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Management Skills

Work process improvement *by Michael Aldrich*

Is 're-engineering' simply hype or is there a useful business tool waiting to be found?

Most sensible managers are wary of new management fads, particularly when they are intensively hyped. *Business process engineering* is a cross between a fad and an idea whose time has come

What is re-engineering?

Business writer, Peter Drucker distinguishes between two types of re-engineering: the redesign of work operations and the reconfiguration of entire processes which alter the rules of the whole business. The use of the word 're-engineering', however, is unhelpful in that it implies a disciplined and mechanistic approach to work. The reality is that working with people is the key to redesigning both the operations and the business as a whole. Human behaviour, not engineering, lies at the core of business process re-engineering.

The redesign of work processes at the operations level is better described as 'work process improvement'. Its origins lie in the areas of Organisations and Methods and Operational Research, developed during and after the Second World War. They were concerned with management theories, senior-subordinate relationships, hierarchical reporting structures and labour relations. Nowadays, work process improvement takes place within new organisations that place a strong emphasis on quality, productivity, innovation, empowerment of working people, teamworking, flat structures, multiple skills and interdisciplinary working.

Redesigning strategies is much more difficult — because it is not just a question of processes. Strategies, company cultures and infrastructure are just as important. Human resources are of paramount importance. The development of people 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, fashion ever-better working relationships and to bind people together through good communications remain the top priorities for every manager. The battle today is to accomplish organisational change in harmony with technological innovation

Stepwise change

'Work process improvement' is about iterative change — small steps that cumulatively achieve large benefits, yet are controllable, manageable, measurable and likely to succeed. The term is being used increasingly for techniques that improve administration processes through the use of new office automation technologies to reduce the flow of paper within an organisation.

The 'paperless office' is not a cost-effective proposition now, but there are certain applications in the office that can be made paperless, possibly through electronic data interchange. In recent years, a formidable array of new technologies and techniques in electronic scanning and imaging have come onto the market, delivering potential business improvements through better quality, shorter business cycles and reduced administration costs. These innovations continue to replace the more routine and repetitive tasks that are prevalent in bulk administrative work.

Work process improvement is relatively straightforward. It begins with business analysis to gather facts and insights before formulating potential areas of improvement. The methods of analysis depend on how the particular organisation operates and behaves. The identification and choice of work process improvement opportunities are closely tied into the characteristics of the organisation. Existing strategies, cultures and rules have to be considered, and people have to be involved and to be motivated to implement the changes successfully.

While technology makes it possible to improve the way that work is done, this potential can only be tapped when people are organised to make it happen. The technology is there to support the people and not vice versa. This is probably the secret of using technology successfully to improve work processes. This is not a new approach, but it is much less risky than attempting to redefine the whole business in one fell swoop, and most importantly, it has been shown to work.

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