Employee Relations

Business process redesign: the wheel of Ixion
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Introduction

Our organizations are haunted by a ghost. Some people think that this has been the case since Taylor invented the principles of scientific management, but it was not until the 1990s that the ghost was given an appropriate name: Business Process Redesign (BPR). Other names, however, will do as well: Business Process Re-engineering or Process Innovation (Davenport, 1992). It is a name with technological connotations, as if it is meant to denote something venerable. However, sceptical minds inveigh against the ghost and speak in terms of Business Panacea Revisited (Willmott, 1994) or Big Personnel Reduction.

Not only are there many different names, we also encounter many definitions of the phenomenon under discussion. However, the best known and most popular definition goes like this:

[Business Process Redesign] is the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of business processes to achieve dramatic improvements in critical contemporary measures of performance, such as cost, quality, service, and speed (Hammer and Champy, 1993, p. 32).

The tone is melodramatic. The defenders of BPR have a distinct revolutionary pathos. The classical text (Hammer and Champy, 1993) is presented as nothing less than a "manifesto for a business revolution". BPR is assumed to have fundamental, radical, and dramatic consequences. Its defenders argue that it is about nothing less than a revolution in the way we think about organizations. Finally, we are able to heave a sigh of relief because we can throw off the age-old yoke of labour division and replace it by an overall orientation on business processes. Of course, the new type of orientation that is the result of BPR-efforts is fully instrumental to increased performance: low costs, high quality, excellent service and astonishing speed. Dissenters who are not aroused by the promises of BPR are tiresome spoilsports who ought to be shot (Kalgaard, 1993, p. 71). As a matter of fact, hard-baked revolutionaries cannot tolerate forces that impede the pace of change. It may be concluded that there is no place whatsoever for the "incrementalist orthodoxy that has prevailed for 30 years" (Grint, 1995, p. 109).

Despite the exuberance with which it was welcomed, BPR hardly guarantees unequivocal success. On the contrary, even Michael Hammer has admitted that 50 per cent to 70 per cent of all BPR efforts fail (Hammer and Stanton, 1995). Other gurus (Ballé, 1995; Obeng and Crainer, 1996) also acknowledge serious problems with implementation. Problems are diverse: human nature simply...
does not comply with such a technologically- and numerically-driven approach like BPR; BPR projects tend to be fairly expensive (Møtze, 1996; Willmott, 1994); BPR is invariably presented as if it can be done in isolation of the social and cultural context (Grint, 1995), and so on. One may really wonder why, in face of all the practical problems attached to BPR, the gurus and their leaders firmly hold on to it; The German philosopher Hegel once told his audience at the Berlin university that if his philosophical system for the explanation of the world would prove in some way or the other erroneous, this should not be attributed to the system itself but to the world. In similar fashion, the advocates of BPR immunize their change programme against any form of empirical doubt.

This article sympathizes with the aforementioned spoilsports and tries to dampen the enthusiasm for BPR. In expressing my sympathy I will adopt the same sort of pathos that is typical of Hammer. I believe that unrelenting pathos might be the only way to counterbalance the revolutionary climate that Hammer and fans are trying to stimulate. Although efforts to enhance the efficiency of organizational processes are not reprehensible per se – we should not forget that large-scale organizational inefficiency may be one of the major reasons for environmental damage – I believe that the widespread enthusiasm among managers for change programmes like BPR is very alarming. I will show this by formulating ten points of critique which I will present in section 3. In the next section, I will discuss some essential elements of BPR and also enter into some recent developments in what, unfortunately, tends to become an important managerial discipline.

The life of a ghost

In one of his few unpretentious moods, Michael Hammer (1990) has contended that he did not invent BPR, but merely coined a catching name for a trend that was taking place in some “remarkably successful” organizations. What do these organizations know that others do not know?

The first and perhaps most important thing on the way to success is abandoning the functional structure of the organization. Adam Smith has led us to believe that the function or the task is the ultimate core of each work organization. Given this assumption, the managerial challenge is to co-ordinate the diversity of functions and tasks within the organization. In other words, managers should design the organizational structure. This structure has been defined as, first, the way tasks are divided and, second, the way in which they are co-ordinated (Mintzberg, 1983). However, co-ordination is expensive since you need co-ordinators. Unfortunately, these people are not involved in doing any real work; they only take care that specific portions of real work are put together. T he problem is that co-ordinators simply represent costs because they do not add any value since adding value is, ex hypothesi, the prerogative of real workers.

But how can an organization avoid co-ordination? After all, if one leaves all the real workers to fend for themselves, control problems will become paramount. If one takes away the glue that has been applied between the tasks,
the organization will become liable to fragmentation, chaos, and anarchy, the three arch-enemies of rational management. The dilemma can thus be formulated as follows: in face of the huge costs of co-ordination organizations should get rid of it if they are to stay competitive, but such a clearance inevitably causes serious control problems.

BPR’s solution to the problem is deceptively simple: “horizontal compression” (Hammer and Champy, 1993, pp. 51-3). Employees should not only carry out their tasks but also co-ordinate them, which entails a compression of the organizational hierarchy. According to the defenders of BPR, the advantage of horizontal compression is that you will keep co-ordination problems at bay. The “case worker” (Hammer and Champy, 1993, p. 52) will develop an insight in the total process that should be carried out by the organization[1].

The second trend signalled by Hammer is that successful organizations seem to adopt a process orientation. A process is defined as “a collection of activities that takes one of more inputs and creates an output that is of value to the customer” (Hammer and Champy, 1993, p. 35). The adoption of a process orientation implies nothing less than a paradigm shift: task focus is replaced by process focus. In consultancy language this implies a shift from vertical and functional structures to horizontal work flows (Van der Linden, Van der Meer and Raaijmakers, 1993); in academic language the shift is from differentiation to de-differentiation (Willmott, 1994) or integration. The latter word has gained an almost mystical status in the world of managers. Integration is the panacea for organizations that want to become customer friendly. What the protagonists of BPR have in mind is a fully integrated process which is pulled by the customer who appears as the moral figurehead of employees in the organization.

But where exactly is customer friendliness to be gained? If the entire working process in the organization has become the responsibility of a minimal number of “case workers”, the organization has in effect removed many obstacles to optimal and speedy service. These obstacles are, of course, the inevitable side-effect of functional structures in which an employee who carries out task 1 “pushes” the result of his/her work to the next employee who has to carry out task 2; ultimately, some result is handed over to the customer by the tenth employee. The problem, of course, is that employees who carry out task 1, 2 and 3, are miles away from the customer and only work for their immediate boss and workmates and perhaps also for their own good. From the employee’s perspective, the customer is behind the horizon of his or her department. The third aspect of the trend observed by Hammer is that customers should be brought, no matter what it takes, within the range of each employee. Since the customer is the most important receiving end of organizational action, customer focus is a condition sine qua non for true competitiveness.

Interestingly, the metaphors of “push” and “pull” are well-known in the world of production/operations management. The difference between “push” and “pull” might be seen as a difference between operations systems that are “resource driven” and those that are “customer driven” (Harvey, 1990, pp. 177.f)
The classic (modernist) example of an operations systems that is resource driven is Fordism “where portions of work are pushed from one processing stage to the other” (Alders, 1993). If we are to believe people like Harvey and Alders we are now witnessing a transition from Fordist operations systems to (postmodernist) Kanban-systems “where components of end products are only manufactured if the next stage (i.e. the ‘customer’) needs them” (Alders, 1993). This fundamental customer orientation allows organizations to prevent the (very expensive) accumulation of inventories. In Fordism the capacity of each processing stage (and not the needs of the internal or external customer) determines the quantities that are produced. Inventories are necessary in order to smooth out unbalances in the production process. Inventories, however, are as expensive as co-ordinators whose main reason for being is to smooth out unbalances in the administrative process.

It might be argued that the ideas behind Kanban-systems are very similar to those that drive BPR. In a way BPR simply adopts well-known logistic principles in order to impose them on administrative procedures within organizations. I think, therefore, that the popularity of BPR is an indication of the trust that organizations increasingly put in technocratic solutions for problems which are not necessarily of technical nature.

This might, indeed, be seen as the fourth aspect of the trend observed by Hammer. Afer a decade in which culture was the main target of organizational change, we are back to technocratic basics. One glance at the different backgrounds of BPR-protagonists is enough. Almost without any exception, writers on the topic are computer engineers or information specialists: Hammer and Champy (1993), Huff (1992), Rai and Paper (1994) are but a few examples. This points to a very serious problem: there are only few people with a non-technical background who publish about BPR. If there are publications written by non-specialists (e.g. Grint, 1995; Willmott, 1994) they will very likely not be read by many managers. A serious discussion is hardly possible under such circumstances.

Hammer is the most important representant of those who opt for BPR. He claims that many organizations do not have the slightest idea about what might be possible by means of information technology (IT). Many organizations invested heavily in IT during the 1980s, but they did not fundamentally change their work processes. For too long a time, IT merely speeded up the existing work process. It, however, did not contribute to its fundamental reconceptualization. A missed opportunity with detrimental consequences. Merely speeding up the working process, Hammer claims, has only tempted members of organizations to store massive amounts of redundant information. Why is this the case?

Within traditional, functionally-oriented organizations, the information system looks like a collection of disconnected tubes. Thanks to the enormous information processing capacity of IT, each tube is inevitably going to be jampacked with information nobody is waiting for or with information that has already been stored elsewhere in the system. The competitive advantage that
might be generated by speeding up the information process is virtually eliminated by a redundant viscosity in each tube. In similar fashion, the production process within Fordist operational systems stagnates due to overproduction at a particular workstation. Systems that are used within organizations are just like people: when they eat too much, the blood in their vessels will inevitably clog.

Hammer recommends a strict diet. Paradoxically, the weapon that might cut away the fat is IT. The attack on excess fat can only become a success if organizations come to a real understanding of IT. If there is something new to BPR, it must be its emphasis on IT as something which makes functional structures redundant. Since Adam Smith we have thought that these structures were indispensable within organizations. Indeed, without such a structure one could hardly speak of organizations. There was no other option than to take the structural paradox of the division of labour (differentiation) versus the co-ordination of tasks (integration) for granted. And now we hear people talking about organizations that should dispense with structure altogether (Huff, 1993). It is possible to get rid of the structure if one no longer makes a distinction between execution and communication. In other words, employees should take up the responsibility for co-ordinating the task they are carrying out (Hammer, 1990, p. 111).

This allows us to identify a fifth aspect of the trend Hammer observes: a dawning awareness of the possibilities IT offers. Aided by IT, the organization is able to redesign processes in such a way that the individual case worker is enabled to carry out tasks that were formerly divided between inadequately co-ordinated employees. Of course, not everything can be carried out by one individual, but in order to circumvent this minor problem the organization might form so-called "case teams". The members of these teams enjoy, without a single exception, the benefits of real-time connection to the central computer system which can best be seen as a collective brain that replaces the members' individual brains. In other words, the case-team is expected to perform as a "virtual individual" (Willmott, 1994).

Summarizing, BPR is a trend which can be characterized as follows:

1. Organizations try to get rid of the functional and vertical straitjacket inherent to their structures.
2. Organizations focus their attention to processes.
3. Organizations canonize the customer in the sense that employees are encouraged to interpret the customer as their boss and employer.
4. Organizations increasingly suspect "soft" options for fundamental change and put their faith in technocratic solutions.
5. Organizations discover the unknown possibilities of IT.

How seriously should we take BPR? And how far-reaching are its consequences? McHugh et al. (1995, p. 14) have argued that there are three BPR versions. The first one stands for several cost-cutting and efficiency measures; catchwords are...
divestments, delayering and downsizing. The second one refers to ways in which the organization might try to achieve “best practice status in one or more core business processes”; the idea here is simply to outwit the competitor in different areas. The third version of BPR subscribes to the ideas of cost-cutting and best practice, but also claims to create new markets and to “re-invent the industry”. McHugh et al. (1995) dub this version of BPR “BreakPoint Business Process Re-engineering” which aims to link innovation to unrivalled customer orientation.

I would like to argue that it is this BreakPoint version that takes BPR to its extreme: a holy war is declared on each form of differentiation. Superior customer orientation implies that the organization ceases to exist as an isolated entity. McHugh et al. (1995) extol the idea of “holonic” networks in which organizations co-operate in an organic way in order to take optimum advantage of the possibilities embodied by the customer. They emphasize that such holonic networks should be seen as the logical sequel to what used to be BPR. Within these networks, each form of differentiation is banned: borders between several departments and, indeed, organizations themselves (i.e. so-called “holons”) have evaporated. IT, of course, comes to the fore as the big evaporator in the art of re-engineering; it even cancels all geographic differences.

The idea behind these holonic networks is that they can adopt whatever form is necessary in order to cope with a new situation. The many different forms that might be taken on can best be seen as “virtual companies”. Only those holons are accepted in the virtual company that are able, in cooperation with other holons, to engender total customer satisfaction. Eventually, the ultimate differentiation, i.e. the fundamental distinction between buyer and seller, is taken away. Normann and Ramirez (1993), for example, have described how the customer him/herself might become actively engaged in the production process by assuming responsibility for the addition of value embedded in the product or service.

McHugh et al. (1995) use this idea to describe how the customer determines the actual size and form of the holonic network. Customers are no longer seen as passive consumers, but as “prosumers” who are actively engaged in the design of the product or service. Thus, if a particular product or service does not prove satisfactory, the customer-prosumer is responsible too. After all, prosumers are expected to shape the network in such a way that the processes within it can help to satisfy his or her needs. Central to this process are two ideas:

1. the holon as such is “unable by itself to create a BreakPoint in the market”; only a virtual company can do this;
2. the customer should become a part of the network.

To put the second idea metaphorically, the network should eat the customer in order to become or to behave like the customer. This brings the quest for oneness which drives BPR-efforts to a conclusion.

Now I will turn to the task of criticizing BPR and the ideas behind it.
Exorcizing the ghost

The reception of management texts differs from culture to culture. Rhetorics that are quite acceptable in the USA might be outrageous elsewhere. Many of the managers with whom I worked in both The Netherlands and The Netherlands Antilles are appalled by the arrogance with which Hammer and Champy (1993) present their ideas. The revolutionary pathos, the absence of even the slightest of doubts, the unfair critique of traditional work methods, and the vehemence with which they denounce “the management fads of the last 20 years” (Hammer and Champy, 1993, p. 25) are rubbing many a manager the wrong way. The claim that these fads directly helped to undermine organizational performance in the USA is never seriously backed up by evidence and is simply taken for granted. We are only presented with a few scantily documented success stories of companies adopting BPR-like ideas. It is no wonder that many managers with whom I debated the ideas behind BPR think that it is merely one of many fads that cross their way. It is suspected that Hammer and Champy’s indictment against managerial fads merely serves to increase their own fad’s marketability.

Despite all suspicions, BPR still seems to attract managers and consultants, even in The Netherlands. The topic received a fair amount of (non-academic) attention in management journals such as Holland Management Review. However, articles devoted to the subject have almost invariably been written by management consultants, i.e. by people who have a vested interest in selling the idea. The next passage illustrates my point:

Redesign is good. Redesign is a must. In our practice we notice that many organizations, whether or not without considerable help, go through a fantastic learning process if they strike out upon the path of redesign. In most cases an organization will emerge that performs better and extracts more energy from its people (Batelaan, 1993, p. 89; my translation).

Batelaan, who is a consultant himself, warns his readers not to put their trust in consultants. Success of organizational change programmes depends, he claims, on the organization and not on the consultant. Batelaan may be very right in this, but he suggests, only a few lines later, that consultants may be perfectly able to guide the organization through the process of change provided that “they employ methods that suit the organization”. BPR, of course, happens to suit any organization. The warning to be careful with opportunistic consultants echoes Hammer and Champy’s denouncement of consultancy fads and merely serves narrow commercial objectives.

But here I shall leave my critique as to how BPR generally is presented for what it is and turn to the ideas behind it.

BPR is not strategic

BPR’s central goal is improving the efficiency of the operational process within organizations. There is at best some casual attention for strategic issues. McHugh et al. (1995, pp. 67-8, 185), for example, discuss the necessity to replace strategic planning with strategic thinking, but their ideas are utterly superficial
and very reminiscent of similar ideas proposed by Hamel and Prahalad (1994) or Mintzberg (1994). I think this lack of interest in strategic issues is typical for the bulk of BPR literature and practices. Strategy might, as will become clear below, be too intellectually demanding.

It is extremely difficult to see how BPR should contribute to the creation of new markets or to what Miles and Snow (1978) have called “prospector-strategies”. If BPR suits a particular type of strategy at all, then it is a defensive strategy which is based on cost avoidance and high efficiency and which may be particularly useful in declining markets (Walker and Rueckert, 1987). BPR is not attractive for organizations which pursue growth strategies. Operational approaches seek to enhance employee productivity, not to create new markets or products.

This point is well captured by Hamel (1994), an important guru who has vented his doubts as to BPR on more than one occasion. He mocks the idea of productivity improvement by pointing out that British workers are among the most productive in the world but that this is nowhere reflected in terms of market share:

> Going through the same retrenchment wringer, ridding themselves of unneeded management layers, outmoded work rules and cumbersome bureaucracies, few of these firms are managing to grow in real terms. With a static revenue line, these firms are losing relative share in world markets. Yet, if the typical approach to restructuring, with its dominator focus, grants productivity gains only at the expense of global market share, efficiency programmes may do as much harm as good (Hamel, 1994, p. 71).

One does not necessarily have to agree with Hamel’s own ideas about unrestricted globalization, economic growth and competitiveness in order to appreciate his challenge to managers:

> Slimming down the workforce and cutting back on investment is inherently less intellectually demanding for top management than discovering ways to grow output on a static or only slowly growing resource base. Cutting the buck is easier than expanding the bang; thus the preference of the former over the latter (Hamel, 1994, p. 71).

Hamel’s drift is to make clear that the real problem of many western companies is not their lack of productivity but their persistent belief that productivity is the single most important key to long-term success.

BPR presupposes the infinite malleability of employees

Once I received a glimpse of a case-worker. He played a role in an information film produced by a well-known Dutch insurance company. The case-worker had his headphones on and a small microphone constantly threatened to jump into his mouth. With wires he was connected to the advanced computer that was placed right in front of him on a very tidy desk. A voice-over explained that the whole set-up offered some considerable advantages. The computer was, for example, able to put through a phone call of a customer to the case-worker without any delay. That is, the case-worker simply heard in his headphones someone talking. What has been removed from the interaction between employee and customer was the former’s discretion as to decide when to pick up
the phone. Neither is there any unnecessary hand movement to, say, a telephone. In the redesigned company not even a second can be wasted and nothing is left to chance.

There are more interesting details surrounding the film presentation. The office in which the case-worker carried out his no doubt stultifying job was in brilliant white and very spacious. Redesigners do not like (“differentiating”) rooms or offices with pleasant photos or posters on a nearby wall. An abstract and ridiculously expensive painting on a white and distant wall is the last decoration that might be visible.

As soon as the customer talked to the case-worker, the latter immediately knew what to do: typing all data into the computer, waiting for a second or two for the results to appear on the computer screen, reading the results into the microphone and ending by stating how much he liked helping the customer. However, the customer obtained so much information that one really wonders whether even the most intelligent among us would be able to absorb it – but it is not the customer that interests me here. He or she already received too much compassion in recent management literature. The person who earned all the compassion in the world was the poor case-worker.

I watched the film with some Antillean managers and hardly anybody could suppress a pitying smile. One of these managers remarked: “For decades people have devoted their energy to the improvement of working conditions and this is apparently the outcome of all their efforts”. Then the real laughter could begin. We got a little comfort from the fact that the film was acted and not for real. But it is important to realize that the insurance company was, as the voice-over carefully explained, only too serious about improving working procedures. The information film represented nothing less than a vision on how the future employee is expected to do his or her job.

People working in a redesigned organization are put under a regimen of logic and computerization. Hammer (1990) often derides the fragmented and stultifying tasks carried out in the “Smithsonian” and “Fordist” organization, but does this seriously imply that working for a redesigned organization is less stultifying? Or, to put it differently, should we really take for granted that the endless differentiation of working procedures enhances the quality of a person’s job?

At face value at least, we cannot charge redesigners with too much solidarity and compassion. People in redesigned organizations are expected to work harder and to refrain from exercising any influence on their own job. The assumption clearly is that people are, as Willmott (1994) would put it, “infinitely malleable”.

BPR underestimates political factors

The advocates of BPR speak enthusiastically about job enlargement and empowerment. Their expectations in this regard, however, may be totally unrealistic. See, for example, what Hammer and Champy (1993, p. 111) write about so-called case teams:

An absence of contention and conflict during re-engineering usually signals that nothing productive is happening, but contention and conflict among team members should be directed...
towards a common end. “Truth”, said the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, “arises from
disagreement amongst friends”. To us, friends are people with mutual regard and mutual
concern. Team members must be friends who share a common focus: improving the
performance of their process. There is no room for private turf and private agendas.

At face value this is certainly one of the few “soft” passages in Hammer and
Champy’s text. Even a well-known philosopher is quoted. But in the end the
underlying message is harsh enough: in order to improve performance members
of a case team are expected to shelve all personal affairs. The case member who
refuses to do so, will meet serious sanctions and might be expelled from the team.
The same holds for those who are, to put it bluntly, too stupid. In the redesigned
organization, there is, as Hammer and Champy point out, no room for simple
people. Yet, the smart people belonging to the case team are not expected to stand
up for themselves. Such is the grim and strange logic of re-engineering.

Empowerment is about enabling people to make their own decisions with
respect to their own work. However, such decisions are only accepted if they
contribute to the integration of jobs which is one of the essential objectives of
BPR. Freedom of action and opinion cannot be a serious issue in the redesigned
organization if empowerment only relates to people who have shown to be able
to act in the approved manner. Employee influence is only tolerated if the rules
of the game are unconditionally accepted.

The infinitely malleable employee is the fully disciplined employee. His or her
rewards are job enlargement, more responsibilities and more (sham) autonomy.
What is to be done if people are not enthused by these prospects? What is to be
done if they need persuading? The suggestion made by Hammer and Champy is
that people who are reluctant and have doubts about redesigning (for example
because the fear of losing their jobs or merely because of the increased workload)
are not only simple but also malicious. There is no consideration whatsoever for
anxieties and emotions among workforce. Resistance should be handled by
starting a relentless offensive against dissenters and/or by value-driven and
inspired leadership. But who is, one might be inclined to ask, really simple and
malicious here? An amazing knack of persuasion on behalf of managers is simply
taken for granted. They should, as Willmott (1994, p. 42) has argued, be able “to
persuade turkeys to vote for Christmas”. I think that the widespread resistance
against redesign is a perfect indication that the average employee is not nearly as
simple as BPR consultants seem to believe.

Summarizing, the redesigned organization can only be achieved if you start
with redesigning people. That is, if you want to redesign your organization, you
had better forget about the worries and anxieties of employees and not
underestimate their intelligence.

BPR unjustly draws a bead on middle managers
It is perfectly possible to link BPR to a much wider arsenal of political
measurements aimed at destabilizing the middle classes in Western societies, a
process which is stimulated by the dominance and aggressiveness of financial
markets (Korten, 1995). Organizations that subscribe to the rules laid down by
these markets often do not develop serious alternatives for downsizing and
delaying and simply share “a common dedication to the elimination of middle
management” (Scarborough and Burrell, 1996, p. 183). Since middle managers
form a substantial part of our society’s middle class, it might very well be
argued that organizations with such a dedication do not help to bring forward
societal welfare and peace.

However, having made this moral understatement, it is also worthwhile to
note that there are economic or strategic reasons also for not rounding up
middle management. Prahalad, for example, has repeatedly pointed out that
middle managers are very often not the bone idle and workshy people described
by Hammer, but the carriers of the organization’s core competences (Geber,
1994, p. 37). That is to say, middle managers often have a much closer affinity
towards the product or towards the market than top managers. By rounding up
middle managers, organizations inadvertently eliminate important elements of
their own knowledge base, especially those forms of knowledge which are not
rationally documented or laid down in bulky manuals.

Prahalad’s insights are increasingly being applauded. Floyd and Wooldridge
(1994) have argued that middle managers are not the inert dinosaurs many
people see in them. In their view, middle managers are pre-eminently fit to start
change programmes within organizations. Their argument hinges on the idea
that many of the roles traditionally played by middle managers - strategy
implementation, information gathering, increasing operational flexibility, etc. -
simply cannot be taken on by top managers because they are too detached from
daily affairs within the organization. One can hardly maintain, however, that
such roles are strategically irrelevant. Once more it might be argued that
processes such as BPR generally do not show deep strategic insight.

However, these doubts with respect to BPR do not obscure the general
impression that downsizing and delaying is becoming a quite natural
response to organizational problems. This might very well lead to the sort of
fatalism recently described by Galbraith: “People who are shed, if I may use the
subtle modern term, expect one day to be shedders again, even if they
experience how the great majority of insecure people live” (quoted in
Scarborough and Burrell, 1996, p. 185). Perhaps this is the sad irony of the
discussion about BPR: the how-to-re-engineer books are bought and read by
precisely those who tend to become its victims.

BPR’s attack on bureaucracy is merely a matter of rhetorics
I would like to point out that Hammer’s idea of bureaucracy is a very populist
one. In his view, bureaucracies simply boil down to masses of paperwork,
redundant procedures and widespread inertia. However, in the footsteps of
Weber many authors (e.g. Clegg, 1990) have claimed that an obsession with
control is the kernel of each bureaucracy. If we take this seriously, BPR is an
example of bureaucratic mentality because it shares its basic obsession. The
way in which control is achieved can be very different. BPR may indeed reduce
paperwork or eliminate some procedures, but computerized technology allows for other control tactics.

The anti-bureaucratic tendency which prevails in textbooks on BPR is sham. Inveighing against the inertia of bureaucracies is an essential element of the enterprise cult that ruins our organizations, but the bureaucracy may be much more persistent as some of us might be inclined to think. As Thompson (1993) has pointed out, in these post-modern times it might be better not to debate the question whether we are losing our bureaucracies and instead devote all our attention to observing and understanding carefully how the bureaucracy changes and adapts itself to new situations. In short, the bureaucracy is not eliminated; it is compressed and intensified in order to become manageable for those at the top.

BPR does not serve the organization but capital
It has been pointed out that the impact of BPR on our society should not be underestimated and that it might very well have some unforeseen and unwelcome political effects. BPR is driven by the entrepreneurial spirit which rides roughshod on broad layers of our society. The political ideology behind it is downright conservative and hinges on ideas like autonomy, economic independence on behalf of the employee, deregulation, etc. The top within the organization is allowed to dodge any moral responsibility for employee welfare just like governments are increasingly allowed to display a total lack of interest in the fate of the weak in our society.

What companies need are not simple and dependent people but strong “post-modern nomads” (Van der Zee, 1994) who are willing to view their very own life as an enterprise. In other words, the ideal employee should interpret his or her own impending dismissal as a new entrepreneurial opportunity and not as something frightening.

As has been pointed out by Saul (1993) and many others, all efforts to undermine the very idea of job security, as well as employee influence, have not resulted in substantial growth or improved competitiveness. Yet, our business leaders seem to be addicted to drastic cutbacks, radical changes and massive layoffs. The reason is that these measures are rewarded by financial markets. The consequences for our organizations are dire. Who wants to work in a place where everybody is on tenterhooks because he or she might be the next in line for dismissal? The only people that might take advantage of programmes like BPR are not even managers themselves but those who control financial markets. Indeed, it has been persuasively argued by Whittington (1993) that the opportunism of capital may in the long term very well turn out to be disastrous for our organizations. Many managers who serve as paladins of the financial markets may sooner or later experience “that capital’s ultimate embrace wrings them, warmly, by the neck” (Scarborough and Burrell, 1996, p. 186).

BPR is difficult to reconcile with customer orientation
The sanctifying objective of the organization is to satisfy the customer. It is necessary, therefore, to engage in a partnership with the customer. However, the
case-worker I saw in the information film was anything but a partner of the customer. Partnership presupposes equality between the partners, but in the film the case-worker was never meant to be equal to the customer. He was simply enslaved by the customer who seemed to be very embarrassed by this situation (but perhaps she was a poor actress).

Apart from this, I fail to see how service to the customer can retain its quality if employees are forced to do their work as quickly and efficiently as possible. An employee whom I happened to know and who works for the post office in the city where I live, complained about the many reorganization efforts he had witnessed. Work pressure, he explained to me, was so intense that he simply was not able to handle problems of the customers in the way he used to handle them in the good old days. He was repeatedly told by his boss that customers who did not address their letters properly or even forgot to address them should not be helped anymore, because making a call in order to ask for the right address and other activities that might rectify the customer’s shortcoming, would simply bring the sorting process to a total standstill. There are many more of these stories to be heard in Dutch organizations. They all serve to illustrate that the operational and technocratic mentality ingrained in BPR is very difficult to reconcile with phantasmagoric ideas about superior customer orientation, unless of course the organization has customers that are as smart and perfect as the computers that run its working processes. In other words, redesigned organizations need not only competent workers but also competent customers. In this respect, at least, there is some equality between the case-worker and the customer.

BPR offers a very simple representation of work processes.

In most texts about BPR, work processes are reduced to surveyable chains of often simple jobs. Generally, the imagery is deceivingly simple: a small quadrangle represents activity 1, and is, by means of an arrow, connected to another quadrangle representing activity 2, etc. This imagery strongly suggests that people are carrying out their tasks in a strictly formal, if not computerized way. Of course this is a very well-known problem, but the understanding that models do not represent complex reality does not seem to take root among the disciples of BPR. Wastell et al. (1994), however, have argued that even the most simple tasks demand considerable improvization and problem-solving capacities. Although these aspects are crucial, models of work processes usually ignore them. BPR consultants hold on to such models and therefore tend to ignore informal aspects of work processes.

An objection related to this point is that BPR apparently assumes that the work process absorbs all events within organizations. In fact, however, many things happen that seem to be totally unrelated to such a process. I never saw on all the clever flowcharts presented by consultants people emptying an ashtray, buying a bunch of flowers or treating their peers to cake. But it is not unlikely that the redesigned organization has jettisoned such useless habits or activities.
BPR implies risks which might be unacceptable to many people. Risk is a subjective phenomenon. What may be an acceptable risk for one, may be unacceptable for the another. What people think is acceptable very often depends on the way they judge their own situation. That is, if they deem a situation to be favourable, they are less prepared to take risks than if they deem it to be unfavourable. There is quite a lot of evidence to back this up (e.g. Feigenbaum et al., 1994).

This insight merely serves to back up the claim that people are not always willing to accept the same sort of risk. BPR implies enormous risks: people will very likely lose their jobs, investment costs may soar in order to pay for new IT; consultants are generally very demanding. An example is appropriate here. The Dutch-based company Philips recently (summer 1996) announced new reorganizations. In order to overcome the disappointing results over the first six months of 1996, new dismissals were deemed to be unavoidable. Since 1986 Philips have already dismissed 81,000 employees. There are 265,000 left, most of whom face a very insecure future because all dismissals in the past apparently did not bring the hoped-for turnaround. What I believe is most staggering about such announcements is that the costs of the new re-organization will take approximately $550,000,000 (Metze, 1996).

The risks involved are enormous and how on earth should an organization like Philips convince its people (or, for that matter, its shareholders) that they are acceptable and that money and jobs will not be wasted? Wastell et al. (1994) have pointed out that reorganizations such as BPR are only acceptable to the workforce if the situation is deemed to be desperate. Most BPR programmes failed because people did not share the management's judgement regarding the risk of the situation. I think this will be even more so when the same message has been stated over and over again during a period of ten years or so. Moreover, very often people also feel that only their management were taking advantage of the proposed change (see also MacKendall, 1993). Under such conditions it seems highly improbable that employees are willing to accept the risks that BPR offers to them.

BPR presupposes a very perverse view on competition

In many texts on BPR (and management in general), the authors depict a sinister and ominous world. In a way it resembles the hell depicted in Paul Auster's tantalizing novel In the Country of Last Things (1987) in which we read about a world where "nothing lasts", where everything, even the weather, is "in a constant flux" and "where anything is possible" as if you were "born in a world that has never existed before". Hammer's view of the world is Auster's horrific nightmare. Managers are taught that the world is a constant threat and that war with competitors is always imminent. Hammer puts into his readers' minds a resounding form of paranoia. The world is amoral and nobody can be trusted. Armament is inevitable and BPR serves as the coat of mail that protects the manager in a perverse and malicious world. It is a weapon that allows one
to engage in cut-throat competition with anyone who stands in the way of success.

In this world view, competition functions as the "noumenal" reality of our organizations. It exists, it is out there, as if it is independent of our organizations and their managers (Willmott, 1994). The challenge to be competitive is not only moral but also has a mystical and metaphysical component as well. What Hammer and many others tend to overlook is the "essential relativity of competition" (Saul, 1993, p. 366). Change programmes like BPR tempt us to forget that competition is man-made, but such a perspective on competition is perverse. I believe the following quotation illustrates my point:

Given the modern manager's devotion to an international "standard" of competition, the effect of the marginal improvement in social conditions brought about in Korea by persistent and violent street demonstrations has been to weaken Korea's attractiveness as a capitalist producer. The citizen who listens to the modern rhetoric of free markets and free men would assume that a bit more social justice and democracy are good things. The course of Western civilization has been advanced. The manager, however, sets aside rhetoric when it comes to specifics. From his point of view, Korea is now less competitive (Saul, 1993, p. 367).

No wonder then that in such a climate BPR is likely to be seen as a panacea and Hammer as a hero. In view of the intense competition nobody minds extracting more energy out of people. The idea to avoid competition hardly ever occurs. Stress, unemployment and the absence of democracy are therefore endemic and regarded as side effects that are only bemoaned by unworldly idealists. Instead of trying to solve these problems, one prefers to stir up competition once again.

Hence employees are regarded as villains and thrown into the Tartarus where they are tied to a burning wheel just like Ixion. In order not to drown they have to turn around the wheel perpetually. Nobody dares to bring this wheel to a stop.

Conclusion

We should get rid of the ghost and are very much in need of skilled exorcists, i.e. people who do not accept the contemporary climate, who really care about the organization and the people working there, and who are prepared to bundle voices against a predominant way of managerial thinking. What I have tried to make clear throughout this article is the perversity of managers and gurus who refuse to take serious the complexities in our organizations and who are willing to sacrifice people and even organizations on the altar of competition.

Note

1. I believe it is very important to acknowledge the moral attractiveness of the point made by Hammer and Champy (1995). After all, the bureaucratic division of labour silences morality in organizations in the sense that the specialist is not morally concerned about those who are affected by the total process carried out by the organization, be they customers, action groups, the neighbourhood or society at large. Rather, his or her morality is only directed to the workmate "whose successful coping with his own task depends on the actor's application to his [or her] part of the job" or to the immediate superior "whose occupational standing depends upon the co-operation of his subordinates (Bauman, 1989, p. 195). That is to say, BPR seems to open up the possibility of moral autonomy because it...
seems to encourage employees to think about the direct and indirect consequences of their actions, whereas the bureaucratic division of labour discourages such thinking. The specialist is somebody who farms out the ultimate moral consequences of particular actions to the coordinating expert. Of course, I am very well aware of the fact that BPR was not invented in order to encourage decent moral judgement on behalf of the employee – its reason for being is simply efficiency and profitability – but any attack on specialism and functional structures, including BPR, may be welcomed on moral grounds.

References


