's thinking was a vision of organisations as collections of individuals that must process information, individually and collectively, in order to achieve the organisation's goals. Therefore, an organisation's design should take into account the amount of information required to be processed by its decision makers. When uncertain business conditions demand that the organisation assume a greater informational burden, the design must be altered.

I remember being amazed by three things about his first book that I read in a doctoral seminar.

First, the sheer ambition and courage of his ideas. Jay meant to do nothing less than provide a complete toolkit to analyse and design complex organisations of all shapes, sizes, and sectors – and he wanted to do that in a slim volume of around 150 pages.

Second, the anchoring of his arguments in concrete detail, gleaned unmistakably from first-hand experience.

Third, the humility with which Jay presented this

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

ambitious set of ideas. For instance, in the preface to his 1973 book, *Designing Complex Organisations*, he wrote: "... A third warning is that the reader will find nothing new...What I have tried to do is synthesise a number of phenomena which are usually treated separately... It is this synthesis which is the contribution, if any that this book makes." He went on to acknowledge his intellectual debt to the founding fathers of modern organisation design theory: "I have been influenced by James D. Thompson. It was he who influenced me to begin studying organisations and provided a basis for some of the content. The other person is Herbert Simon. There are times when it seems to me that I have merely rewritten his thinking on the basis of the last ten years empirical evidence."

As I read more of Jay's work (he was always Professor Galbraith to me), I began to appreciate why his name had become synonymous with the theory and practice of organisation design. His ideas were fairly abstract, but around this core, [Jay built a detailed framework](#) that interpreted structural features of organisations such as hierarchy, departmentalisation, policies, lateral roles, and so on in terms of their information processing functions. This mapping from structure to function later became an integral part of all the thinking about and research on organisation design.

A final layer of ideas involved how to make these concepts useful to those who design organisations. Jay's **Star Model** identified five key "levers" -- strategy, structure, process, people, and rewards -- by which managers can shape employee behaviour toward a desired outcome. It is easily one of the most influential ideas of all time in the world of practical organisation design and change.

At some stage, I discovered, to my surprise, that Jay used to be a professor at the same B-school where I was studying for my doctoral degree (Wharton). I wondered what had prompted a successful theorist like him to give up academia for the world of practice. I lost no time in asking him that the very first time I met him, at a small workshop in Brussels many years later. His candid answer basically was that he left academia when his ideas began "turning out to be too useful to publish."

Around 1979, Jay said, he began getting more requests for consulting than the academic rules would allow. He felt he was learning a lot through these projects, perhaps more than through his regular academic position, so he resigned his professorship. That must have taken courage and intellectual ambition of an unconventional sort. As he wrote in his book *Designing Matrix Organisations that Actually Work* in 2008: "My academic colleagues thought I was crazy. In part they were correct. I have never regained my academic credibility." This was patently false of course, as his ever-growing citation count within academic articles clearly showed, but he could never overcome his innate modesty.

Over the years, I got to know Jay, particularly in his role as co-founder of the Organisation Design Community. This initiative aims to put organisation design squarely back onto the academic agenda, from where it has gone missing for a couple of decades and to ensure it gains the same importance there that it already enjoys in the world of practical management. Over multiple meetings, discussions, and brainstorming sessions, I repeatedly saw in Jay the same attributes that so impressed me about his early work: Ambition, courage, an anchoring in reality and awareness of the latest phenomena and above all, a sense of humility. His very **last paper** was about the organisation design implications of Big Data and the third edition of his book, *Designing Organisations*, hit the shelves two months before he died and was a total rewrite of the second edition.

I last saw Jay at a conference in 2013. We were enjoying what felt like a well-earned drink at the end of a long day, and I casually mentioned a doctoral student at INSEAD who wanted to build agent-based models of matrix structures for his dissertation. Jay's eyes lit up; for the next 30 minutes I got a glimpse of the kind of academic he must have been as a younger man. He laid out the problems

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

with the pessimistic rhetoric about matrix structures ("utter nonsense!"), and how the label itself was being bandied about without any precision. He cited examples from his extensive experience, and we argued a bit about what would be a good way to abstract from the phenomenon in a useful way. Jay was clearly excited by the prospect of an analytic look at the phenomenon, and couldn't wait to read the work.

That's the Jay Galbraith I will always remember.

Phanish Puranam is the Roland Berger Chair Professor of Strategy & Organisation Design at INSEAD.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/blog/insead-blog/in-memory-of-jay-galbraith-organisation-design-trailblazer-3381>

Download the Knowledge app for free

