

Book review of “Re-engineering at Work” by M. Loh, published by Gower Publishing Ltd, Aldershot in 1995 (ISBN 0 566 07642 X)

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This book deals with re-engineering, or as it is more commonly known, business process re-engineering (BPR) - a management topic which is currently highly fashionable. According to the book's dustjacket the author, Dr Michael Loh, has extensive experience as an organizational consultant, and is currently employed as Regional Organization Development Manager in the Singapore office of a multinational insurance company. To guide his readers, the author gives the following definition of re-engineering: 'a *multidisciplinary* approach to *implementing fundamental change* in the way work is performed *across the organization* with the goal of *dramatically improving* performance and stakeholder *value*' (pp.xiii-xiv). The book is mainly concerned with the 'human element' in BPR. Its ten chapters are organized around a simple four-stage framework. Chapter 1 explains Step 1: 'Establishing the Change Imperative'; Chapters 2-6 cover Step Two: 'Creating Vision and Targets'; Chapters 7-9 cover Step Three: 'Redesigning, Building and Implementing'; and Chapter 10 discusses Step Four: 'Sustaining Long-Term Results'. For each chapter the author provides Recommended Reading, in the form of a list of relevant books with brief comments on their contents. The book concludes with an Index, List of Personnel with Affiliations, and Company List. The actual amount of text in the book is smaller than is suggested by its 186 pages (including Title, Contents and Preface) because of the limited number of words per page.

Widespread interest in BPR is generally considered to have been sparked off in 1990 through articles by Hammer in the Harvard Business Review, and by Davenport and Short in the Sloan Management Review. These articles were quickly followed by books – the best-known ones written by Hammer and Champy (1993). Davenport (1993) and Harrington (1991). Hammer and Champy's work stresses the radical nature of the organizational change involved in BPR and the importance of the human element in this change, and is quoted extensively in the present book. Davenport's work emphasizes the role played by Information Technology (IT) in BPR, but the present author neither mentions Davenport nor discusses IT issues at any length – IT is not even mentioned in the index! Similarly, Harrington's work, which deals with a more gradual process of change (process improvement rather than re-engineering), is ignored. These 'early' articles and books appeared, each in their own way, to provide good descriptions of the 'philosophy' of BPR, but many readers felt that they did not contain enough guidance on how to manage BPR projects in practice. Since there is growing empirical evidence that many – if not most - BPR projects fail to yield anything like the benefits hoped for, an increasing number of books is being published which claim to offer solid practical advice on how to implement BPR successfully. The present book is one of these.

Unfortunately, the book has major flaws. Because of its focus on a rather narrow range of human resource issues, other organizational aspects of BPR are largely disregarded. In particular, important changes in organizational structure following on from BPR get a bare mention at best. In Chapter 9, two of the 'recurring themes in reengineered organisations' are given as: 'Work units change, from functional departments to process teams' (Theme 8); and 'Organisational structures change, from hierarchical to flat' (Theme 16). However, the author does not support such statements by analysing the potential contingencies involved. Similarly, apart from stressing the need for 'organisational learning', the author does not explain how one should manage the considerable risks of failure inherent in a BPR project which imposes procedures and routines that are largely untried and untested in the particular organization at issue. Despite the publisher's claim that the book is 'eminently practical', only seven pages (making up the whole of Chapter 9) are devoted to giving practical advice on redesigning work processes, whereas, for instance, double that number of pages is used to discuss various aspects of using consultants - obviously a subject close to the author's heart. Moreover, some of the advice proffered –

such as: 'You don't need to know much about the current process' (Thought 8) - is dubious at best. Acting on such advice, one is likely to end up with a redesigned process suffering from defects that are very similar to the ones in the original process.

Although only one of the chapters is sub-headed 'the touchy feely stuff', the whole book is unfortunately full of it. The pages are peppered with stories about various well-known companies. But anecdotal evidence is the only form of evidence that the author offers; and in so doing he adopts a rather jokey style which some readers may find off-putting. The present book does not really say anything worthwhile about reengineering that cannot be found in the book by Hammer and Champy. If readers need more practical advice on the successful implementation of BPR projects, then they should look elsewhere.

REFERENCES

- M. Hammer and J. Champy, *Reengineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution* (London: Nicholas Brealy Publishing, 1993)
- T.H. Davenport, *Process Innovation: Reengineering Work through Information Technology* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1993)
- H.J. Harrington, *Business Process Improvement* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991)