

## **Title: BPR: A psychological, cultural and political perspective**

### **Abstract:**

The technique of Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) has made a significant impact on organizations (in terms of structuring, as well as of overall thinking) since its conception in early 90s from authors Hammer and Champy. The radicality that it implies could lead the firms in question, either to spectacular performance or to brink of disaster. However, there are several parameters that have not been emphasized boldly, such as cultural, psychological and political elements that inevitably exist in any organization. Therefore, what this paper explores, is actually whether the approach is applicable in different societal and cultural contexts, since Hammer and Champy describe the Anglo-Saxon model of firm, and also the attitude that members of the organization would have towards the design and implementation of the re-engineering approach. It is believed that no such project is likely to succeed without the acceptance and embracement of employees. The author believes that above parameters should be carefully examined before proceeding into such decision which could affect the very viability of the organization itself. Also, motives towards such decision, could be highly dispersed as organizations could be seen as a 'coalition of members having different interests' rather than a unitary entity.

Keywords: Business policy, Decision making / process, management, heuristics

### **Introduction**

The factor of human resources has a crucial role on the successful implementation of BPR as, due to its revolutionary nature not all employees is certain that will welcome it.

The revolutionary nature lies in the totality that it implies (as it cuts across the departmental boundaries that exist in functionally structured organizations) as well as the radicalism of its purpose (re-designing of all business processes from a blank sheet of paper, applicable also in vertically structured organizations).

There could be a number of factors for this negative attitude, ranging from self interest to the belief that BPR will act to the detriment of the organization as a whole. Organizations are widely accepted by now, that are not exactly the unitary entities, as assumed by the unitarist perspective theory, in which all members are committed to the goals set by the senior managers. Below, we will examine the insistence of management to impose BPR, the resistance of employees and the negative implications of BPR and some cultural differences that might play their own significant role.

### **The insistence of management to impose BPR**

The imposition of BPR could be attributed to ideological, as well as political, psychological or cultural parameters. The ideological parameters (the approach has fanatical supporters) are out of the scope of this paper, and we will focus on parameters other than the strength of the theory itself, first established by Hammer and Champy [1].

A first distinction that we have to make is between the reformers (those attempting to reform) and the reformees (those who are to be reformed). [Brunsson and Olsen, 2].

We have to stress that every organization has a history, and in the course of time it evolves its own accepted ideas about what work is important and what results are good. The evolution of the organization also develops perceptions regarding which reformers are acceptable by the mass body of employees, as well as by the opinion leaders of the firm. The acceptance of the reformers can heavily influence the end result of the project, as non-accepted reformers is almost certain that will face a wall of opposition against them.

Also, we have to underline some political / psychological parameters that could push towards BPR approach:

a) Managers with background to certain industries and professions, develop / expect change [Lant, 3].

The educational and professional background of reformers, as well as of reformees, is possible to influence their attitude towards change, in terms of developing and in terms of expecting and accepting. In this fashion, certain professions, such as engineers are more inclined to change than other backgrounds, such as economics or classical studies and the decisions that they made reflect their particular values and knowledge.

Similarly, the present or past work experience in certain industries, such as IT or telecommunications (the so called Schumpeterian industries) is more likely to influence employees to develop / accept change, than those with background to traditional industries, such as metals, mining or textile. Change could be seen as a mentality, and environmental change might boost organizational change.

b) Analogy bias

Reasoning by analogy is the application of analogies from previously successful situations to complex strategic problems (one of the most usual heuristics). Brindle [4] calls this bias the misuse of analogy game and described it as the process of comparing and referencing other past decisions to the current decision under consideration. This analogy provokes a subtle emotional bias that causes the decision-maker to either support on or reject certain solution, depending if the solution was relevant to the decision that is being compared to.

Since successful implementations of BPR have been widely publicized in specialized managerial magazines, decision-makers is likely to adopt it in their own organizational environment, not bearing in mind specific firm, historical or cultural contexts that may prevail.

### c) Institutionalized environments

Organizations are partly judged by the use they make of the structures, processes and ideologies which significant groups in their environment consider to be rational, efficient, reasonable, fair, natural or up to date. Organizations live in institutionalized environments and by that way, they are exposed to the quirks of fashion in organizational structure [Brunsson and Olsen, 2]. To win the respect of shareholders, banks, clients, suppliers or government, it may be advisable on some occasions to use fashionable tools, and BPR could constitute such one.

The existence of external norms may actually be the very reason for reform, in an effort for exposition of modernity<sup>1</sup>, both outwards and inwards the organization:

- Outwards show off modernity: This possibility might arise in an effort to attract support and investment by institutions, especially by firms that their recent past performance was worse than expected. It might well be met in countries that have recently aspired in the Western ideology and practices, such as Eastern European (e.g. Poland, Czech etc.) and modern Middle East countries (e.g. Arab Emirates) where US writings appear to have a substantial appeal.

The case might be applicable even for targeting customers that have not received the appropriate level of service, as the manager might want to underline that “we realized that our performance to you was not good, and we made certain that something must change”.

Seeing organizations as living in institutionalized environments means emphasizing that many of the rules in individual organizations are part of a wider rule-system in society. There are many norms for how organizations should behave that are not formulated or controlled within the local, individual organizations but are produced on a more general level and have a more general applicability [Meyer and Scott, 5].

However, these norms might be proved extremely complicated in multinational companies, where decision-making and execution might operate in different societal and cultural contexts, and environmental norms that may apply in subsidiary organizations be rendered as completely irrelevant than those in headquarters.

- Inwards show off modernity: this possibility might arise in an effort by new-coming top management to crash existing structures and powerful employees that cannot cope with. Especially in family-ownership firms, younger generations, is likely to have their own distinctive way of making things (and beliefs that previous' generation management has created an old-fashioned organization) and try to be sanctioned in staff awareness and consolidate their succession. In Anglo-Saxon (origin and run-type firms), new management would want to imply its practices and BPR could constitute a perfect excuse for changes (of mentalities and persons) as well as create enough confusion and tumult to pass, otherwise time-consuming changes, within a relatively short period of time. In that way, employees who wished return in the previous way, will compromise on the danger to loose all vested interests and previous privileges.

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<sup>1</sup> Being modern is associated in Western culture with improvement, progress, and development, which makes it extremely difficult to argue against reforms aimed at modernizing the organization. Arguing against such reforms is of course also a function of the career stage in which the employee is in. If for example is in the early stages of its career development it is difficult, but mature employees –with potential valuable knowledge- that have stabilized in a medium / lower level positions might probably opt for an “easy life” with smooth trajectory and without surprises and any ‘new ways of doing things around’.

#### d) Politics

According to Pettigrew [6], most examples of decision making reveal the play of both political and process factors. Most important organizational decisions are political in that they involve conflicting goals that are seen differently by senior managers, with varying degrees of authority and different priorities, seeking to mobilize power and influence. He also notes that politics are generated by the structure of organizations. Structures are designed by the powerful, but they also allocate power.

If we view the imposition of major structural decisions as political, the application of BPR has absolutely a political element in it. As by definition, governs what things are done, and shapes the future direction of the organization and the lives of people within it, is without question a matter of vital significance to organizational stakeholders. So, the re-engineering of major issues such as who is involved in the making of decisions; who is left out or kept out; who is in a position to exercise influence; who is able to introduce items on to the decision-making agenda or keep them off; and most of all, who is in position to exert claim on the scarce resources of the organization, are of utmost significance and might constitute to a great extent to the allocation and exercise of power in organizations.

In this game of power, in which competing interest groups vie with each other, the re-engineers are automatically transform and upgrade their status to power-holders which may well choose to behave in ways which further their own, or others' interests. This process may be characterized by various forms of bargaining, negotiation and compromise that may lead to outcomes which are less than optimum for all parties.

Finally, it is usual that new management would want to position their own people in key jobs and formulate its own team. Furthermore, in cases that previous management is not completely removed of organizational inner / near environment (usual in multi-divisional groups of companies) people of the previous management is likely to comprise an easy target.

#### **Resistance of employees**

Pettigrew has developed a theory of the firms as a coalition of members having different goals with the dominant coalition to impose usually its own goals and interests. We have to note that the ability of groups to pursue their goals, depends upon the power they wield in the organization, which may depend on a number of variables; such as their position in the organizational chart; the skills of the group members; the resources they command; whether or not their role is seen as legitimate by the rest of the organization members. In divisional / holding companies, power balances become more complex, as political alliances in firm-level and in group-level seem also to play their own role.

As decisions can be viewed as being fundamentally concerned with the allocation and exercise of power in organization, such power games might seem as inevitable, since the division of authority and the division of labour leads to fragmentation and sectional interests [Miller, 7].

Since we accept the pluralist perspective, highly influential could be the expectation whether or not, the coalition that they belong, will be better off than competing / rival groups, and what would be the power / influence of rival groups in the scarce resources of the organization ("if you can't win, at least you make sure you don't loose"). In such case, we could expect the individuals with access to scarce resources of the organization, or those with valuable

knowledge, to be the vanguard of the opposition. Rest members will tend to fall in rank behind them, manifesting their overt or subtle, according to the circumstance, support.

We have to note that BPR, due to its strength, entails the possibility that coalitions will be redefined, as former competing groups is possible to unite in front of the common threat, in the dogma of “the enemy of my enemy, is my friend”. Usually, the utmost enemy in this case is the dominant coalition, however in large groups of companies, the intra-organizational as well as the inter-organizational alliances and coalitions are almost impossible to be predicted. In this case, a policy of ‘divide and rule’ is likely to be employed by the dominant coalition, in an effort to crash the opposition to their plans.

There might be several cases that some employees consciously reject of BPR. The approach is highly controversial, with dedicated supporters and fanatical opponents. Opposition might arise from personal interest (the approach has been identified with large job-cuts), from collective interest (belief that it will function to the detriment of the organization as a whole), as just from reluctance to be a part of any such project.

Naturally, employees have a tendency to resist in any changes that might effect the existing status quo and produce some unknown to them outcomes.

As regards to the status quo, it is worth noting that organizations develop physical defense to change. Punctuated equilibrium models of strategic change [Tushman and Romanelli, 8] assert that organizations experience long periods of strategic persistence punctuated by short periods in which major changes occur in strategic direction and supporting structures and systems. One reason why organizations may go through long periods of convergence punctuated by short burst of change is that organizations experience tremendous persistence forces that make both the recognition of a need for change and implementation difficult. Thompson and Warhurst argue that engaging with employee feelings and values is likely to be the most fragile of all management activities. In part this is because many, perhaps most, employees do not buy very far into the message of change. Case studies reveal considerable skepticism about the ‘new’ managerial agenda and Jones notes of a change programme “Hotpoint employees view these US-inspired changes with the cynicism of workers who recognize another management scam designed to ensure that they work harder”. Ignoring low-level employees except as objects or in their defined ‘roles’ is a usual fault of implementation, as the issue of wider employee participation in organizational change and development has been highly under-estimated.

Even well-developed institutions, with a good cultural cultivation, might resist to the forces of changes. Even if they generate capacity for action, they also create inertia or friction in face of attempted reforms, which in some cases could well be personalized to specific reformers.

As regards to the the unknown outcomes, Rawls argues that if we reduce from the organizational to the individual level, rational agents will not agree to a contract where their own position is uncertain [Rawls, 9]. He also assumes that people have very limited information where their interests lie and places the rational economic agents behind a veil of ignorance for their decision making.

Bate [10] notes that change will take place if and when the following preconditions are present: a problem or problem arises and a desire or felt need to resolve them; an awareness of the existence and basic nature of the problem; and available information which allows the parties to the problem to define it and make appropriate choices between alternative courses of action. Above preconditions should not be considered as natural, especially under the political prisma, discussed above. Situations are allowed to persist even when they were accepted by the parties

themselves as problematical and undesirable, as parties could actively colluding in a process which effectively removes all possibility of resolution to their problems. In the heart of this collusion lies the organizational culture.

There are several definitions of culture, but we will insist on Bate's argument of evolution (by organization's members) of a system of shared perspectives of 'collectively held and sanctioned definitions of the situation' that makes up the culture of these organizations through their daily interactions with one another. The culture, once established, prescribe for its creators and inheritors, certain ways of believing, thinking and acting which in some circumstances can prevent meaningful interaction and induce a condition of learned helplessness –a psychological state in which people are unable to conceptualize their problems in such a way as to be able to resolve them.

Silverman [11] observes that organizational world 'is a taken-for-granted world governed by what we understand as the laws of nature'.

Culture affects the type and quality of interpersonal relationships, which in turn affect the approach to joint problem-solving processes. So, certain shared cultural meanings, once established, define what are acceptable, natural, desirable and effective ways of relating and acting. Taken together, they constitute people's 'dominant relational orientation' to work and to each other [Kluckholm, 12].

The perceptions that the employees have of their status in the value system of organization, will affect their attitude, as well as the perception that they have, of the management perception for them. To put it simpler, if they believe that the radical re-design will eventually act on their own benefit, since they regard themselves to have a high, and especially under-rewarded, status on the value system, and furthermore, they feel the positive attitude of the management to them, it is more likely to accept to enter in a change procedure that they will be eventually better off. If, on the other hand, they believe to be in danger (either they regard themselves to lack in dynamism, or they think that they do not have the management approval) it is highly possible to be entrenched behind a general denial of any attempt to change.

We have to emphasize on the difference between relatively immobile employees and those with mobile careers. Those with immobility of labour, is likely that they will reject it, while mobile employees is more likely to embrace it, as they would desire to be a part of the project. This is possible as it might contribute in their next job position as is a transferable skill, since practical experience in designing and implementing theoretical techniques in real situations is a valuable asset for professional managers and the experience could be earned only in firms that are willing to invest in the technique. However, and according to Crozier [13], immobility (along with uncertainty and commitment) is a variable usually rewarded by top management and employees with such attitudes is possible to get locked in key position within the organization, with ability to exert power and influence to block decisions and actions. A much quoted example is the technical engineer exactly because of his control over the major source of uncertainty in the routine of factory life, his relative immobility and his high commitment to his job.

### **Negative implications of BPR**

BPR can not be classified as a theory, but rather as a technique. However, even its founders are surprisingly vague about the implementation details but offer a wide theoretical framework, in the higher level of the firm.

However, as Liddle notes “it is so big and affects so many areas, virtually no aspect of the organization is untouched. People feel threatened and the whole process of reengineering is really, really hard”.

So, definitely a great disadvantage of BPR, is the potential negative reception by the employees of the organization and the sense of insecurity that it inevitably creates. Even organizations that have moved entirely to the process-led approach, will admit that they lost a number of staff at once who had no desire to be part of such an approach and, also, that there is a significant minority, maybe 20-40% of the workforce, who would strongly prefer to return to the traditional ways [Holtham, 14].

While exit of the organization is certainly a way of re-action, there are others, maybe even more harmful for the firm in question.

Bate describes several conditions, which might be temporal or not, such as unemotionality (when displays of feelings are not permitted or are somehow bad for the individual and for the organization), depersonalization of issues (when few people accept personal responsibility for things that are going wrong, and instead, collective responsibility on the lines of a government cabinet is considered to be the order of organizational life), isolationism (when there are shared beliefs that one should be able to stake out a personal territory in the organization that could ‘do one’s own thing’ in return to let others do likewise) and conservatism (synopsizes as ‘the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t know’).

The threat that employees feel, could impact on the management, diffusion and transformation of knowledge. More specifically, the threat that employees inevitably feel, entails the possibility to lead them to restriction of their knowledge, in an effort to secure their position. Such restriction of knowledge could severely damage the processes, as well as overall competitiveness of organization.

Seligman has defined a certain psychological state as ‘learned helplessness’, a condition which results when a person perceives that he can no longer control his own destiny. If this perception finds confirmation in experience, if one learns from trying that one is indeed helpless, ‘this saps the motivation to initiate responses [Seligman, 15]. The end result is the complete abandoning of any effort, since the energy and will to resolve problems drains away. The learned helplessness condition is extremely possible to lead to subordination behaviour, which is symbolized by ‘not taking responsibility for solving problems, even your own ones [Bate, 10], but instead be totally dependent to the superior managers to initiate a response.

All above employees’ reactions might arise from the concept, as well as for the implementation process of the technique. Typically, a small engineering team, which might be from within or from outside the company, designs work for the company. The team is fuelled by assumptions such as: “There is one best way to organize work; I can easily understand how you do your work today; I can design your work better than you can; there is little from your work that is worth saving; you will do your work the way I specify”. Such attitudes are almost certain that will lead to antipathy and to defensive behaviour of staff, which will cancel several assumption of the success, such as perfect information and commitment.

We have to note here, that while BPR claims to emphasize teamwork, however, it is supposed to be driven by a leader who is prepared to be ruthless. Sentimental managers have clearly no position either in designing or implementing process, and the prerequisite of a fully committed, decisive and hard leader is absolutely necessary.

Another hazard of BPR is a rather more strategic one. The danger entails that company becomes so wrapped up in fighting “its own canons” that it fails ultimately to keep up with its competitors in offering new products or services. Critics of BPR warn that it “may help you save some money tomorrow but will leave you in a worse position next month or next year”.

## **Cultural differences**

Clearly, cultural differences are important, and need to be considered when operating in organizations in different cultures. The more systematic study of work-related attitude was carried out by Dr Geert Hofstede [16], a Dutch sociologist, in 116.000 employees of IBM from 40 countries. For compatibility reasons, only the sales and service employees of IBM were considered. Hofstede identified four basic dimensions of the differences between cultures: namely the power – distance (concerned with how far the culture encourages superiors to exercise power), the uncertainty – avoidance (concerned with the degree to which the culture encourages risk – taking), the individualism – collectivism (whether identity is based on the individual or group level) and the masculinity – femininity (the differentiation between cultures on gender stereotypes).

The results of Hofstede produced considerable differences between (groups of) nations with countries ranging between high and low level of the above dimensions. Therefore, since a culture’s work-related values are so distinctive and different, it might be expected that their processes and behaviour should be distinctive too. The inferred argument is that we should not expect the same conceptions and prescriptions about management, that is same techniques to be appropriate in all these cultural areas. On the contrary, management needs to be culture-specific, since each group would have its own implicit model of organizational functioning. In the consideration of organizing and managing, Hofstede suggests the prior determination to two fundamental questions:

- Who has the power to decide what?
- What rules or procedures will be allowed to attain the desired end?

The dimension of power-distance influences the answer to the first question and the uncertainty-avoidance to the second.

So, in high power-distance cultures such as Taiwan or Mexico, employees are frequently afraid to express disagreement, and taking of decisions is entirely up to the managers while in low power-distance countries, such as Germany and Switzerland, employees are expected to be consulted before decisions are made.

In the same fashion, in strong uncertainty – avoidance cultures, such as Greece and Portugal, people feel threatened by uncertain situations, and experience greater anxiety and stress under these circumstances, trying to counter it by hard work and intolerance of deviancy. In weak uncertainty – avoidance countries, such as Denmark and UK, there is less need for rules and people take a very pragmatic view of keeping or changing the existing rules.

Above cultural characteristics strongly influence both the decision-making process, as well as the implementation process of organizational structural changes. There are also other elements that might heavily influence techniques, such as BPR, as individualist cultures such the USA place emphasis in the individual initiative and achievement, while collectivist cultures, such as France, are characterized by much tighter social frameworks, where people are members of extended families and the emphasis is on belonging and the aim is to be a good member.

However, we have to note that what the scales of Hofstede depict, is description of national common values of the central core of the culture. These common values come about through the socialization of the people who are conditioned by similar life experiences and similar education. Recently, and as more and more overseas students come to join the US and UK educational institutions, as well as due to globalization forces, Anglo-Saxon techniques are diffused across countries, and their knowledge and mentalities are being widely exported. Furthermore, when students, once graduated, return in their home countries, they have many possibilities to become a member of the local elite that will be able to impose their own practices on the (especially less developed) host environment. Of course, changes in culture are much easier in individual or group level than are in national level, as the results of socialization and mental conditioning are exposed from birth.

Clarke and Newman locate the phenomenon of 'shifting fads and fashions' regarding radical change in the context of deep-rooted economic problems of US economy, and place it in the start of long drawn out crisis of Anglo-Saxon capitalism and its competitive failure in the early faces of industrializing Pacific Rim [Clarke and Newman, 17]. The born-again manager is supposed to rescue the situation brought about by the old corporate mentality of the 'playing safe' organization man, as he is being offered a range of positive identification, such as 'problem solver', 'radical thinker', frustrated 'change agent' etc. We have to note that USA belong to the Anglo-Saxon group of Hofstede (along with UK, Canada, Ireland, Australia etc.) with low uncertainty – avoidance (favour risk-taking), low individualism – collectivism (focus is on personal level) and high masculinity – femininity (performance is what counts, as big and fast are beautiful).

## **Conclusion**

Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) has had a significant impact over the last decade as a business philosophy, yet it is a term that has been abused as much as it has been used. All arguments quoted in this paper do not aim to render BPR as a useless technique. On the contrary, there are some valuable core concepts in BPR, but there could be considered as a separate part from its often evangelical promotion. Such concepts are, its requirement to think about an organization in terms of its business processes, and the satisfaction of customers as the ultimate goal of the organization. Adopting a process-orientation approach should force an organization to concentrate on those processes that deliver maximum value to customers in minimum cost.

Definitely, apart from the valuable core concepts, BPR presents also major weaknesses and its application is not always successful. It is definitely, not a universal panacea, as is often presented, as we have to examine its applicability on a case-by-case basis. Indeed, some organizations may not need BPR, the management is not always capable to undertake it on full commitment basis, and BPR may not suit to the corporate (and national) culture and governance of European or Asian firms. Most of the companies that have adopt it are American ones, probably reflecting the chasm between Anglo-Saxon, European and Japanese companies in terms of culture, separation of ownership/management, long-term/short term perspective and way of financing.

The above reasons could much result to the quotations that fifty to seventy per cent of re-engineering projects fail to achieve the dramatic results intended. It can be surmised that a great part of these failures is due to the fact that BPR was an inappropriate approach for these

organizations in the first place. Also, the level of managerial capability and the willingness to proceed to incisions could play a great part in this failure.

For stagnated companies, BPR is definitely an option to move ahead. It can really help firms that are at the brink of disaster, as it creates a strong shock to the whole organization. But, in any case, we should emphasize that potential decision and failure to implement a BPR approach could prove extremely dangerous to the very viability of the organization. Bashein has argued that “reengineering is a high risk, high reward endeavour”.

However, it is not applicable for all companies and not applicable for all cultural and societal contexts. We should not forget the human and psychological parameter of the subject, as no such project is likely to succeed without the employees acceptance of it. And we should not forget that there is no one best way to organize a business; and BPR does not constitute an exception. The most successful systems of organization differ markedly from one kind of business to another.

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