Chapter 17

Business Process Reengineering Is Not Just for Businesses But Is Also for Governments: Lessons from Singapore’s Reengineering Experience

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Business Process Reengineering (BPR) has been hailed as a cure for many of the woes in today’s organizations. Many organizations have embarked on BPR but the results have been mixed. Failure is not uncommon but this does not appear to have affected the BPR drive to achieve dramatic improvements in organizational performance. The pragmatic goal-driven approaches adopted by corporations and other businesses position them advantageously in their BPR pursuits. But what about public bodies with their bureaucratic baggage? Is BPR relevant to them? If relevant, is it feasible in the public sector, particularly the public sector of developing nations which tend to have bigger baggage? This chapter draws on the experience of Singapore to suggest strategies for reengineering practice in the public sector of developing countries and other nations.

INTRODUCTION

That “change” is the only thing which does not change is a universal truth and organizations are no exception in spite of their inertia propensities. These changes in organizations tend to be either incremental ones or temporary “fixes” which become permanent in many cases ultimately. In numerous cases, the outcome of this approach is an organization which is ineffectively organized to cope with the demands of today’s highly dynamic environment. This state of affairs is particularly evident in the public sectors of many countries, and more so in developing countries (Bartel and Harrison, 1999; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Libecap, 1992; McGill, 1999; Wescott, 1999).

People across the globe generally view the public sector as being inefficient in its deliveries (delayed and poor quality service) and ineffective in many of its activities (i.e. efforts do not reach the target group or do not produce the desired results). If a private corporation had had such characteristics, it would have ceased to exist. Public organizations have not been faced with the kinds of competitive pressures which private companies face. However, times are changing and public bodies worldwide are increasingly under pressure from within and without to deliver quality governance and public service. Media portrays a 21st century where governments will need to operate like businesses in serving their people and interacting with other governments and organizations. An inefficient government service would not only adversely affect the affairs of state and a country’s position in the world but could also be a drag on its private sector which is increasingly being forced to play in a global field. Developing countries, in particular, need to take heed of this fact in their pursuit of higher level development and greater significance in a global economy.

What can be done to rectify such a situation in the public sector? Osborne and Gaebler (1992) call for “reinventing” it. How can it be reinvented? This paper contends that business process reengineering (BPR) offers an answer. It uses evidence from the BPR literature and data on Singapore’s reengineering experience to suggest a reengineering approach for governments. The suggestion is particularly targeted at the public sector of developing nations.

Business Process Reengineering and its Relevance to the Public Sector

BPR has been hailed by IT management gurus such as Davenport (1993) and Hammer and Champy (1993) as a cure for many of the woes in today’s organizations. Numerous organizations have embarked on BPR but the results have been mixed. Failure is not uncommon but this does not appear to have affected the BPR drive to achieve dramatic improvements in organizational perfor-
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