

C O M M E N T

WORK PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

Most sensible managers are wary of new management fads particularly of the heavily hyped variety

'Business Process Re-engineering' which has been described as the radical redesign of business processes and their operation by cross-functional teams is, on one level, a concept whose time has arrived and, on another level, an image-making advertising slogan for some elements of the IT and consultancy industries to gloss mis-conceived client adventures in change management.

As Peter Drucker remarked, "Look, re-engineering is new because we didn't have it as a concept before."* His argument that only when something is established as a systematic discipline or organisable process does it really have an impact is an interesting perspective of cultural attitudes.

Drucker distinguishes between two types of re-engineering: the re-design of sub-processes and the reconfiguration of entire processes which alter the strategic and competitive rules in an industrial/commercial sector. The use of the word 're-engineering', however, is unhelpful in that it implies a disciplined, mechanistic approach to work processes. The reality is that working with people is the key to both re-designing sub-processes and re-configuring for strategic advantage. The behavioural sciences not the engineering sciences are at the core of business process re-engineering.

The re-design of sub-processes is better described as 'work process improvement'. Its grandfathers were Organisation and Methods and Operational Research developed during and after the Second World War. The grandchild has married into new social organisations that place much emphasis on the empowerment of working people, teamworking, flat structures,

quality productivity and innovation, multi-skilling and cross-discipline working. The grandparents had struggled with, among myriad issues, X and Y theories of management, senior/subordinate and labour relationships, hierarchical reporting structures, developing more empathetic cultures and attitudes towards change, and encouraging science-based innovation. At a sub-process artifact level they moved from mechanics to electronics.

Strategic re-configuration was and remains much more difficult, because it is simply not just a question of processes. Strategies, cultures, infrastructure and tools are equally important if not more critical. Human resources are of paramount importance and the development of these resources to improve the quality of leadership, to create and sustain a common purpose that people can work towards, to build a culture of enterprise and opportunity, to grow by teaching and learning, to fashion ever-better working relationships and to bind people together through good communications remain supreme management challenges. The battlefronts today are at the interface and with the inter-actions of Organisation Change and Technological Innovation where senior management often struggle with inadequate evaluation and review processes that are essential for proper oversight and success.

'Work Process Improvement' is about iterative change - small steps that cumulatively achieve big benefits yet are controllable, manageable, measurable and likely to deliver. The term is being used increasingly for techniques that improve administration processes through the use of new office automation technologies by reducing the movement of paper within an organisation.

The paperless office is not a cost-effective proposition at this time but there are certain applications in the office that can be made paperless either through electronic data interchange or through conversion of paper to electronic images at an early stage in the processing cycle. In recent years a formidable array of new technologies and techniques in electronic imaging have come to market as usable products to deliver economically viable benefits and potential business improvements through better quality and shorter process cycle times. These innovations continue the theme of automation displacing the drudgery tasks prevalent in bulk administrative and bureaucratic work.

Work Process Improvement is relatively straightforward. It begins with business analysis to gather facts and insights before formulating potential areas of improvements. How the analysis is done is dependent on how the specific organisation operates and behaves. Who does the analysis is also organisation-specific, the sole requirement being that it is done competently within an appropriate framework of support. Identifying and choosing alternatives are again organisation-dependent. Strategies, cultures and rules have to be considered, and people have to be involved and motivated to make the changes.

Thus while technology provides potential opportunities, the opportunities remain unrealisable until the human resources organise to deliver the benefits. The technology is there to support the people not vice versa. That is probably the secret of using technology successfully to improve work processes. It isn't new but it works and it is less of a risk than attempting strategic reconfiguration.

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* "A new concept placed in context"

Christopher Lorenz, Financial Times 11th June 1993.

Michael J Aldrich, August 1993