

**“Lifting The Mantle Of Protection From Weber’s Presuppositions In His Theory of Bureaucracy”**

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## 1. Introduction

It has been previously remarked upon (Sharrock and Button, 2007) that ethnomethodology is accused by whatever hue of a formal sociology concerned with primordial social structural matters such as ‘power’, ‘authority’, ‘bureaucracy’, ‘the state’, and the like, that it does not, cannot, deal with them. It has also been remarked upon (Sharrock and Button, 2007) that this is not a true characterisation of ethnomethodology which is as interested in these *everyday* matters of as it is in *any* everyday matter. It is just that it does not attach to them any primacy in the description of social affairs. Rather, ethnomethodology’s interest in them is conditioned by their appearance within the everyday affairs of members, in practical courses of action and interaction – how they are oriented to, and thereby made relevant for, and in, actual occasions of action and interaction.

This paper is concerned with one of sociology’s primordial concepts, that of *bureaucracy* and the associated actions and interactions of bureaucrats. Two of the founding figures in sociology were particularly concerned with the operations of bureaucracy, and have influenced contemporary thinking on the state and its administrative activities. Within Marxist influenced literature the state is a relentless machine that subjugates citizens through its various governmental apparatuses such as the faceless, calculating, bureaucrat. Weber also portrays the bureaucrat as a calculating, rational operative, proceeding according to rules of conduct, operating through written documents, working within a hierarchy of responsibility and authority and providing for official continuity of business.

While Marxism as a whole is a thread that continues to run throughout sociology, within contemporary sociological discussions of bureaucracy and administration it is perhaps a Weberian foundation that is more evident. Certainly the management aspiration of the organisation that figures in this study<sup>2</sup> to increasingly standardise and rationalise their processes so as to gain greater efficiency by having greater control asserted over how things get done through the increased use of protocols for doing, even automating, part of the work, can be traced to a Weberian ideal type of bureaucracy. Through their education and through their management training courses, managers in the organization are well aware of, and versed in, modern management practice, which they attempt to implement within The Department. Modern management practices flow through various routes such as Transaction Cost Theory (e.g. Malone et al., 1987)

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<sup>1</sup> Bittner (1974, p. 73).

<sup>2</sup> A governmental department in a European country –referred to as The Department- concerned with the administration of welfare payments to the unemployed. At the time this study was undertaken The Department had a “customer policy” that treated people who were claiming or making claim applications as its customers and employees of the Department referred to them as their ‘customers’. Accordingly we have adopted that convention.

from Taylorist notions (Taylor, 1911), which in turn have their source in a Weberian understanding of bureaucracy.

The drive for standardization and efficiency that can be found in modern management practices was very evident in The Department. Often these management practices portray the person who actually does the work as the weak link in the bureaucratic process because it is at their level that errors can be introduced. The drive for standardisation and rational processes to be followed and adhered to are then attempts to deal with human error. However, as Bittner remarks in a seminal article on the concept of 'organisation', "Clearly what Weber had in mind when speaking about efficiency was not a formally independent criterion of judgment but as an ideal that is fully attuned to *practical interests as these emerge and are pursued in the context of every-day life.*" (Bittner 1974, p.74, emphasis added).

The question, however, of what the emerging practical interests of those whose work is the subject of rationalizing protocols are, and how they interact with those protocols is one that is not addressed in management theory or sociological considerations of organizations. In distinction, Bittner called for "a program of inquiry which takes as its object of interest the study of the methodical *use* of the rational constructions subsumed under the concept of organisation." (Bittner 1974, p75, emphasis added). What is driving Bittner's call is the recognition that the sociological descriptions of structural features of social matters such as rationality and efficiency, stand on behalf of, and inevitably gloss over, the details that constitute them in practice. Thus Bittner's interest, and that of ethnomethodology in general, is less with whether something is or is not rational in Weberian terms, or is or is not rule following, but more with *how* it is that something could be described in those terms, that is, *what* it is that is done, and *how* that is done, so that it could be recognizable and describable as *rational* or *rule following* within bureaucratic organisations.

In this paper we will make a start in, what Bittner describes as lifting "the mantle of protection from the unstated presupposition surrounding the terms of Weber's theory of bureaucracy" (Bittner 1974, p.73) by describing this "what" and "how" that stand behind Weber's sociological characterisation. We will attempt to advance Bittner's program by unpacking the use of two of Weber's rational constructs, the use of written documents and rule following through the examination of them as courses of action and interaction. Consequently, we will look to, how, in the actions and interactions of The Department's employees they are, when they are, achieved as characterisations of those actions and interactions.

## **2. The Rational Character of Bureaucracy**

For Weber, the following principles characterise bureaucratic organisations:

- 1) The continuity of official business.
- 2) Stipulated rules govern its conduct.
- 3) There is a hierarchy of responsibility and authority.
- 4) Officials do not own the resources needed to conduct the organisation's business.

- 5) Offices are not tied to the official.
- 6) Official business proceeds on the basis of written documents.

Thus bureaucratic organisations are viewed as embodying certain rational characteristics, of, for example, *calculability, efficiency, predictability, and technical proficiency*.

Weber writes:

“The fully developed bureaucratic apparatus compares with other organisations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration”.

(Weber, 1930).

and:

“Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly the more it is ‘dehumanised’, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all the purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation.”

(Weber, 1930).

However, seemingly contrary to Weber’s description, The Department could just as well be characterized as ‘irrational’, ‘highly personalised’, ‘slow and imprecise’, and ‘technologically backward’. For example, contrary to Weber’s description of bureaucracy being driven through documentation, files, and knowledge of them, an application for benefit is not organised as a single coherent file that can be interrogated in order to respond to applicants’ queries such as “why have I not received my money”. Instead, different pieces of information on or relevant to an application are distributed across technologies, buildings, and people. In order to answer a query, it is not a simple matter of looking into the file and checking on the status of the progress of the file through its pre-destined phases. Rather, it requires investigatory work on the part of the person dealing with the query in order to assemble, in an ad hoc manner and for this purpose only, a virtual file on the application from out of the various information repositories that contain material relevant to the application.

The apparent ‘inefficiency’ even ‘irrationality’ of this process is, however, a rational reaction to the organisational and technical infrastructure of The Department. Paraphrasing the title of one of Harold Garfinkel’s influential papers, (Garfinkel, 1967) ‘there are good organisational reasons for bad customer records’. So for example, information is not kept on a single computer system due to a number of organisational and legacy issues in the department.

The cornerstone computer system in the department is a legacy system (BENSYS) that has been and continues to be nursed through the years (and all the legislative changes that have occurred that The Department has to respond

to) but it is too important to risk replacing it with a modern system that would be very expensive and could compromise the benefits system that must be kept up-and-running. This system contains key customer information and payment schedules and automatically triggers payments. Due to its original design with a DOS-style interface and limited information fields it is not at-a-glance user friendly and can only contain limited information. Consequently, supplemental required information storage and processing capacity is handled by a variety of adjunct paper and electronic systems. These are at best only partially integrated with BENSYS and sometimes completely stand-alone.

This issue is compounded by the fact that The Department has seen an increasing separation and distribution of business function in the last 15 years, following management trends and the widespread introduction of networked computer systems. Accordingly, different departments have built or acquired systems suited to their local needs. These generally work well *locally* with the access all employees have to BENSYS but are often not always accessible (and if they are, not always easily understandable) by employees in other departments. Paper records are also integral, for some parts of the process their movement delimits the actions to be taken, otherwise they may be stored locally nor centrally. Thus for good policy and local reasons a patchwork of distributed records has developed that from an holistic, or more to the point, customer serving perspective, can have bad implications. This, seemingly, 'inefficiency' of records policy and records structure was in many cases not made visible to people who rang The Department with queries, who would be presented with answers as if there was a single file to consult as part of a rational and efficient process of document use. In these terms document use was made rational and efficient in the work of The Departments employees and an understanding of organisational rationality and efficiency requires that this work is understood.

In order to start to lift the mantle on Weber's presuppositions and to examine how rationality and efficiency are achieved in practice, we will proceed by examining two elements of Weber's characterisations – that official business proceeds on the basis of written documents, and that stipulated rules govern its conduct- as that is done in the work of The Department's employees.

### **3. Official Business Proceeds on the Basis of Written Documents**

Associated with this feature of bureaucracy in Weber's schema are the ideas of precision, efficiency, speed, knowledge of files and continuity. In this respect transcript A (comprised of field notes and some recorded data)<sup>3</sup> is interesting.

#### **Transcript A**

- C: [my benefits being held up because of the amount of NI] but I worked both years and need my money urgently as I've nothing to live on  
A: So so is it the tax years 08 and 07?  
A: Did you work in both of those tax years?

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<sup>3</sup> The Department's concern to protect the privacy of customers prevented us from recording customers' sides of conversations on the telephone with The Department's agents. Consequently the utterances made by the customer – C – are field note renditions of what they actually said. Speaker 'A' is the agent answering the call, 'D' is the agent's supervisor, and 'J' is the fieldworker.

A: Ok alright alright  
A: Ok bear with me for a second hold on  
A: Ok [quietly] [checks BenSys]  
A: Mmm I think it's the 07 year that's the problem  
C: But I worked for all that year  
A: What for the were you working full time  
C: I worked for the whole year  
A: Yeah but were you working full time, how many  
C: I worked more than 20 hours a week  
A: You were doing 20 hours a week? and you worked for the whole year of 06 07  
C: Yes  
A: Then we'll need to have a look at your Z60  
C: I've already sent it to you  
A: Ok alright hold on a second, alright bear with me for a sec  
[he puts the customer on hold and goes to get Diane his supervisor]  
A: Can I borrow you Diane? Please  
D: Albert did you want me?  
A: She's querying the tax years she says she's already sent in her Z60 for it  
urm  
[they're walking over to the desk while talking]  
A: 08 I think she's alright but 07 is the problem  
D: See 08 I think she scrapes through on that doesn't she  
[they're looking at BenSys together]  
D: Ok go into 07  
A: 07 but 07 is showing quite a lot less but she claims that she's worked the whole year doing 20 hours a week at urm {supermarket}  
D: [looking at NotePad, a BenSys screen where agents enter comments on their activity] – that says enough conts in tax year ending 07  
A: If Supplies Z60 the claim can be reassessed [reading] but she says she's supplied it  
D: Did she work full time  
A: No she worked 20 hours yeah but if she worked the whole year at 20 hours she probably would have enough wouldn't she  
D: Not necessarily [go into]  
A: [but it'd be a] lot more than two thousand and whatever she put on there  
D: Go into because it looks as if at some stage she was claiming benefit cause she's had some credit, go into NICS  
A: Urm yeah not that I'm very good with NICS [to J] this is a good screen to look at actually NICS this is one about the contributions  
J: Ah right  
A: I try to avoid this like the plague but  
D: There's nothing wrong with NICS  
[laughs] is it that one is it or the JCP one? The top one, yeah the top one  
A: Ok [enters eno into NICS]  
D: Ok go on to conts  
A: That's the 07 tax year isn't it see that shows 5516  
D: You've got the we've only got the 126 and 201  
A: Yeah

D: Go into go back into 97  
[to J] see sometimes you have a disparity between what's on one system and what's on another system

J: Yeah. Do you have an order which you'd take them in

D: Urm I would go by NICS more than I would but then again sometimes NICS isn't fully updated so the best way to do it is by the Z60 which we generally ask the customers to supply but because they've already supplied it there's already notes about them having supplied it urm

D: [back from having dealt with another colleagues problem] where's NICS

A: Oh hold on

A: Oh uh oh laughs

D: Ahead of yourself here  
[D then works on the systems for him]  
[to J] this bit I don't know about I try and follow Diane but she goes at 100 miles an hour

A: It's not really for me to input this one thing  
[in BenSys enters 'tax year invalid' and goes in and enters the new tax figure from NICS. In NP writes that updated info from NICS onto BenSys]

D: Ok there you go lovely

J: So you just updated the figure from NICS into there so that she can get paid

D: Yes a lot of these wouldn't know how to do it so at this stage I would do it.

J: Yeah

D: Cause it will be something that they will be able to do eventually because you have to know what your looking at (... been with us) and er it is a processing skill and none of them are processors. I prefer to do them from the Z60's because you've actually got the information in front of you but I can go into NICS otherwise it then holds up the customer

J: Yeah thank you  
[back to customer]

A: Hello?

A: Hi sorry to keep you holding I've had to go through a couple of systems to find out the situation because because you said urm that you worked for the whole of 06 07 financial year I had to go onto um onto a different system to see what was on there and on the different system it does actually say that you that you've earned enough, urm well that's what I'm coming to now. Um I can release the payment for you and it'll take 3 days to reach you so you'll get it by the end of the week  
[talk about when she can expect her money]

C: Can you update the record so that it doesn't happen again

A: Well no it has been updated that's the point we would we wouldn't have been able to pay you this mon we wouldn't have been able to pay you this money unless we updated the system.

"C" has called The Department because her benefits are being held up because The Department does not think she has the correct level of Employment Contribution to warrant her claim, yet she asserts that she does. At the end of the call and a resolution to her query she asks if the record can be up-dated: "can

you update the record so that it doesn't happen again." In so doing the customer is orienting to the idea that there is indeed a single coherent document, record, or file, that pertains to her, something that the agent sustains in his answer (note the "it") "Well no it has been updated that's the point we...."

However, it is apparent from the exchanges between the agent (A) and his supervisor (D) that there is not a single record or file to consult.

To begin with the agent suggests that the issue of whether or not C has the necessary Employment Contribution can be cleared up by consulting her Z60 form<sup>4</sup>, but C informs him that she has already sent it "to you". This being a paper document stored elsewhere, the agent cannot consult it so must determine the relevant information from the various computerised records. The agent, in putting her on hold and requesting the help of his supervisor, points out that the record he can see of C's contributions, on BENSYS (the core system), shows that she had the necessary contribution for the year 08, but records a lower contribution level for the year 07 than C is saying that she made. The BENSYS record is not, however, part of a coherent file concerning C's claim, it is the system that contains key customer information; payment schedules and automatically triggers payments. C's original claim – made on a paper based form- is not accessible by the agent, neither is the Z60 that C has sent in.

The agent suggests that if C's contention that she has worked the whole of 07 for 20 hours a week is correct then she would be entitled to the support she has claimed for and believes she is entitled to. D queries this, though, because from the BENSYS system's data it would appear that she has been claiming benefit previously and that consequently she may not have been working the 20 hours.

D suggests that they consult another system the NICS (which is the system of the revenue and customs service that is partially integrated with BENSYS and is directly accessible from The Department). The doubts raised by the caller have triggered a search of this resource. Although the agent was aware of this system he did not know how to use it. So D accesses NICS and they navigate to the 07 figures and find that the NICS system and the BENSYS system do not tally.

D then goes into both the NICS system and the BENSYS system again in order to reconcile the discrepancies. She updates the BENSYS in the light of the NICS system. This is necessary for the money to be released to the customer, which will be triggered once the system shows the necessary level of contribution has been made. It would appear that the money has not been released because the BENSYS system did not hold the correct level of contribution. It is likely that the periodic update BENSYS receives from NICS has not taken place. In the process of updating the BENSYS system exchanges between D and the agent show that the agent is less confident than D in the use of the NICS system, and D explains to J that the agents have some technical knowledge gaps.

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<sup>4</sup> A Z60 form is issued by employers and records the income received, and the national insurance contributions made by an employee during a period of employment within a tax year. It is an important document that is used by the Revenue Authority (the country's tax collecting authority) to calculate the taxes owed by an employee.

It is interesting here to note that the decision about what information is 'right' comes from a comparison of the two information sources – NICS and BENSYS – plus what the customer has said that enables a *judgement* to be made that the information on NICS can be taken as right in this case. The fallibility of computer systems (because of their changing nature as information gets updated) in comparison to the trust in paper as a point of time record i.e. they would have rather had the Z60 is clear. Given the contradictory information on the systems the judgement is made on the balance of evidence i.e. the customer's word, plus NICS system. In other examples, the information on NICS was not taken as being correct. It is also worth noting that the type of reconciliation of discrepant information sources on display here is not detailed as a regular feature of procedure, and is not learned as such. The knowledge and expertise displayed by the supervisor is specialised and comes from on-the-job experience. Solving problems such as this often involve investigation and the working out of a puzzle. As this knowledge is re-used and propagated in The Department (as it is to the agent, here) recognising a possible case of X, or at least determining the relevant next course of action (here, to look up NICS) becomes a relatively simple matter for those in the know, like D.

The transcript involves a number of issues relevant to Weber's description of the operation of bureaucracies through written documents – the use and knowledge of files, continuity, speed and efficiency and it allows us to make a number of observations about the nature of bureaucratic work around "written documents".

#### i) The Absence of a Case File

First, there is not a single case file, rather there are many different records which have to be tied together by one person who has to 'work the case' in order to deal with a query raised by a customer who has called into The Department's call centre regarding their case. Legally the case record is a combination of the full record on the BENSYS system and the paper documents comprising the customer's original application. Unfortunately, marrying up the paper file and the BENSYS record is not always straightforward. After paper applications are processed they tend to go into a filing 'black hole' of cases piled in random order and stored in an unorganised fashion for 1-3 months.<sup>5</sup> They are then bit-by-bit filed in order for another 3 or so months before being sent into storage. Given that most queries are raised in the first few months (e.g. disputes over information given and received, for which original documents are needed) this is problematic. Also, the BENSYS system does not track changes in an easily retrievable fashion being an 'of the moment' record of the cases status rather than containing historical views of the record at any particular time. Therefore the only way to keep track of changes is to add a note to the system, and making a note is a matter of judgement. Frustratingly, if a complete 'dump' (paper file

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<sup>5</sup> Due to the economic crisis facing the country in question with respect to the world economic conditions pertaining at the time, the fieldwork coincided with a time of extreme pressure on the Department. Since unemployment was rising rapidly, this led to a backlog of filing and this 'black hole' of unorganised files. In normal circumstances the filing is regularly completed in a timely manner.

print out) is made, all changes to the record are shown including key strokes which means that in practice the file may only be readable by a computing expert, and even in this case would be massively time consuming, if indeed even possible. Thus, in practice the BENSYS record alone is used but it is partial, and does not record other key information relevant to a customer that is distributed around The Department in other paper and digital records.

In the transcript the agent and supervisor are clearly consulting two of these records, which they believe contain data relevant to the call. It is not a case file, but files that contain information that, for this query, may help them in clearing up the tension between the information that indicates the caller has been previously given that she does not have the necessary contribution payments to support her claim, and her assertion that she does. Both files contain duplicative information on contribution levels, though in this instance the information is inconsistent.

Not all of the records though are duplicative. They can have different characteristics and are used to record different information and for different purposes. The following are the records we encountered:

- a) There is a paper file, used for validation purposes, and which contains signatures and copies of evidence from customers and also provides a point of time view into what the customer said originally and any immediate corrections to that information.
- b) The BENSYS record – this is an active record of what is happening now with the case. All the historical details pertaining to a case exist but even when printed, they cannot, for practical purposes, be read by people trying to understand a case, because, as indicated above, they record *all* activity done regarding a case, including every keystroke involved. BENSYS does not, however, have one view, rather it has a large number of views onto the case and an agent needs to reconstruct what is happening with the case by looking at different views along with other sources. The only place where a rationale pertaining to a case, such as the basis for a decision, could be stored is on the NotePad screen, but this has limited text fields for entering comments on actions taken.
- c) LMS (labour management system) contains a record made by an Employment Centre of the benefit contract<sup>6</sup> and the search for work of a customer. Although primarily completed in the Employment Centre it is widely available for people in other departments to view.
- d) New Claims Tracker – as its name suggests this application is used for tracking new claims. At various stages in processing the status of the paper application its status and general whereabouts are noted on this system. It is particularly useful

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<sup>6</sup> The Employment Centre is the local office where a customer will first make an application for support, and the Employment Seekers Allowance is the actual monetary support they receive. The application involves making a contract in which an applicant commits to look for work while receiving the allowance.

before the BENSYS case record is constructed. It has the arrival date of the claim file, whether the file has been passed to processing, or is in pending awaiting other information, and when processed, when it was signed off.

- e) DMAKER – the decision makers system - is not available to everyone. Decision makers provide assessments of cases that are more ambiguous or have more complex features e.g. regarding home ownership, self-employment. DMAKER is mainly used internally by the decision makers to track cases and record ‘decisions’
- f) CIS – Customer Information System – is a government wide information system. It provides a limited view (basic personal information, dates and types of benefits received) onto all types of benefits people have claimed or received from the government.
- g) CMS is an initial claim taking system used by the call centres. The record is only kept for one month but it is printed out and the paper copy becomes the cornerstone of the paper file referred to in a) above along with the customers signed declaration that the information is true.
- h) NICS – this is the record of employment contributions (a type of tax) and is owned by the revenue and customs department of the government. Employees of The Department have access to this.
- i) Call Logging Tool – this is used by the telephony section that serves the processing section. In this they record basic details about the call and the caller, and can use the system to send automatic template-based emails to processing to ask them to follow up on the calls. Emails should be dealt with within 3 days. Emails can only be sent on a case once a week. It is only after sending 3 emails without receiving a satisfactory outcome that the telephony section can escalate their contact to processing via a direct call.

From this we can see that there are six records (records a-c and f-g) which are case-ordered i.e. records containing customer information organised by individual customer and three logging systems (containing information on many cases organised by sequential interaction). Although there is not an actual case file, customers can labour under the impression that there is, and agents can maintain that impression. So, in calling The Department, customers can display that their call is “another” call regarding their circumstances. In the transcript we are examining, the customer does this with respect to her statement that her money is being held up because of her employment contributions. In so doing she is offering the agent a point of entry into her case, indeed in doing that offers that there is a case, which can be entered into. In that respect she displays an orientation to the existence of a case that can be inspected, rather than a set of distributed information relevant to her, that are drawn together for the moment of making a decision or answering a query.

In this instance the agent makes visible to the customer that he has had to consult another person and various systems. This is to some extent a feature of the fact that he was unable to solve the issue without consulting his supervisor. Confusion about how to solve the query plus the need to put the caller on hold a few times become accountable phenomena – reasons are given and a gloss of the actuality is the most economic of reasons (glosses of the actuality are also provided to simplify the explanation given to customers or to maintain a professional demeanour in the face of problems or idiosyncrasies). However, as we noted, the agent does intimate that a file does exist in his response to the customer that her file has been updated, and in other calls, particularly where the agent can answer the enquiry proficiently, the agents talk about the ‘file’ in a manner that maintain the idea that there is a concrete file within which is the sum of the organisation’s actions regarding the customer.

## ii) Investigatory Work

The second issue that Transcript A raises that is relevant to a discussion of the use of written documents in bureaucracies is that understanding what is going on in a case so as to, for example, answer a customer’s enquiry, is not a simple matter of consulting a case file and seeing what has been done or not done, or what is to be done, or what is required in order for something to be done, or what a decision is, or seeing what the reason for a decision is, or when a decision can be expected. Also there is no one person who is responsible for or who has knowledge of ‘the case’. Indeed the very concept of the case is a representational proxy that gives the appearance of a unified system by standing on behalf of separate and unconnected systems and which is conjured into existence in, for example, enquiring and answering an enquiry.

When a new claim is processed there is a notion of an order of sequential activities that the case must go through as it is processed to completion. However, for example, there are the set of activities that relate to the interactions of customers and agents within the Employment Centres that go on in parallel to the processing and are recorded there, locally, on paper and partly in the LMS record, and only partially on BENSYS. Furthermore, when customers call in about their case this too can provoke parallel activities that stand outside but relate to the sequential processing of a case. When a new claim has been processed and the case is ‘live’ it is then in another phase, where essentially it cyclically pays out benefits if various information regarding the job seeking behaviour of the customer is received and the right boxes are checked on BENSYS. Customers still call in with queries, mainly regarding payments or changes in their circumstances, therefore extra work and re-work is carried out in parallel to or in relation to the cyclical functioning of the live record. This can have implications for, and effects upon the cyclical functioning and therefore in turn produces more phone calls to The Department, e.g. calls about ‘where’s my money?’ It must be noted, however, that the information most available and to hand – that contained in BENSYS – although partial, in a number of straightforward cases is sufficient for answering customer queries. However, in a significant number of cases it is not, and the more distributed the information is

– often reflecting an everyday notion of ‘case complexity’ – the more problematic it is to answer the query.

Another important aspect of casework and records is that often the work itself has scant record. The products of the work can be the various data in the system and the updates to this, but unless it is recorded in notes sections the work and the reasoning behind the changes is not in itself visible. The same goes for enquiries, whereby the primary recording of any contact is in the telephonists’ call logging tool. This is only accessible by the people working in the telephony section of The Department, and it is not easily searchable and is thus rarely searched because information is recorded as a sequential list of incoming calls, whereas when looking up customer information, agents typically use one or several of the case-ordered records. Other records of enquiries only exist if the BenSys notes are updated, or possibly in the emails sent between the telephony and processing sections. As such, many enquiries leave little or no visible trace on the case-ordered records.

The case is not, then, a tangible concrete – in the form of an electronic or paper artefacts – object in the manner of, for example, solicitors’ matter files, that can be touched, consulted, notated, filed away, taken out, handled and the like, (Travers, 1997). Agents in answering customers’ enquiries need to understand what is going on with regard to an enquiry, but they cannot gain this understanding through consulting the file on the case, or talking to a person who is responsible or has oversight for the case. Understanding what is going on in a case involves assembling, there and then, the relevant information to answer a query from out of the various systems and records that might be relevant to a case. In this respect, the agents are involved in a type of *investigatory* work.

The agent in the transcript thus does not turn to the case file in order to deal with the customer. This is not the first time that the customer has queried the Department over her claim because she states that her money is being held up because of her employment contributions, and that she has previously sent in her Z60 form which would show her levels of contribution and, presumably, prove her assertion that she has made the correct contribution. However, although others will have worked on the case the agent’s subsequent actions do not build on the actions of his predecessors. Thus he does not, for example, turn to a file to see what they have done and why they have done it, or what needs to be done, or to let the customer know what is now being done. Rather, he has start to investigate the matter afresh, as if it is a first time matter to find out why there may be an issue with the employment contributions.

Thus, to answer an enquiry an agent needs to assemble the case for the very purpose of answering the enquiry from one or more of the various sources of information. Of course, in straightforward cases this assembly may be achieved relatively simply by interacting with the customer and retrieving some information from a single system, usually BENSYS. Conversely in other cases the assembly is considerably more complex.

Consequently, the ‘what’ of the state of a case is assembled for the purposes of answering the enquiry, it is not a documented consultable matter, and the information that the agent collects, and the work that is done to collect it,

essentially dissolve once an enquiry is over. It would require a re-assembly if the issue is enquired into again, even if the enquiry is made moments after a current call is over and the customer calls again and gets another agent. The only benefit to this reassembly would be gained in a situation that the previous agent had made sufficient notes to enable a quicker reassembly – facilitating a ‘continuity of service’. In many cases, though, to the agent it would not be understood as a reassembly, it would be done as a first time. The ‘what’ of the matter exists only in the course of the interaction between agent and customer, and different ‘whats’ can be created depending upon agents’ knowledge and skills. In that respect, the current work of an agent in answering an enquiry often does not build readily on the work of others that have gone before, it is for the moment and may duplicate, be better or worse than what may have been done before, or might be done again<sup>7</sup>.

There is, as we noted, a contrast between the organisation of a ‘file’ on a case in The Department and the organisation of a solicitor’s matter file. With respect to solicitors’ files, the file *is* the case, and work is triggered by events such as arrival of letters, or by reaching a particular date. The solicitor keeps up with what is happening on the case by keeping familiar with active cases on a regular basis through examining them and seeing what has been done, what is to be done, what is outstanding, and what has to be done again. The file embodies the matter and where in a process it might be and is therefore a ubiquitous object available for examination and consultation by anyone who knows how to read it, and from out of which anyone could respond to queries in consistent ways. Thus solicitors files embody characteristics such as continuity, consultability, sequentially, and predictability. They are concrete substantial artefacts that litter desks, offices and hallways, are portable, showable objects that can be physically manipulated.

### iii) The Organised Properties of Investigatory Work

A third issue arising from out of Transcript A that is relevant to the use of written documents is that the investigatory work that makes up the ad hoc assembly of a file displays organised properties involving various domains of knowledge. These domains are not necessarily ones that have been developed by the organisation for deployment by agents. Rather, agents have to draw of domains of knowledge that come from their experiences of working in the organisation and interacting with people, in general. Here it involves knowledge of: the organisation, knowledge of people, and knowledge of how the systems work. However, not surprisingly, because agents’ understanding is based on their experiences, not all agents have the same degrees of knowledge about these matters. Rather, their understanding is individual and personal, and this, naturally, affects their efficiency with regard to, for example, answering customers’ queries.

#### *a) Organisational Knowledge*

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed it is a marked phenomenon that awareness of customers calling several times in quick succession tends to be transmitted through the verbal communication of telephony agents on the floor rather than through case documents.

With respect to organisational knowledge, in investigating why the customer has not receive her benefit the agent has consulted the BENSYS system and believes he has found the answer which is that not enough contributions have been made in a year relevant to the claim. The customer, however, contends that she has. The agent has obviously shown that he knows where relevant information is stored and that he knows the process of how in the first place to arbitrate between the system and the customer, which is to consult the Z60. However, faced with the situation of not being able to consult the Z60 because it has already been sent in and not having access to it, or knowledge of it being sent in, the agent requests help from his supervisor, D. She displays that she has more organisational knowledge than the agent because she is able to suggest the use of NICS in verifying the customer's assertion that she has made the necessary contributions. In part that knowledge is used in the investigative work of arriving at an outcome, and the 'what' of the state of the case. It requires an understanding of where in the organisational structure knowledge that can be relevant to an enquiry might reside. The agent does display that he knows of the system, but was unable to understand its significance or where it might stand in an organisational hierarchy of trustworthy material; D explains that she would trust the Z60 first, then the NICS system and then the BENSYS system.

#### *b) Knowledge of People*

The investigatory work also displays knowledge of people. Faced with a discrepancy between the data on the NICS and the BENSYS systems, D sets about transferring the data from the NICS system to the BENSYS system. She 'knows' that people do not always process matters in a timely manner, that there can be a time lag between the information on one system being used to up date another. She also displays knowledge of customers and their ways. It is entirely plausible that another outcome to the one pursued could have been produced. The BENSYS system that triggers the release of the money to a customer cannot do so because it shows that there are not sufficient contributions. The client contests that she has made the necessary contributions and has sent in her Z60 to confirm this. This has not yet resulted in the updating of the BENSYS system. One response to the customer could then be that until it is proved through the Z60 to The Department's satisfaction that she has paid the contributions and until that is organisationally sanctioned through the BENSYS system she will not receive her money. However, D, in changing the BENSYS data takes what the caller has said at face value (although her case is also certainly strengthened by the NICS data). She does not want "to hold the customer up" because the data has not been processed properly, and takes that as the priority rather than organisational protocol. In so doing D is using her knowledge of customers in judging that this is a genuine claim. In this case, the weight of evidence, i.e. the customer's word plus the information on NICS falls down on the side of the customer. Without the supporting evidence on NICS they would have had to resort to attempting to find the Z60. The customer displays her knowledge of the information that is relevant to her claim regarding her contribution level, she is confident in her facts, challenging what is on the system, knows what a Z60 is, and is able to promptly respond that she has complied to a previous organisational request. D's knowledge of how customers act give no grounds to suspect the sincerity of her situation.

### *c) Knowledge of Systems*

With respect to the knowledge of systems that is involved, in order to access the data on the NICS system technical knowledge is required – knowledge that the agent did not possess at the time. The same goes for transferring the data from one system to another. Clearly the agent involved does not have that knowledge, indeed his lack of knowledge and worries about the NICS system underlie his need for support from his supervisor. His references to D's speed and efficiency and her remarks concerning the ability of others make it quite visible that a technical knowledge of the operation of the systems is necessary to expedite the matter, and that knowledge is variously distributed amongst agents and develops in the course of doing the work.

### iv) Customer Driven

A fourth observation relating to the use of written documents in bureaucracies that can be made with respect to the transcript is that the construction of the case is not one that is driven by organisational processes, and the result of a rationalised sequence of actions, but is, rather, customer driven. The work of investigating the case, of consulting various systems, of bringing together necessary information is an *occasioned* matter, not one that systematically arises from bureaucratic procedure or process. It is occasioned by the customer, and there would have been no follow on activities undertaken without the call having been made. The application would just hang in the system, not moving forward and not triggering follow up action by The Department. In other words, the organisationally intended outcome of a claim, the legitimate paying of support would not result if it were left to those processes. It is the customer's statement that her payment is being held up over by an employment contribution problem that initiates the agent's actions not the 'logic' of a process designed to provide customers' with their entitlements.

### v) Legislative Circumstances

A fifth observation that is made relevant by Transcript A is that, as noted above, there are, to paraphrase Garfinkel (1967) 'good organisational reasons for bad customer files'. Information is distributed across systems and parts of The Department's organisation. There are, as we have noted, multiple systems each built separately from one another into which data relevant to a claim is stored. Each system has been designed for a purpose, i.e. to serve a particular need, often by one particular group of people who need to handle customers' claims at some point during their lifetime. Only some are integrated with others and in those cases only partially. There is no one overall system through which a file on a customer could be compiled. Thus the absence of a customer file is the outcome of a set of systems no one of which can handle the preparation, updating, and storage of a file on a customer. In this respect, the occasioned assembly of a transient file by an agent consulting various information systems is an organisationally rational set of activities in the face of the technical systems available within The Department. Simply, there are no systems capable of developing and maintaining a holistic file on a customer. Also, it is not possible to develop a master paper file that would contain all of the information and previous activities with regard to a customer.

One reason for all of this is that The Department is faced with a legislative system that creates a stream of legislative compliances. That is, the definitiveness of the legislation that The Department has to comply with is only stable until the next piece of legislation is passed. There is no certainty as to when that will be, only certainty that there will be change. The result is that The Department has developed systems that enable it to collect and store required information relevant to the way the legislative environment has unfolded and how the department has chosen to organise its workflows in a distributed fashion in relation to the legislative landscape. Not knowing what the future environment may be, it is not possible to design in advance a system that is necessarily flexible enough to gather any new or different information that the legislation may require. Thus a current system may enable The Department to comply with legislative directions, now, but will not necessarily support future ones. The bricolage of systems thus reflects a history of legislation and work design where local and unfolding concerns have been dealt with in a piecemeal rather than comprehensive and cohering manner. Ideally The Department might create an overall system that is capable of processing customers in a holistic way, collecting, maintaining and storing all of the information pertinent to a customer that is required by current legislation, and thus embodying a master file on the customer. However, that would only be a temporary state of affairs because 'at any moment' new legislation might change the information parameters and requirements, and not just incrementally that would permit the system to grow, but radically which would make the development of an 'extra' system more efficient than the development of a bolt on.

The Department thus encompasses a number of legacy systems, none of which are capable of holistically processing a customer, but which together can hold information that is relevant to a customer.

It might appear that a simple solution would be to use the various systems to make an input into a single paper master file. This, however, is problematic due to the organisational structure of The Department. The Department is distributed between local, neighbourhood offices (the Employment Centres) and centrally located processing centres and new claims call centres. Each processing centre is divided into two basic sections processing and telephony, which are generally not collocated. In the office we visited, processing and telephony were located on different floors in the same building and telephony serves as the customer touch point for processing. Processing is divided into a number of functionally discrete units, e.g. mail room, new claims processing, change of circumstances, decision makers, to name the most significant ones. Indeed, although the legislative backdrop is significant in the multiplication of systems, an even more significant feature is the business function separation, which means that many of the systems have been developed specifically to cater to local requirements. The result is that no one part of the organisation could hold the file; no one person could own the file or the customer, and it clearly contributes to the disjointedness between units and sections and the opacity of the work of others.

The upshot is that the absence of a customer file around which the processes of dealing with a customer's case can be organised is a systematic product of a

bureaucratic structure operating within the particular technical and legislative environment it inhabits. This means that the investigatory work of agents is essential in the rational processing of a claim even though that investigatory work is not made up of procedures designed by The Department as part of its rational and efficient processes, but is organised in the actions and interactions of agents:

- operating in ad hoc ways
- drawing off various bodies of knowledge, differentially available and understood, and built individually by agents as they mature, or not, within the organisation
- driven not by the rational process of the bureaucratic organisation, but by customer enquiries
- while maintaining at the same time the appearance of a procedure organised around the rational of a customer file.

#### **4 Stipulated Rules Govern Its Conduct**

One of the distinguishing features of bureaucracy for Weber is the idea that bureaucracies operate according to rules, which are applied by the bureaucrat to a matter in hand irrespective of the citizen being dealt with. The rules transcend both the bureaucrat and the citizen and provide for equitable treatment. For Weber this is an important distinguishing feature of bureaucracy with respect to other forms of administration and marks it out from charismatic or traditional authority where patronage, status and person were important criteria in dealing with issues.

##### 1) Standardised Processing

A feature of describing actions done in bureaucratic organisations, as rule bound is to underscore how they are *mechanical* in nature. Bureaucratic processing is thus done, in a mechanical rote manner; everyone treated the same according to the strictures of the processing routine. The work of the employees of The Department who first process a customer is, indeed, often one of going through the routine and imparting to the interview a formulaic character. For example, our fieldwork notes contain a “13 week review” (review of a customers activities during a 13 week period):

PA (personal assessor) is going through job search activities – updating the action plan and in conversation with customer. In the action plan it says ‘register with recruitment agency’ and PA asks customer if they have done this yet. Customer says no – what is that? The PA removes it from the action plan. But then the customer goes on to say they had never thought of doing that ‘do they have driving jobs’ – they discuss he will need to have a CV – and he already has one as he’d already given one to a possible employer. Goes on to say that he will try the agency then – so PA reinserts it with a date (the following Friday) by it and tells the customer to try and keep in touch with them.

Registering with a recruitment agency is a routine action that customers are expected to do, and it is routine for it to be recorded by The Department as part

of a customer's action plan. However, the exchange captured in our field notes suggests that, since the customer does not even know what this means then for it to have gone down in his action plan was just a matter of the original interviewer following a standard format, and our fieldwork records capture very many such formulaic sessions. For example, PA, below goes through the routine of preparing for the filling in of the initial job-seekers agreement:

The PA logs onto the system and enters the eno (employment number) into LMS. Checks the signing on cycle – P cycle (there are 2 different cycles) Tuesday. Gets the forms out that make the sign-on pack.

Writes the eno and signing day. In an Excel chart (part of LMS system) looks to find free sign on time for P cycle Tuesday. Enters name and eno into a free slot for 9am. Then checks customer details in the customer statement – no kids – so no need to worry about the school run. She then writes the time on the signing card and enters sign on date into LMS.

On pack PA writes customer name and initials and address (taken from LMS). And puts it together to make the pack – with a yellow ribbon to indicate signing day. Then she adds date for next sign on day (2 weeks later). On 'attendance arrangements' card she writes time and dates of the signing and stamps the 'looking for work' book. She flicks through the screen to enter things on LMS – enters last job and dates (merchandiser 14/09/08-13/02/09). She would query the customer if there was nothing in that box on CS.

Calls the customer over: explains that they will draw up a search for work agreement and that she will give her the signing book and explain how it works. Turns the screen to face the customer, LMS open.

These activities of setting up for the agreement are utterly routine and repetitive, something we witnessed time and time again. The PA then goes through another routine of asking standardised questions and recording the answers in check boxes and free text on a form in LMS designed for that purpose:

### **Transcript B**

- PA: What length of contract are you looking for?  
C: Would take even just a week  
PA: Driving licence?  
C: Yes  
PA: Clean?  
C: Yes  
PA: Vehicle?  
C: Yes  
PA: Rent or mortgage?  
C: Mortgage  
PA: Can you travel?

C: Yes  
PA: Do you speak any languages?  
C: No  
PA: Do you have any health problems?  
C: No  
PA: Formal qualifications?  
C: BA hon in fashion design and buying  
[the customer gets out her CV]  
PA: your last job was in merchandising have you always done that?  
C: Always worked in fashion  
PA: Getting your foot in the door?  
C: Not really this is the work I want to do, these are the sorts of  
roles I wanted to work in fashion industry.  
[PA enters 'experience lies with the fashion industry  
sales and administration for 5 years']  
PA: We'll now draw up the search for work agreement  
PA: Do you want to work in the same area?  
C: Sales or administration but I'm open to suggestions  
[PA enters job goal – sales administration (fashion)  
and a second one administration and she finds codes.]  
PA: Anything else?  
C: No that's fine.

PA explains customer will be given 13 weeks to look for a job in that area – which is the maximum time – as she has worked in her career for a while. After 19<sup>th</sup> of June if she's not working they will broaden the job search.

## ii) Achieving Intended Outcomes

However, applying the formula, and working through the process of asking pre-set questions and recording the answers, can at any moment breakdown because a customer may not answer in a way that is relevant for the situation they are in or in a way that can be entered into the form. But, an agent is not allowed to answer on behalf of the customer, what they must do is record the customer's own answers. In order to arrive at a situation where the customer is answering in way that is relevant to their circumstance or which fits the form agents will lead and work with the customer so that they can develop an appropriate answer.

This work can fall into a number of categories that reflect different levels of intensity.

### *a) Eliciting An Appropriate Answer*

First, simply eliciting an answer from the customer that matches what is a legitimate answer for the form. Thus in the extract above, the next question the agent asks is "what's your availability":

### **Transcript C**

- PA: What's your availability  
C: Any day time hours  
PA: But what's the earliest and latest you will work (I need to enter something in)  
C: 7am – 7pm  
[Agree on an 8-hour day, Monday-Friday].

C's initial answer is designed to display her flexibility, as is her second, however, they are not answers that can be recorded on the form where as the answer PA occasions and which ends up being between two times which make up an 8 hour day, Monday-Friday (in this case starting at 9am as this is considered appropriate for the type of office-based job the customer is applying for) is.

This eliciting activity can also be seen in the following transcript where the agent elicits from a different customer the default answer "looking for work within a 15 miles radius of home" but without saying that this is a category of answer on the form.

### **Transcript D**

- A: Okay, what what have you done previously  
[Customer speaks: explains that when says property maintenance/agent it was odd jobs but basically translated into putting up satellite tv aerials]  
A: Okay so what area are you looking for work is it just-  
[Customer speaks: basically anything]  
A: Okay but is it within your local travel to work area, you're not looking to-  
[Customer speaks: close to home]  
A: Okay 15 miles radius yeah (pause) okay and d'you have any long term disabilities or health conditions

In the following instance, the agent needs a specific date on when a split occurred between another customer and his girlfriend. This is important because the separation period is used in determining if the applicant will be counted as in a relationship, which could affect the processing of his claim. The agent works with the applicant to develop a specific date for the form, but again, without in so many words, saying that is what is required.

### **Transcript E**

- A: And have you separated from someone who used to be your partner in the last six months  
[Customer speaks: yes]  
A: Okay and when did you separate please  
[Customer speaks: March]  
A: (softly) Okay roughly what date d'you know  
[Customer speak: about 2 months ago]

- A: Let's have a look (with a paper calendar) was it before Easter or after Easter  
[Customer speaks]
- A: Okay was it a weekend or-  
[Customer speaks]
- A: Okay Ea- Easter was on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April so um-  
[Customer speaks]
- A: The 9<sup>th</sup>  
[Customer speaks basically assents but not sure]
- A: What date are we on today let's have a look (softly) yeah so we're on the 7<sup>th</sup> now (counts) 7 weeks would have been the 19<sup>th</sup> of March (pause) about- about the 12<sup>th</sup> then (pause) and can I take take your ex-partners name please.

### *b) Leading Questions*

A second category of activity that agents will engage in is to ask “leading questions” in order to generate supportive answers from customers. To understand the work that this is doing it is necessary to know that part of the continued eligibility for support is that the customer is “showing willing”, is not just “scrounging”, or going through the motions of looking for a job without really wanting one, but is genuinely and actively seeking a job. Thus the agent is able to record information that would show to anyone who might process the claim that the customer falls into the legitimate category of job seeker. However, The Department does not make this aspect of its processes explicit to job seekers. That is, it does not make its decision-making protocols visible to them, and certainly does not empower agents to overtly describe that. Thus in recording what a job-seeker has been doing to find a job, the agent is not empowered to tell the job-seeker that their answers directly<sup>8</sup> will be used to judge their commitment to job-seeking and thus their continued reliability for support.

The organizational reason for this is simply that The Department has an obligation to sift out those who are genuine job seekers from those who are not, and, for the latter category, to stop their support. This is not to say that agents try to catch customers out, but is to say that in recording what the customer is doing to find a job they know that the people who will process the claim have to be able to see evidence that this person is indeed “active”. Should customers know this, then it would be easier for those who are not genuine job seekers to provide information as to their activities so as to satisfy the processors or to construct bogus activities that would serve the same purpose. Thus The Department does not make visible to customers all of its protocols and processes

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<sup>8</sup> Of course it *is* explicit in the looking for work contract that customers must be actively pursuing work to be eligible for benefit and customers are made aware of this, rather it is the subtleties of how this is demonstrated that The Departments employees cannot make available directly to the customer, rather it is up to the customer to infer it.

that agents are using in dealing with and processing a customer.

However, agents involved in interviewing customers and in recording their answers to the questions they are asked as part of their interviews will inevitably form judgements about the customers before them, or at least judgements about whether they have provided truthful or correct (in reflection of their circumstances) answers. The notion of 'correct' is an interesting one due to the fact that incorrect answers can simply be given due to ambiguity in the question or that the customer is in actuality in an ambiguous position in relation to the question but must find the 'correct' specific answer. Not knowing The Departmental processing protocols customers may not be in a position to talk about their job-seeking activities in ways, which, in themselves, display that they are active and genuine. Thus, although an agent may believe that a customer who is before them is doing their best to find a job, they may know that the descriptions they are giving of their activities may not be doing them justice. So, for example, there are standard activities that people can claim to be engaged in to show that they are actively seeking a job, for instance, checking job postings in newspaper, and searching the Internet. Processors, though, may be looking for something extra to these standard responses that anyone might give, even those who are not genuine. So, for example, has the customer been doing anything that evidences that they are pro-active in their job seeking rather than reactive? In such circumstances agents might ask leading questions such as "is there anything extra you have been doing", so that they can record as part of the job-seeking activities, pro-active instances. In so doing they are giving the customer the opportunity to provide descriptions that processors can, later, take as evidence of commitment to job-seeking so that there will not be a problem for the customer in continuing to receive their benefits, without actually telling the customer that it is in their best interests to show evidence of pro-activity.

Thus, although there are standard procedures and questions that agents have to ask all customers, agents can work those standard procedures so as to ensure that the answers given ensure the satisfactory outcome the procedures are designed to result in, but which, in themselves, would not necessarily result in. In saying this we are not suggesting that processors are going through the results of applications and interviews with fine tooth combs looking for subtleties and making fraught 'pay no pay' deliberations on each and every occasion. Most applicants are genuine and are processed routinely. But The Department does have a legislative obligation to expose inappropriate applications and rule-bending, and has protocols that are designed to alert them to that possibility, and the practice of "asking leading questions" can help genuine applicants not to become inadvertently subject to these.

### *c) Reformulation*

A third category is to reformulate a customer's answer so that it answers in a manner that would support the customer. In this respect examine the following interaction.

### **Transcript F**

- A: But you've recently had a job that has ended which is your self-employed one okay .hh and you're not in receipt of any tax credits at the moment  
[Customer speaks: no]
- A: Okay and you were self-employed in your last job was you↑, and what kind of business were you doing did you say property maintenance  
[Customer speaks: gives more detail regarding satellite aerals, odd jobs of maintenance etc.]
- A: And can you tell me when you became unemployed please  
[Customer speaks]
- A: Roughly a month  
[Customer speaks]
- A: Okay, the next question is a bit of an odd question .hh I'll try and break it down for you, it says have you stopped trading permanently when I say permanently it means you've stopped work permanently and will not be returning to your former self employment  
[Customer speak: well if the business picks up again but it's not very likely at the moment]
- A: Okay so you're still going to be a self-employed satellite stroke tv eh-erm aerial installation  
[Customer speaks: confusion over this question comes to light- he is looking for other work because there is none in what he was doing ]
- A: Okay tha-that I know  
[Customer speaks]
- A: Eh what I'm saying is have you decided that's it I'm not doing that any more no-  
[Customer speaks: I'm looking for anything]
- A: Right  
[Customer speaks explanation]
- A: Yes  
[Customer speaks]
- A: Right  
[Customer speaks]
- A: Yep  
[Customer speaks: in last few turns has given quite detailed explanation of why he is ceasing trading, what went on with the business and why he can no longer do the job – also to do with the recession]
- A: Okay, so what you're actually saying is you will do anything you can do as long as it's P A Y E and you'll get a decent wage  
[Customer speaks: he is really just worried about keeping a roof over his head – house the biggest concern so paying the mortgage]
- A: Keep a roof, yeah .hh okay so when did you last work what date did you last-

[Customer speaks: give time period]

A: Okay which date would that have been, so we're in April

In this example A asks the date the customer became unemployed and then enquires whether he has ceased trading, as he was self-employed. This is an important question. If he has not ceased trading then the fact that he has no work is not evidence that he is "unemployed" he might merely be having a lull in his business, or a seasonal downturn. In those circumstances he would not be eligible for support. If, however, he can show that he is no longer trading in the aerial installation business then he would be eligible, and one way in which he can demonstrate that is to show his willingness to take on *any* other work. To begin with the customer starts to answer in a way that indicates that he would consider returning to his business if it were to pick up again. This would damage his claim. However, rather than just recording this answer as one that will involve continuing to trade, the agent seeks a clarification of his answer in presenting him with the conclusion that he will still be a self-employed TV aerial installer. This gives the customer opportunity to elaborate his answer and he goes on to subsequently describe how he has been looking for work in any field, is looking for anything, and describes in some detail why his business is no longer viable and why he has had to get out of it. The agent then reformulates his clarification "you are saying" so that it aligns with The Departments' protocols "you will do anything you can do as long as its PAYE" for support. The agent has then navigated the customer into a situation where she can record an answer that would best support the applicants claim in terms of The Departments' protocols whereas their initial answer would not have done, but without doing that in so many words.

#### *d) Educating The Customer*

A fourth category is to tacitly 'educate' the applicant in how to answer a question. After six months of receiving support, customers have to have an in-depth interview. The Departments' protocols are such that a customer has to be able to show progression with respect to their previous activities in searching for a job. So after the first couple of weeks' activities such as looking on the Internet and looking at newspaper postings and "extra" activities indicating willingness would be acceptable. However, after six months The Department would be looking for progression such as evidence that the customer has been applying for jobs.

In a six month interview with an unemployed printer the agent asks him what he has been doing to find a job. The printer tells the agent that he has produced a CV, which he has sent to various employers that he has designed and printed literature about himself, his skills and his experience, which he has also sent to employers, and produces a fulsome list of jobs that he has applied for.

In terms of The Department's protocols this is over-kill, and amply illustrates the applicant's commitment to job seeking. However, this fulsomeness might work to the detriment of the customer if they fail to find work before their next six-month interview, because it would be difficult for him to have done much more

than he has already done and therefore it would be difficult for him to show progression. In effect declaring all these activities now would set the bar too high for him to clear at the next interview.

The agent tries to show the customer this circumstance by suggesting that he keeps back some of the activities for the next time. As far as The Departments' protocols are concerned progression would involve applying for a number of jobs on top of looking for jobs on the internet and through the papers, and doing some of a bunch of activities such as doing training, registering with an agency, rewriting their CV and so forth. The agent makes this visible to the customer. The result is that what is recorded in the interview schedule is a selection of the customers activities with some held back for later if need be. The agent then has in effect educated the customer in the protocols and rules of The Department with respect to the processing of the claims so that the customer is able to maximize their position with regard to them, now and in the future.

There is, however, a tension for agents in doing this. As we have mentioned, The Department wishes to keep the existence of its protocols, or at least what the protocols are, opaque. The reason for this is that for those who are making fraudulent claims or are trying 'to cheat the system', knowing the protocols would mean that they can shape their answers to questions to disguise their fraud. In this respect, agents do make judgments such as "I don't trust this person", or "I'm not sure of this person", on the basis of their answers sounding too pat, too neat, or in some way suspicious and agents are concerned to expose cheating and fraud if they can<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, agents are also concerned to maximize the position of customers with respect to their circumstances and will on occasions make judgements that a customer is legitimate and has a fair right to support, but that the way in which they are answering would create some difficulties for the processing of their application.

Of course the rules and protocols are to some extent made available in-and-through all the interactions customers have with The Department, and some long-term unemployed are known for their savviness in working the rules and protocols to ensure they keep getting paid while doing the minimum job-seeking activities. However, more generally it is in the cases, as above, that agents often via pointed demonstration rather than explicit description let (apparently) genuine customers understand how the record is being constructed out of their circumstances in a way that 'works'. In these circumstances, educating the customer in how to answer the questions is a way in which the agent can ensure that the protocols result in the outcome they were intended to produce but, again, might not produce on 'this' occasion. It should also be noted that this work, to ensure the case is more smoothly processed, is also undertaken in the knowledge that small errors, 'wrong' answers and so forth cause more work down the line in terms of requests for clarifications and disputes. The agents

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, one way in which potential fraud is 'investigated' is to get customers to fill out supplementary forms on the suspicious area of their claim, e.g. in relation to their small business, their finances or living arrangements. More questioning or greater scrutiny can either throw inconsistencies into sharper relief or the request itself can get some customers to withdraw claims.

therefore orient to trying to avoid needless repair work further down the line.

Previous sociological and philosophical writing on rules and rule following have underscored the active nature of rule following. Thus Wittgenstein (1972) notes that rules do not determine their own application, rather cultural knowledge has to be brought into play by the rule follower. Garfinkel's (1967) experiment with occasioned maps makes visible the work that the person following directions has to engage in to fit the directions to an unfolding topography. Within the Department, it is plainly visible that following the rules and protocols of the Department is not simply a mechanical matter. Certainly there are rules, and certainly their application can appear to have a rote, mechanical character and have been designed that way to ensure fairness, equability and appropriateness. However, the rules are designed to achieve a legitimate outcome and on any occasion the achievement of this outcome cannot be guaranteed by the rules but rather requires active work on the part of the agents. Agents work the rules, work the situation, and work customers in order to apply the rules and ensure that outcomes the rules are meant to achieve are indeed achieved.

## **5 Conclusion**

Whatever opinion people may hold regarding the efficiency and rationality of bureaucratic organisations they may have to deal with in the course of their everyday lives, Weber's characterisations of them in his rational constructs are ones that modern management theory attempts to drive into organisations and are one's that modern management practice, certainly within the organisation we studied, attempts to actualise. Interestingly, the protocols that management introduce as part of this actualisation are designed to ensure that the intended outcomes such as the rational efficiency of the organisation are realised despite human error. We say "interestingly" because when the actual use of these constructs by the employees of organisations is examined it is in that use that the status of these constructs as, for example, rational and efficient are achieved, and achieved outside of the purvey of the enforcing protocols.

Thus it is in the investigatory and assembling work of agents that the intended outcome of a rational process designed to efficiently provide customers with their proper entitlement is made to work in the actions and interactions of those involved. These actions and interactions display agents' reasoning through of the problem drawing off their organisational and commonsense understandings, in ways not specified by the protocols of The Department. Also, in stepping outside of the routine, mechanical delivery of standardised questions and assigning answers to pre-given categories, by guiding, coaxing or educating customers to provide answers that will best support their claim, agents work to ensure the process results in its intended outcome, but which may not be assured by that processes. Again using their knowledge of the organisation, drawing off past experience, looking ahead, and their judgments of people, agents achieve the outcomes the rules and protocols of the organisation are intended produce in

ways not specified in those rules and protocols, and thus achieve, in part, their status as rational efficient matters.

Our examination might be used to undermine Weber's understanding of bureaucracy. For example, the facts that each time a different agent is contacted the work would have start again rather than preserve a continuous thread, and involved agent judgements rather than just rules of process, might question the idea of a rational efficient organisation portrayed in Weber's account. Also, the idea of precision might be questioned since records were not updated in a timely manner, and resolution to problems were driven by customers' enquiries thus making the speed of the operation of the organization questionable.

However, we are not interested in developing anti-Weberian sociological characterizations, for it could equally be argued that in fact The Department was an embodiment of Weberian rationality, for people received their money, mainly within an acceptable time frames, according to the processes and rules of The Department and government legislation and in many of the cases we witnessed had satisfactory outcomes. Further, it might well be the case that in other bureaucratic organisations to the one that figures here, the actions conducted around written documents, and other aspects of Weber's characterisation might be different to those of the Department employees we encountered.

Our interest, rather, has been to "lift the mantle of protection from the unstated presupposition surrounding the terms of Weber's theory of bureaucracy" to understand what matters involving the use of documents, efficiency, rationality, knowledge of files and rule following and rule application can look like in the actions and interactions of those whose work constitutes a bureaucratic organisation. By unpacking the work that The Department's employees engaged in we have been attempting to make visible *the order* of the presuppositions that stand behind and give substance to characterisations of rationality and efficiency. Thus the work they engaged in to assemble from out of the variously distributed information on a customer to answer a query *as if* they were consulting a file, the way in which they used their knowledge of people, technology, and processes to ensure satisfactory outcomes where the processes might provide for an unsatisfactory outcome, *as if* the processes were producing the looked for result, and the way in which they would work together to constitute an answer in the face of individual deficiencies, *as if* the satisfactory answer did not depend upon the individual answering the query, are what achieves the characterisability of bureaucracy as rational organisations. Understanding the processes and protocols of the organisation is only part of what understanding of what that rationality consist. Understanding the work that goes into using those processes and protocols has to be part of what understanding what bureaucratic organisations are. While the specific activities we have recorded might not be visible in all bureaucratic organisations, nevertheless it is this *order* of activities that are presupposed in characterisations of rationality and efficiency,

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