

# The problem of the solution?

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As we have argued before, a large part of the work of an asset manager consists of inventing solutions for future problems. You could almost think that asset managers are notorious pessimists, but fortunately that is not the case. Ultimately thinking in problems is just a means to ensure that you find the best solution for the actual problem. Now this is always a dangerous statement. Wherever in the world you say this, there will always be some techie who claims that they are doing this already, long before the time of the invention of the asset management concept. In a sense, they obviously have a point<sup>1</sup>. Problem solving and humanity are connected very closely.

However, what we have already encountered in practice is that the problem is not made explicit, there is only talk of the solution. This too we argued earlier<sup>2</sup>. The argument is then used that everyone knows what the problem is and that it is not necessary to specify this. If some more questions are raised, it becomes clear that an asset which does not meet a technical criterion, but no one knows why that criterion applies. It is assumed that the problem is clear to everyone. And that is exactly the problem we want to discuss today: documenting solutions without the problem which they solved is recorded.

A simple test to substantiate this proposition is the following: walk to any maintenance manager and ask for the maintenance schedules or maintenance contracts which he manages. In a professional organisation these can be provided easily. If not, you have a starting point to improve asset management. Browse through the schedules and contracts and then casually ask what will go wrong if half of the maintenance is skipped or the intervals are doubled. High probability that even in a professional organisation the answer cannot be provided without problems. With luck, one can find the tool with which the maintenance schedule is optimised or who was involved, but one has to seek to give the answer. As long as the tool with the optimisation file or the employee is present, you will find it. But for how long? Tools only last for about five years. The tool could be supplied during a longer period, but the downward compatibility holds once. At a given time the file is no longer readable. And this also applies to employees who do not last forever. Especially in technical subjects, there is a looming retirement wave. If it then also is the case that the assets last longer than the employees, such as infrastructure (eg road, water, electricity and gas), then there is a good chance that at one point no one knows why certain things are done.

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<sup>1</sup> See also the column *“Asset Management: Philosophy or instrument?”* 23 November 2012

<sup>2</sup> See also the column *“Decision making is a profession”* 16 December 2011

This in all honesty reminds a bit of an experiment ever conducted with monkeys<sup>3</sup>. In the middle of a cage a ladder was placed with a number of monkeys. On top of the ladder there were a number of bananas. Each time a monkey climbed the ladder to grab a banana others were soaked with water. Monkeys do not like to get wet. So when they realised this happened because another monkey climbed the ladder, the cheeky monkey who wanted to grab a banana was beaten up. After a while, no monkey dare to climb the ladder. The scientists then replaced a monkey in the group. The first thing the new monkey did was to go towards the ladder with the bananas, but the other monkeys immediately beat the new monkey up. After some time the new monkey learned not to climb the ladder, but the new monkey did not know why. A second monkey was replaced, and so on. In the end there was a group of five monkeys that never received a cold shower, but continued to beat up a new monkey who wanted to climb the ladder, even though no one knew why. It was just the way things were done.

Do we now want to say that you can learn a monkey asset management as long as you have enough bananas? Of course not, the whole point is that an asset manager must realise that he is not a monkey. Any act, whether it is operation, maintenance or investment, is a choice. This also applies if it only deals with the implementation of regulations. Those regulations are ever designed as the best solution to a problem, but that does not mean that they still are the best solution. The idea of what is best may have changed, but there also may have been developed better solutions. Every action must be critically assessed continuously and thereby it helps tremendously when it is documented why that act is chosen. In other words, do always record the problem behind the solution. Don't do this in a separate document, but capture it with the solution itself. But to convince the asset managers you may want to take some bananas and a water sprayer.



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<sup>3</sup> Stephenson, G. R. (1967). Cultural acquisition of a specific learned response among rhesus monkeys. In: Starek, D., Schneider, R., and Kuhn, H. J. (eds.), Progress in Primatology, Stuttgart: Fischer, pp. 279-288. See also <http://erikbuys.wordpress.com/2012/04/29/foolish-monkeys/> for a nice cartoon