Pergamon

S0268–4012(96)00040–0

*International Journal of Information Management*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 21–33, 1997
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0268-4012/96 $17.00 + 0.00

# Business Process Re-engineering—A Discredited Vocabulary?

T R BELMIRO, P D GARDINER AND J E L SIMMONS

**Business process re-engineering (BPR) literature has demonstrated over the past 5 years how significant is the potential of BPR in keeping businesses competitive. However, a tremendous variation in the vocabulary used in the literature has blurred the meaning of re-engineering and a high level of misconception, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation has been identified during an investigation at three British and three Brazilian companies. Although, the spoken languages in the two countries are completely distinct, the root of the problems concerning BPR are exactly the same. Directors, managers, workers, and the authors of BPR literature all seem to be working with completely different mind sets. The evidence reported in this paper suggests that the credibility of BPR as a management change tool is becoming weaker, and if no urgent action is taken to unify vocabulary and definition, then BPR is predestined to become another has-been theory in the history of management. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd**

T.R. Belmiro and J.E.L. Simmons are with the Department of Mechanical and Chemical Engineering, and P.D. Gardiner is with the Department of Business Organisation, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, UK. Email: T.R.BELMIRO@HW.AC.UK.

## Introduction

The old principles of manufacturing, for example Taylorism and Fordism, are coming under increasing strain from new communication technologies and new methods of management. Society readily embraces developments in information technology and this fuels increasing customer expectations for better service. As one company director interviewed for the research to be described in this paper stated:

> We are transforming our business, because society [has changed]. It is our work force, and our customers who are driving us now.

Typically, organisations have experimented with a number of management tools, often implementing the next new idea without first completely absorbing and understanding the previous one. This process causes confusion to arise concerning the interpretation of the growing number of concepts and jargon rich vocabulary that now imbues management literature.

In the 1990s a new theory, business process re-engineering (BPR) emerged and has become very fashionable. Many companies hoped BPR would meet their competitive needs without the uncertainties of previous management theories. BPR carries with it a new set of words, propositions, and concepts.[1]

The purpose of this paper is to bring to light from the case studies

[1]Hammer, M. and Champy, J., *Re-engineering the Corporation: A Manifesto for Business Revolution*. Nicholas Brealey, London, 1993; Davenport, T. H. and Short, J. E., The new industrial engineering: information technology and business process redesign. *Sloan Management Review*, 1990, Summer, 11–27.

investigated, in the UK and Brazil, three concerns about the application of BPR. Firstly, the lack of clarity concerning what constitutes BPR as opposed to less radical organisational changes. Some company leaders questioned in this research gave almost any recent change as an example of BPR.

Secondly, the evidence suggests that there is an increasing divergence of understanding of the principles of BPR between company managers. This leads to misconceptions and misunderstandings within and between the companies. In a series of interviews it was found that concepts and vocabulary used by employees to describe BPR are not common to each other, not even among the designated BPR team members from the same company.

Finally, it is posited that a significant portion of responsibility can be assigned to the literature for generating some of the misconceptions and misinterpretations that now exist among industrial practitioners.

The framework of this paper is supported by six case studies based on large manufacturing companies, three in the UK and three in Brazil. In each company the interviews were held in person, usually beginning with the respondent of a initial postal questionnaire, or someone delegated by him or her. A selection of other employees were then named for further interviews. The general structure of all the interviews was the same, to assist making a comparison between the beliefs and assumptions of those interviewed. As a result the interviews provided a measure of how well employees were tuned in to the company's vision for BPR. It was paramount in the research to maintain the integrity of the interviewees' words, therefore the meetings were tape recorded on audio cassette and a full transcription took place at a later date.

In reporting the data for the purposes of this paper, each company is tackled separately in order to highlight the differences in understanding that exist even within the same organisation. A short summary is provided after each company to aid clarity. An integrated discussion and conclusion follow the company analyses.

## First UK company (UK1)

The first research interview was held at a medium-sized traditional, and well-established British engineer-to-order manufacturing company. According to the managing director, at the time of the interview the company was five months into a re-engineering programme in collaboration with a group of manufacturing consultants. The managing director declared that although the company was in a good financial position, it had decided to embark on such an ambitious programme from a desire to increase their global market share. The fundamental requirement to improve productivity, according to this manager, is through major changes in culture and attitude within the company, which he defined as 'business redesign'.

The consultants had already spent many hours trying to understand the current status of this company's attitudes, values, and culture. In so doing, a long and complex diagram ($3 \times 8$ m$^2$) had been prepared, based on the contributions of those in charge of each specific function. Every effort was made to make sure that no process or sub-process was missing. This type of initial exercise is mentioned by authors like Hammer and Champy[2] and Harrington,[3] who state that to start a re-engineering process it is imperative to understand the culture of a

[2]Hammer and Champy, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1.
[3]Harrington, H. J., *Business Process Improvement—The Breakthrough Strategy for Total Quality, Productivity, and Competitiveness*. McGraw-Hill, New York, USA, 1991.

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