Information Technology and Human Services, More than Computers?

Reviewed by Neil Ballantyne

Steyaert, J. (Ed.) (1996), *Information Technology and Human Services, More than Computers?* Utrecht, NIZW - Causa, 202 p., ISBN 90 5050372 1

The papers in this edited volume were first presented at the Causa/ENITH 5 conference organised by Causa and held in Eindhoven in September 1995. The conference focused on the information technology implications of the profound changes in social policy that have swept most western countries in the last fifteen years. The papers in this book explore these changes within three sections: paying for care; care management; and professional practice. It includes fourteen papers from an international group of authors - all distinguished experts in their respective fields. Each section begins with a keynote paper written from a 'visionary perspective', followed by other authors who reflect critically on the keynote paper.

Jan Steyaert introduces the book with a very helpful overview of the relationship between social policy, IT and human services. Ignace Snellen follows with a global perspective highlighting the dynamic relationship between societal developments; changes in the way governments govern; and developments in information and communications technology.

Paying for Care
The common trend of most western states away from collective provisions and towards the marketisation of welfare services is evident within all three of the papers in this first section. Howard Glennerster explains the demographic and economic forces necessitating radical alterations in the way governments fund social welfare services. He goes on to outline the techniques employed by governments to contain rising expenditure, and the need for information technology to assist in the rational allocation of scarce resources.

Greater targeting and means testing of welfare benefits has complicated legislation and procedures. Gareth Morgan describes how new technology is helping to cut through complex benefits legislation to provide service users and professionals with accurate and up to date information. The view that recipients of welfare benefits are empowered in their new role as customers of welfare services is, Morgan suggests, a myth. However, he argues that new technology applications in the welfare rights field may support them in their struggle against bureaucracy.

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Peter Roosenboom discusses three phases in the development of administrative arrangements for providing care: from bureaucratic control, through management control, to market control by the use of voucher systems and client based budgets. Roosenboom argues that an emerging role for information technology will be providing market information on likely customer choices and preferences.

Care Management
Hans van Ewijk begins the second section with an optimistic view of the new willingness amongst different welfare professions and services to collaborate in designing packages of care tailored to individual need. Van Ewijk suggests that this new 'open care environment' needs to be complemented with a relational database approach to IT enabling service users and professionals to plan together appropriate packages of care.

Nick Gould takes a more sceptical stance towards claims of user empowerment and the rationality of market mechanisms. Gould outlines care management developments in the UK and describes a conceptual model incorporating three levels of planning. He considers the relational database approach suggested by van Ewijk as too limiting and argues instead for care management information systems that are flexible, provide qualitative information, and enable networking and information sharing.

A complex web of independent service providers offer welfare services in the Netherlands. Eddie van Hierden describes an information system for managing and coordinating care between agencies in the youth services field. The system he describes seems to a be a way of limiting the 'shopping around' behaviour of service users and his paper raises many unanswered questions about data protection and rights.

Jos Aarts ends this section describing the IT implications of increased accountability in the health care sector in the Netherlands.

Professional Practice
In the final section Walter Hudson argues that social workers need to meet increasing demands for accountability and provide evidence of effectiveness by concerning themselves with the outcomes of their actions. Hudson goes on to outline a specific model of Empirical Social Work Practice. The model involves measuring change in response to treatment by the use of software to administer individual quantitative tests and scales, combined with time series monitoring and evaluation.

As other contributors point out, Hudson's model is not appropriate to all, or many, human service settings. It fails to capture the rich complexity of human lives and situations, and leaves to one side the importance of the reasoned judgement and experience of the human services practitioner in effecting change. Gail Auslander critiques Hudson's single systems methodology and commends an information system in use in a health setting in Israel. The system she describes enables practitioners and managers to obtain reports on aggregated data in response to queries, gaining useful information for practice.

Joe Ravetz's paper offers a devastating critique of all attempts to apply rule-based systems to the essentially ill structured domain of most human service agencies. Tom van Yperen suggests modifications to Hudson's model by introducing the notion of goal directed practice. Finally, Sylvia Hoekstra describes developments in the functional mapping and measurement of outcomes in the field of nursing care.

The debate over social work as art or science gets a good airing throughout this section, but I cannot help feeling that an opportunity to discuss a whole raft of other practice issues was lost. Not least amongst which are the potential uses of electronic networking, the Internet, and the world wide web.

Conclusions
There are problems inherent in any text attempting to generalise about international trends in social welfare. The degree of convergence amongst welfare systems can be overstated; and differences in value systems, social and economic context, and administrative arrangements are de-emphasised. Nonetheless, there is considerable insight to be gained from the macro perspectives offered by the contributors to this volume.

The papers themselves vary widely in the clarity and detail of their argument. The best offer a comprehensive review of the area under discussion and include references for further reading. However, all of them are, in their own way, engaging and thought provoking. This is a book that deserves a place on the shelf of reflective human service managers and practitioners everywhere. Don't expect to find neat solutions to the problems of providing welfare services in post-industrial society. Do expect a stimulating tour of the IT and human service themes and issues emerging across the western world at the end of the 20th century.