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THE ALIGN SYSTEM

A BLUEPRINT FOR CREATING THE ADAPTIVE, HIGH PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS OF THE FUTURE

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ORIGINS

The align system is a holistic and pragmatic approach to positioning an organisation to survive and prosper in the post-covid, 4th industrial Revolution world.

The system is based on around 80 years of collective experience witnessing first-hand the successes and failures that organisations have experienced as they attempted to respond to the changes they face.

Its origins lie in a great number of conversations beginning in 2018, analysing these experiences, and recognising common patterns driving success, and common anti-patterns causing failure.

We refined and documented these patterns over a number of weekends in late 2019, and the system was first presented to the public at the meeting of the Amsterdam branch of the Business Agility Institute in January 2020.

This was immediately before Covid struck, and organisations across the world were forced to change their ways of working to deal with the impact of that epidemic. We took some time to reassess our ideas in light of these changes, and concluded they were more relevant than ever - in that respect Covid was just another 'black swan event' that the Align System was created to deal with.

WHY 'ALIGN'?

We chose the name to reflect one of the biggest problems we see over and over again - the vast amount of time spent (and lost) in 'alignment meetings' and similar activities. We believe most organisations have the ability to work faster, better and in a more relaxed way if the anti-patterns that drive misalignment were removed.

We have witnessed teams who spend 40, 50, or even 60% of their time doing work that is essentially 'workarounds' to solve problems that would not exist if their organisation stopped clinging to outdated org designs. Org designs based on concepts originating in a world that no longer exists, and whose time has passed.

Consequently then, as the name suggests, The Align System places great importance on the benefits achieved when org designs are based on alignment around Value Streams.



THE BACKGROUND

In the introduction we describe the system as being holistic and pragmatic.

It is Pragmatic because it is based on real world experience of the ways of organisational change that have come to be known by terms such as 'Agile', 'Business Agility' and 'DevOps'. Using these ways of working are widely recognised as the reasons why businesses such as Google, Amazon, AirBnB have come out of nowhere to dominate their respective markets so relatively quickly. From our experience we have come to recognize a number of common patterns that have driven successful transformations, and conversely a number of common anti-patterns that have caused failure.

We have used these patterns and anti-patterns as 'guard rails' in developing our system, so that we build in ways to succeed, and push out paths to failure. Consequently we have a system to lead organisations to developing their own customised way of working. A way of working that is tailored to their own environment and specific needs, as opposed to adopting an off-the-shelf 'cookie cutter' frameworks. We have found that these off the shelf frameworks, by trying to predict every possible set of circumstances ahead of time, end up causing inefficiency and compromise almost everywhere.

*From the Agile Manifesto -
Simplicity -- the art of maximising the amount of work not done -- is essential.*

The system is Holistic because one of the most dominant anti-patterns we have found is the outdated idea of striving for local efficiency - which almost always is at the expense of overall success. In business transformations, we have also found the local efficiency anti-pattern spawns a second one - 'we need to transform the business, but department SPQ and department XYZ are completely out of scope'. If we don't drive out these anti-patterns from day one, any transformation will be doomed. Consequently our system needs to be holistic - it needs to include every aspect of the organisation.



THE NEED ...

The world in which we now exist is changing in so many ways at an ever increasing pace. This means the models that we have created to organise our business and professional life are rapidly becoming out of date and need to be replaced with new new paradigms that more accurately model this new world.

Key among these outdated perspectives are management practices based on Taylorism - treating organisations as 'machines' that respond in very linear and predictable ways, and traditional budgeting techniques that place local efficiency ahead of overall performance. We believe that any organisation staffed by humans behaves more like an organism than as a machine - in any such system people are integral to the structure of the system and are capable of free thought and action rather than robotic and predictable behaviour. Further any kind of interaction with such a system modifies it and changes its response..

As Jack Welch warned, "When the rate of change on the outside exceeds the rate of change on the inside, the end is near."

We believe the ideas behind the system apply equally to both new organisations in the process of forming, and equally well to more mature organisations seeking to respond to changes in their environment.

... BUT THERE IS HOPE

Although our traditional comfort zones are being eroded and we need to find new ways to work, we don't need to be so afraid - many of the ways to deal with these new challenges already exist - we just need to replace our existing paradigms with these new ones.



SYSTEM FUNDAMENTALS

We believe that everything is in a constant state of evolution, and accordingly we can no longer anchor our models and paradigms in fixed organisational structures and fixed processes, and need to find alternative anchors that can respond to this constant evolution.

We choose two main anchors -

- The customer problem is front and centre at all times in everything we do.
- Since everything is in constant flux we need to constantly assess if what we did yesterday is what we need to do tomorrow, so we design for constant evolution.

WHERE TO START?

Although an organisation may need to become quite complex, the align system always starts from the simplest representation, and then only adds necessary levels of complexity as and when they are needed. This is opposed to other systems which start with a complex model that attempts to address all possible situations, but then requires the removal of any unnecessary elements.

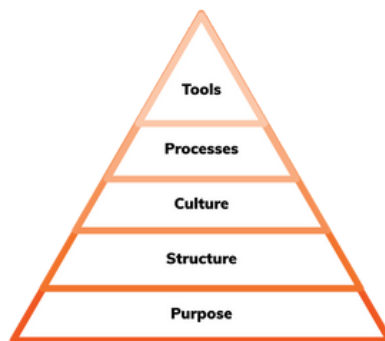
Einstein said "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger and more complex. It takes a touch of genius - and a lot of courage - to move in the opposite direction."

In building up from the simplest models, the align system reflects the agile principle of simplicity - the art of maximising the amount of work not done. We have an emergent design and emergent architecture so at any time we are only doing the work that is necessary for our current goals.

We consider a business to be defined as an organisation which exists to turn a business hypothesis into a solution that a customer will pay for in order to solve a problem that they have.

For us any business comprises two aspects. An operational aspect which turns the business idea into a realisable solution. And an interactive aspect whereby the solution is provided to the user in exchange for some form of payment. These two aspects are inseparable and concurrent - they are neither phases nor sequential tasks.

THE PYRAMID OF ACHIEVEMENT



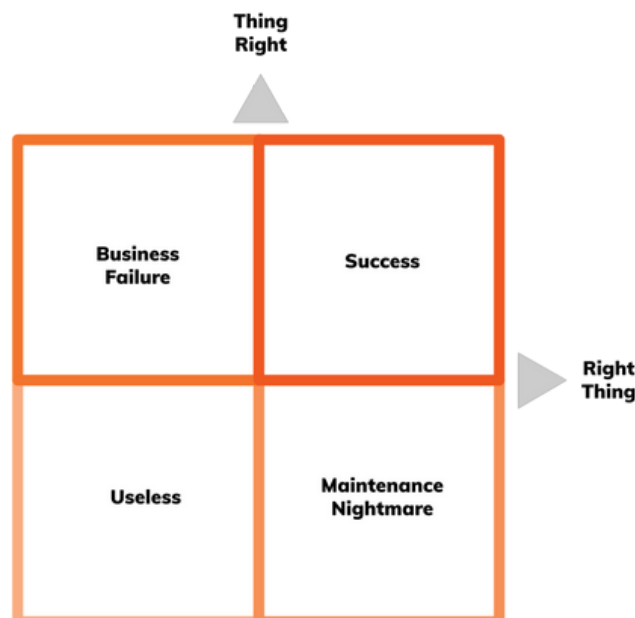
Everything we do is guided by what we call the pyramid of achievement. The pyramid comprises five layers. The first layer is Purpose. Once we have established a purpose we can start to build the next layer structure. We use our Purpose to guide how we design our Structure and rather than use some predetermined structure for historical or other reasons. The third layer is culture but pounds on purpose and structure and is the values and behaviours with which we will conduct our activities so stop. Only then can we start to decide on the Pthat people use to create her product. and only once we know these processes can we start to adopt tools to help us deliver these processes in more efficient and effective ways.

We have come to realise that this pyramid exists and is the basis of success in any activity, because we have seen so many instances when honest endeavour and sufficient resources have failed to deliver an intended outcome either because one of the layers of the pyramid have been missed or they are incompatible with the adjacent level.

Many people vaguely recognise the pyramid but build it from the top down because the higher layers are the most tangible and easily accessible. However our experience shows that working in this way is almost totally guaranteed to fail. This is because each layer is dependent on the layer below being in place and being aligned in purpose, in order to achieve its intended objectives. E.g. any Process requires a compatible Culture in order to succeed. Tools are there to improve the delivery of a compatible Process.

BUSINESS FUNDAMENTALS

At a foundational level any business only needs to do two things make the thing right, and make the right thing. The only way to be truly successful is to do both in equal measure.



On first hearing the previous statement, many might consider it to be so simple as to be challenging their intelligence, yet almost every day we continue to see examples of how many businesses are continuing to fail at this fundamental level. This is particularly true when we see so many organisations falling into the trap of not 'making the right thing' - yet there is no bigger error in business than making a product no one wants.

While recent focus across many industries has been on 'making the thing right', but the Align System builds in the same level of quality control and data driven decision support for both axes so that we continually drive toward the Success quadrant.



PRODUCT/SERVICE DELIVERY

As in many aspects of the Align System, we build from a simple model, adding complexity as and when needed. Our experience shows that most organisations - for mostly for historical reasons - have overly complex and overly long business 'pipelines' to move from a business idea to a product or service in front of their customers.

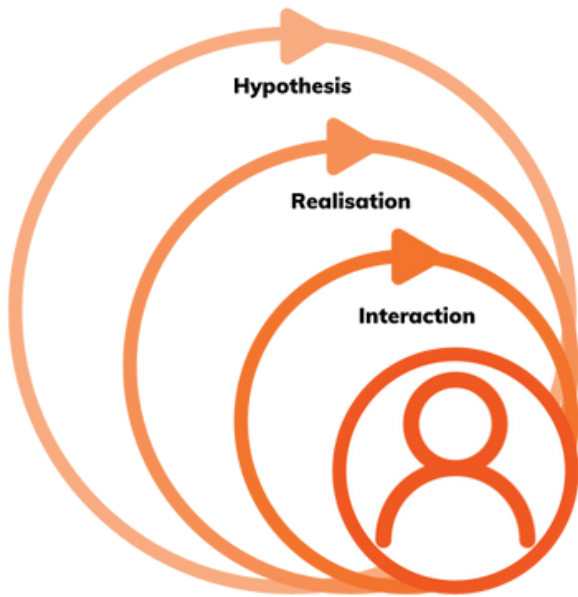
These outdated types of 'pipeline' are the anti-thesis of business agility, in that not only do they drive up costs and time to market, but also drastically limit an organisation's ability to respond to change in their marketplace

Consequently the Align System employs a 3 stage 'chain of why' that takes us from our original idea - or business hypothesis - efficiently to the actions we take to present our product or service to our customers.

The cycles we describe below are very similar to the ideas presented by Gojko Adjić in his book 'Specification by Example' but we have extended them - particularly to show their applicability beyond the world of IT and software development..

As already suggested, we use Wardley Mapping and Cynefin to guide us at a strategic level in terms of our org design, our build or buy decisions, selecting our key personnel, and choosing the most appropriate working practices.

As guided by the strategy we create from our WM exercise, we may choose to further expand out into more detail some areas - e.g. Clayton Christiansen on 'Jobs to be done', BJ Fogg on influencing decisions, SEO research, Growth Hacking for our interaction aspect, or Cloud Architecture, Agile systems, etc., for our Operational Aspects



THE HYPOTHESIS CYCLE

We begin with the (business) Hypothesis cycle. We use Impact Mapping to guide us to define the deliverables we will need to provide to our customers for our business hypothesis to succeed.

We choose Impact Mapping since we believe - via the 5 whys - that any business goal can be described in terms of a set of behaviours we want to change or reinforce in our customers (or employees for internal initiatives). This hypothesis cycle will drive one or more behaviour implementation cycles.

THE REALISATION CYCLE

In the realisation cycle we map out the journey that we want our Users to follow in adopting/using our product. Then we use story mapping to transform this User Journey into a set of realisation elements that will give structure to our product. We can use Wardley Mapping (and Cynefin) as a secondary tool here to guide in developing a strategy that will put us/ keep us ahead of our competitors.

Each realisation cycle will in turn result in one or more user interaction cycles. However we may choose or need to repeat the Realisation cycle recursively so that we have reached a stage where our User Stories are small enough to be implemented.

THE USER INTERACTION CYCLE

This is the lowest level of our 3 cycles.

Here we use example mapping to define the tasks we need to execute so that their interactions with our product (or service) encourages them to choose to use our product - i.e. adopt the behaviours set out in our business hypothesis.



METRICS

Until recently IT departments were - often very justifiably - considered to be among the least successful at project delivery. However over the past few years, many IT departments have turned this reputation around, and are now often among the most successful at delivering what their users' need. This is due in no small measure to the move to a product - rather than project - philosophy, and to the DevOps (see link) 'revolution'.

We'll speak more about product mentality later, but for now we'll look at how the success of DevOps is largely driven by the use of 4 metrics for our operation aspect, -

- Number of Deployments
- Change Lead
- Mean Time to Recover
- Change Fail Rate

Although these seem only to be applicable to software products, with a little thought these metrics can be applied equally as productively to any product or service.

Number of Deployments

The number of times we provide a new item to our customers - the higher the number the better

Change Lead Time

The length of time it takes us to go from a hypothesis to giving the user the item - the shorter time the better

Mean Time to Recover

How long does it take us to recover from any kind of user failure - the shorter time the better

Change Fail Rate

What percentage of new items fail to 'hit the spot' with our customers - the smaller % the better



METRICS (CONT.)

To these four operational focused metrics we add two interaction focused metrics -

Net Promoter Score

How likely is a customer to refer our product to a friend - higher the better.

Adoption Rate

How quickly do new items achieve the expected adoption by customers.

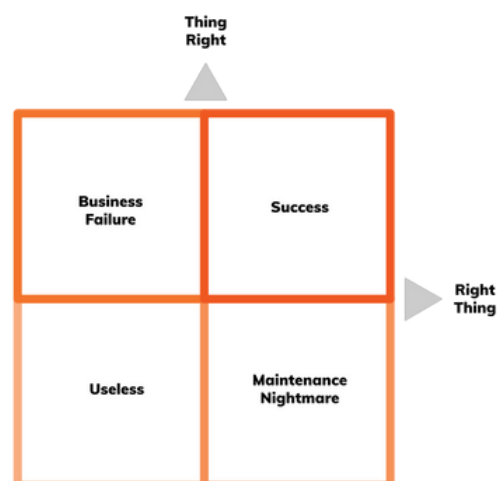
These metrics have been chosen to avoid the trap we humans usually fall into of being seduced by 'Vanity' metrics.

ADOPTING THE ALIGN SYSTEM ...

We see the Align system as being equally applicable to both new and existing organisations. With new ventures adoption is more straightforward as we can build from scratch and not have the transformation overhead with much less friction in trying to change existing mindsets and paradigms.

... FOR START-UPS...

As we have just stated, start ups don't have so much friction when it comes to changing the way of working, however there's often a different kind of friction in a start-up. The sad fact is that more than 90% of new ventures fail. As humans we have difficulty in accepting we are one of the 9 out of 10 who will not succeed and often spend way too much time and effort 'flogging a dead horse'. The sad fact is that too many 'entrepreneurs' take too long to accept the fact that they are in the 'Business Failure' quadrant, and that their idea is doomed.



True entrepreneurs recognise it's more of a numbers game and it's best to give up on a failure and move onto the next idea. Our system has this approach built in and is geared towards identifying a failing idea at the earliest opportunity, to limit our losses and minimise risk to our investment.



... FOR EXISTING ORGANISATIONS

With existing organisations, the challenge of transitioning to a new way of working has to be overcome - and in our experience this is most often completely underestimated, and misunderstood. Consequently this leads to total mismanagement - often failing at eye wateringly massive expense.

Many organisations try to transform their entire workforce at the same time using a waterfall programme management approach. We know of no instances where this 'big bang' approach has achieved the intended outcome and objectives. The big bang approach fails for many reasons, but there are two main ones.

Firstly, a pre-planned, one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to succeed simply due to the the complex and dynamic response of an organisation of any significant size. Real life organisations respond in an unpredictable way to change, more like an living organism and much less with the predictable, linear machine-like response this approach requires to be successful.

Secondly, most transformations of this type assume total buy-in across 100% of the workforce. In reality many employees see a transformation as a threat to their position and/or job satisfaction - either consciously or unconsciously. Consequently they often react in less than positive ways, which increases the unpredictability of the response, and further limits the chances of success.

Our approach uses proven techniques, such as Theory of Constraints, to grow the transformation from inside. We carefully select change champions from the ranks of those most threatened, and support them to spread the transformation across the business. We use their successes to demonstrate the value of the transformation and gain traction with their previously less eager colleagues.

Using this customised approach, each organisation is free to expand on the basic elements in a way that suits their goals and situation, to use the system to develop their own 'Agile way'. We believe this approach is more in line with the spirit of Agile. We see value in a generic way of working - such as SAFe or LeSS - or in copying a snapshot of one successful company's solution. - such as 'the Spotify Model. However, we see there is more value in understanding an organisation's goals and values, before building a customised solution aligned to delivering these specific needs, rather than focusing on performing a set of prescriptive, pre-defined activities.



ADOPTING THE SYSTEM.

FIND OUT MORE

Interested to find out how the Align System can help you secure the future of your organisation?

Then please email us at enquiries@belcadiblackwood.com

We'll be happy to arrange a free and confidential initial consultation