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Article

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Journal for East European Management Studies

Provided in Cooperation with:

Rainer Hampp Verlag

Suggested Citation: Watson, Tony J.; Alas, Ruth (2002) : Interview with Tony J. Watson, Journal for East European Management Studies, ISSN 0949-6181, Rainer Hampp Verlag, Mering, Vol. 7, Iss. 4, pp. 428-429

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/90395>

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Interview with Tony J. Watson

Tony Watson is Professor of Organisational and Managerial Behaviour in the Nottingham Business School. He teaches, researches and writes about organisations, managerial work, industrial sociology, human resource activities and management learning processes. His key research interest is with the way managers handle both day-to-day and strategic issues, as human beings who have to manage their own lives, identities, biographies, anxieties and emotions at the same time as trying to shape work activities and relationships. His academic work builds on his personal managerial experience within industrial organisations and on research work carried out in a range of different settings. A special interest is in the value of ethnographic research as a means of investigating the complexities and contradictions, pains and delights of organisational life.

Alas: Which research projects you have carried out and which ones did you find most interesting? Which results were most unexpected?

Watson: I have carried out a range of different studies of various aspects of managerial work. I think the ones I have enjoyed most have been those where I used the participant observation approach to research. This means being directly involved in a managerial job at the same time as researching what was managing. I first did this when I worked as a young manager in Rolls-Royce's aero engine division. I was involved in managing the move of employees from an old foundry into a new steel casing factory and wrote my first big research report about this. I find it very fulfilling to be analysing and writing about something that one has first-hand knowledge and experience of. I used the same method when I did the research for my book *In Search of Management* (originally 1994, re-issued in 2001 by Thomson Learning). For this I became a manager for a year in a company which is now part of the very unfortunate Marconi company. I very much enjoy talking to managers from different countries and to comparing their experiences. When I was writing the preface for the re-issued edition of *In Search of Management*, I was working for a week in Prague. I spent a lot of time talking to people involved in Human Resource Management and was fascinated to note how similar their work was to managers working in situations which, at first sight, look very different.

Alas: How can leaders' influence the performance of the organizations they manage?

Watson: In all the different societies that I have looked at, it is clear that leaders who have the most positive influence over performance in the long term are ones who build solid and trusting relationships with the various groups to which

their organisations relate - from employees to suppliers, from the press to customers. In the short-term, leaders can achieve high performance through bullying and manipulating people. But for long-term success, there has got to be a trusting 'give and take' relationship between an organisation's management and everybody it deals with.

Alas: Your book "In Search of Management" is written about Czech Republic. Based on this experience, how different are management practices in Czech and UK, in East-Europe and West-Europe? How can leaders in East-European reform countries most influence an organization's effectiveness?

Watson: When I look at the changes occurring in Eastern Europe, I get the impression that some managers are only slowly moving away from the older highly centralised and bureaucratic ways of doing things whilst others are too enthusiastically embracing rather unstructured and allegedly market-oriented approaches. It seems to me that the managers who are going to be the most successful are those who can achieve a good balance between the very necessary bureaucratic procedures that large organisations require and the flexibility and entrepreneurship that an increasingly global world market calls for. In the final analysis, the best managers in the west and the best managers in the east are very similar indeed.

Alas: How do Western leadership theories fit in to East European reform countries?

Watson: I think good management theories are ones that will work anywhere. A great deal of standard Western theory has been inadequate because it started with assumptions that everybody in the world wanted the same things from life as did middle class American academic writers. We get, for example, the highly influential Maslow theory of motivation and its insistence that what everybody ultimately wants is 'self actualisation'. In practice, this is of little use to any manager - anywhere. But it makes many people feel good.

We need theories that managers can take into their everyday working lives - ones that assist them to make wise and shrewd decisions about practical matters. Theories will never tell managers what to do. But good ones will help managers apply more wisely the basic commonsense that every one of us starts off with. This is an important theme in my new book *Organising and Managing Work: organisational, managerial and strategic behaviour in theory and practice*, Harlow: FT Prentice-Hall, 2002 (available in Autumn 2001). I have written this book in an attempt to bring together the types of situation in which managers find themselves in practice and the types of academic ideas that can positively inform the way they handle those situations.

Ruth Alas, Estonian Business School