

**Henrikki Tikkanen • Ph.D.(Econ.&Bus.Adm.)**  
ASSOC. PROF. OF MARKETING • UNIVERSITY OF OULU

## **The Process Movement.A Critical Review**

The recently (re)popularized process movement has its more or less evident progenitors in the quality movement and in the time-based movement. Some recent management philosophies, such as lean management and activity-based management, can also be linked to the processual approach to business. Altogether, an emphasis on horizontal processes that cut across traditional organizational functions could be argued to be common to all of these approaches. Compared with traditional post-war conceptualizations, processual approaches represent fundamentally different perspectives on organizations and strategy. Nowadays, managers are gradually beginning to perceive their organizations as portfolios of dynamic processes rather than static, vertically driven hierarchies. In this article, the so-called process movement was explicated through the concepts of the business process and business process reengineering, and that of the process organization.

Contemporary discussion on business processes, reengineering efforts and the process organization is still at quite a premature stage. The concepts clearly need to be developed and refined; new approaches and methodological perspectives are needed in order to make the existing concepts and theory more applicable in practice. Much more empirical evidence is also needed of how BPR projects are realized in different organizational and business contexts.

The bulk of literature related to the process movement seems to totally ignore the recent, gradual shift in our understanding of the nature of social life. It concerns the constructionist recognition that social systems such as organizations are arbitrary and man-made, and result from the actions of those who participate in them, not from some immutable, mechanistic natural laws. Emergent postmodern approaches, e.g. in organization theory, have tried to deal with that kind of recognition. Recent studies indicate that the basic ideas (e.g. BPR is radical, top-down directed etc.) presented in seminal BPR literature appear to be far too simplified and straightforward to function in reality. In real-life BPR projects, the estimate of a 50-70% failure rate for radical, breakthrough projects has proven to be too modest. The concept of BPR is increasingly being criticized due to reports of extremely high failure rates, and cases where companies are using BPR as a disguise for radical downsizing and layoffs.

The process movement is clearly in need of a fundamentally new approach or approaches. Unless alternative, more versatile approaches are created, the entire process idea, together with BPR, might be labeled as a passing fashion, an outdated buzz word. In my opinion, the emerging new approach, built on the viable basic ideas of the process movement, is most likely to be qualitative and more contextually oriented than traditional approaches. More attention is likely to be paid to the interorganizational context of the focal organization, in both business and social terms. Strategic considerations are also likely to be emphasized much more than in the previous literature.