

Information Overload

Issue 59, July 2007

Welcome:

Welcome to the July edition of Information Overload. Change is an inevitable but important part of life, especially our professional ones. It is important to note that if you are not willing to change, then you'll be left behind by those people who are! When I first started on my professional journey, computers belonged to the realms of the tech geeks, the first library I worked in used the Brown issue system. By the way it had several million books and other items for loan and thousands of staff and students. So we were extremely good at filing !!

But as the computer world seeped into every day life, we introduced one of the first relational databases, with barcodes so we could issue books to borrowers. It's hard to believe that we were at the forefront of technological change, but we were and it was exciting. No longer were we going to have to rely on microfiche to check our stock. We had access to an entire world of libraries and information resources, and we couldn't wait to see what a difference it would make to the way our working lives turned out.

Today of course, computers are in virtually every home. In fact, some homes have more computers than people. Every computer made today has more processing power than the first mainframe computers, and certainly more power than the first rockets that were launched into space. We expect the software giants to introduce new products and enhance old ones. We get annoyed when the systems fail or the power goes out. We are connected 24/7 through the Internet, telephones – mobile and landline, pagers and the electronic mail system. We can chat to people across the world (if you have the time) through the new social interaction network sites that are springing up all over what is being termed Web2.0.

But the difference between then and now, is the speed in which change occurs. We had the luxury of being able to learn and understand, and integrate the old ways of working with the new ways that had opened up to us. Today, we have to be willing to embrace change, and change quickly otherwise we will be unable to work effectively. Which makes me wonder why organisations are still trying to ignore the fact that the people who are working for them are creating records that cannot be captured in the antiquated systems being used. Or are they hoping they never have to account for these "records" in a court of law, or to justify a decision that was made.

The July edition looks at two aspects of working in today's computer driven environment. Change management and continuing professional development. If you want to ensure that your employees and colleagues have the technical expertise to handle the ever-changing media then it is important to ensure that there is money in the budget for training.

We would like to thank you in advance for forwarding this edition onto friends, colleagues and other interested readers. Please note that all back issues of this edition, as well as our registrant resources edition can be read and/or downloaded from our web site – <http://www.iea.com.au/web/Publications> should any of the topics be of interest and use.

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In this Issue we will be looking at:

- What is business process re-engineering when it's at home?
- But isn't business process re-engineering just workflow by another name?
- Factoring in the people factor;
- Everything changes, so what do we do now?
- A Thought to ponder

What is Business Process Re-engineering when it's at home?

And what does it have to do with change management?

Well like all management initiatives, this one has been around for a number of years and is usually associated with – nothing is working, lets change everyone and everything. And it usually involves a serious amount of head cutting.

Which is all very well if these people have been instrumental in slowing the business down. But I would argue that sometimes it's not the person's fault. There are other mitigating factors that need to be taken into account.

Before we move on to these other factors, there are some other criticisms brought forward against the Business Process Re-engineering concept which includes:

- A lack of management support and understanding.
- A lack of money to fulfil the terms of reference.
- Exaggerated expectations.
- Implementation of generic so-called best practice processes that do not fit your organisations specific needs. Every organisation will have it's own way of doing things, even running the same system as another organisation does not mean that the processes will be the same. And the variables are many – but the most variable component is the people.
- If management has not expressed the benefits in a way that the workers will not feel threatened, then the chance of it being accepted by these people is unlikely.
- Thinking that technology will solve all your problems. Technology is a tool, that may help, but in most cases, people still have to operate it.
- Poor project management that sees, Business Process Re-engineering as a one-off project, when in effect treating it in this way, means it is not aligned to the organisations long-term strategies or business plan. A case of – well that didn't work, let's try something new...

But isn't Business Process Re-engineering just "workflow" by another name?

In simple terms, workflow refers to the processing of something from beginning to end in a predictable and repeatable manner. For example: Factories rely on workflow to ensure the smooth flow of finished goods. Certain bits have to be added at certain times otherwise the "thing" may not work properly at the end, or even fit together by the time the item reaches the last stage of the process.

In the office environment, however, it's not quite as obvious if the "item" doesn't fit together at the end, or get to the end in the most predictable and systematic manner. The

workflow may move work on systematically, and predictably - but what may in fact happen is that the work may not actually be, being done in the most efficient way possible. For example, each department involved in the processing of the item, may repeat steps "for their record". Or there are certain steps in the process that may not be needed at all.

It is important therefore to consider understanding what you do and how you do it. There may be some steps that can be eliminated; alternatively, steps may need to be added to the process in order to make the process more streamlined, which is where business processing re-engineering comes into its own.

Factoring in the people factor:

Business process re-engineering as I understand it, is a simple case of finding out what you currently do and determining what works and what doesn't. Then doing more of the what does, and less of the what doesn't. It is easy to say, well we'll do more of a) and less of b) – but what happens when b) is the one that is inhabited by people rather than machinery? Business process reengineering, TQM, Change Management or whatever the next round of buzz words happen to be – has always been associated with job cuts and redundancies, which is why most people happen to be a little wary of the things that may mean they have to learn new processes, practices and systems, or worse still have to learn those things in another organisation.

It's easy to say, but we're only looking at the processes not the people. Well you can do that, but that's only half the problem. Yes the work gets done, eventually, the steps are in place, but there is one major problem. That problem is "George" he's a nice bloke, and will do anything and everything but what he's really supposed to be doing, so you try and avoid putting anything onto his desk, because you know that it will take an age to come out the other side, and when it does, it's only half completed. As you know, most organisations have one "George" working for them. Business process re-engineering would take a good look at the systems and the processes, but it also has to ask the question – are the right people doing the work? Or do they need additional training, skills and /or abilities? Which would make "George" a little anxious. He's been doing the same job for the last couple of dozen years. He avoids using the computer because he's never had any training on it. He hasn't got a clue how to use the records management system because the words being used by the people are pure Sanskrit to him. His colleagues, the ones who "get it" are busy classifying and indexing using the BCS. Making sure the R&D is assigned to the right folder, and someone keeps talking about how TRIM everything is? As far as George is concerned, everyone looks just as big as they ever did, and puts all the documents in the one place on the computer, so he knows where to find them again when he needs to.

You see the problem isn't really George, it's the fact that no-one has taken the time to explain the benefits to him. He grew up in a time and place, where you had a job for life, and you did it to the best of your ability. Then the youngsters come in, with their fancy bits of paper, they seem to be getting the bigger pay rises and the swankier offices. Although George doesn't say so, he begins to resent these intrusions into his working life. And everyone begins to mutter about dead wood, and George feels that it is only a short time before he's asked to leave. So he starts to worry – his manner begins to get surly, he stops dressing as well as he used to and wanders down to the local at lunch time to block out some of the pain and the injustice of it all.

Whilst Business Process Re-engineering may identify that George is the one holding the flow of work back, what Business Process Re-engineering has failed to take into consideration is

that the powers that be, have failed to train George in the appropriate manner in the appropriate systems. There cannot be a one size fits all strategy, as you and I know, we all learn at different rates and in different ways. George was the person who fell through the cracks.

Everything changes, so what do we do now?

Like all things, everyone wants to know "What's in it for me?" If you eliminate most of the tasks that I currently do, are you going to find me something else, or do I need to start looking for another job?

If you look at it from an employers perspective, they really don't mind who they have doing the work, so long as the work gets done. Employer loyalty is rare, and certainly never at the expense of the bottom line. The trick is to stay one step ahead of your competition, and believe me when I say that your competition is not another organisation who does what you do, but the people who work with you.

When it comes to business process re-engineering and managing the change process, an employer will need to look at everything and everyone. That includes the kind of person you are. At this point we are not talking about whether or not you do your current job extremely well, but it helps if you do. An employer will want to see how YOU have progressed throughout your time with their organisation. Have you been at the forefront of the ideas, or are you one of the faceless crowd like George, who go in, do their job, and go home again?

If you've done the same job in the same way for 20 years, you don't have 20 years worth of experience, you have one year's worth of experience, repeated 20 times.

The employer will also look at the courses you have taken and factor those into the equation of the positions on offer. Do you have the right mix of skills needed to continue working with the organisation or are you missing some key areas?

Do you turn up for work looking like something the cat has dragged in? Why should what you look like be a factor in whether or not you survive the head cutting? Well in most cases, you will be given a chance to re-apply for your own job. Would you turn up for the interview wearing a pair of creased pants, and a shirt that had coffee stains down the front, reeking of cigarettes and alcohol? Or would you make a bit of an effort?

Well consider what happens if your HR people had wandered around for a few days beforehand, trying to make some decisions about who to ask to leave? They don't want to suffer the re-interview process if they can help it, and with the Work choices legislation these days, you don't have to. Well consider that the image that you portray on a day-to-day basis is the one that most people take the most notice of. The clothes that you wear to work reflect the attitude that you have towards yourself, your work colleagues and your employer. Of course you could be the best-dressed person on the block and be hopeless at what you do, but I'm sure you appreciate what I'm getting at.

Looking at it from the employee's perspective, you know that BPR is on the cards, after all the mutterings have been growing ever louder. So what do you do?

If you take your profession seriously, you will need to factor in some form of personal and professional development, preferably before the head cutting starts, but is essential if you want to stay on top of the many changes that occur throughout our industries. As we have mentioned, the changes to the way that we work today compared to how we used to work a few years ago has changed tremendously, especially when it comes to technology. We rarely use floppy discs to back up anything. If we use anything, we tend to use CD and DVD, simply because the files are too big to go onto the floppies these days.

We put things on our thumbdrives and external hard drives, or in some cases, keep everything online. Why worry about server/ computer crashes when you can offload the problem to the many online storage vendors out there. With the case of photographs – you can store them on services such as Flickr, Facebook, Yahoo photos, Shutterfly and a whole host of other providers. To people like George, they may feel like they have gone to sleep on one world, and woken up on another. Change can be frightening to these kinds of people, and it's getting worse.

So professional development is essential if you want to survive the BPR phase. But employers need to remember that it is not just up to the employee to determine what courses and training they do, BPR should be part of the organisations long term strategic focus, only then will you be able to determine if training has been overlooked in the past, and what then can be done about it.

As for George, well with the right kind of support, even George can make a difference to the way the organisation is run. Show people the benefits, and give them the support they need and you'd be amazed at the difference.

A Thought to Ponder:

"Never again clutter your days with so many menial and unimportant things that you have no time to accept a real challenge when it comes along. This applies to play as well as work. A day merely survived is no cause for celebration. You are not here to fritter away your precious hours when you have the ability to accomplish so much by making a slight change in your routine. No more busy work. No more hiding from success. Leave time, leave space to grow. Now. Now! Not tomorrow."

Og Mandino (1923 – 1996)

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