Lost Lessons of Business Reengineering #3: *The Worker's Role*
Bob Morison – September 2012

A reengineered process consumes less labor, but all of the jobs associated with it should be more responsible, more interesting, more meaningful, and more engaging.

Believe it or not, that was one of the early tenets of business reengineering, one of the early litmus tests of reengineering done well. Unfortunately, it's also the tenet that was lost earliest and most thoroughly as reengineering came to be synonymous with process efficiency and cost reduction. The process performer was too often ignored.

Here's a cautionary tale. One of the first examples of dramatic process redesign I studied was a company revamping its call center operations and customer support system. Because the new system was making so much more information instantly available, management thought it could script interactions with customers more completely, lower the skill and experience levels required of customer representatives, and significantly reduce staffing and training expense. The attempt backfired. The company didn't account for the full variety of calls, couldn't script the complex ones, and failed to anticipate that when customers get more information, they ask more follow-up questions, thus lengthening and complicating calls. The first new group of less experienced reps was overwhelmed and needed extra training.

The company quickly regrouped, experimented, and reimplemented. It could, indeed, provide better service with fewer call center staff – but only by hiring *more capable people* and giving them more freedom in interacting with customers. The most efficient, effective, and economical approach was to combine strong systems with strong people, to use systems not to control staff but to bring out what they could do. The company enlisted the highest performing reps in revamping the system interface and unlocking the process flow. In the end, the reps were both well scripted and empowered with unprecedented authority to address customer inquires and issues. The whole service process was smartened up, not dummied down.

Reengineered processes require less labor because they are thoroughly and effectively automated. The work left to people should center on what people can do best – work involving attention, communication, decision, experience. With the mechanical parts of the process handled by systems, the process should demand more skill, intelligence, and contribution from the worker. The goal of reengineering was not to automate people out of work, but to devise better combinations of human and systems capability – to create better work.

You can imagine the dismay of the pioneers of reengineering when the movement took on a life of its own and the term was co-opted to put a gloss on arbitrary (and often ill-conceived) downsizing and outsourcing. Those were the opposite of

reengineering – because they focused on cost alone, and because they left the remaining workers stretched to cover for their missing colleagues. More stressful work, not more meaningful.

Those developments dampened the idealism of the reengineering endeavor. And the pioneers – Jim Champy, Mike Hammer, Tom Davenport, and others – were idealistic. We saw reengineering as a way not just to boost process performance, but to create value all around – for customers, employees, business partners, shareholders, and other stakeholders. We wanted to increase efficiency in order to free resources for better use. And we shared both concern and ambition regarding reengineering's impact on the nature and meaning of work.

If we're due a fresh round of reengineering to take advantage of the capabilities of mobility, collaboration, and analytics, we should resurrect that fundamental tenet about workers and work. Why? Because these are challenging times in the workforce world. Unemployment remains relatively high, in part because the technical and communications skills requirements for jobs are increasing. So companies have skilled worker shortages despite the unemployment level. Many are also awakening to the advantages of bringing work back in house, and are redoubling their efforts to attract and retain skilled staff. Unfortunately, for many it's an uphill battle, because downsizing and the unraveling of employer-employee commitment have left employee engagement at all-time lows.

When we're reengineering again, let's pay as much attention to what workers do as to how processes function. Let's make sure that the work that emerges is more interesting, more meaningful, more full of learning. Keep in mind that younger employees expect work and the workplace to be collaborative and mobile, and that collaboration engages the employee on several dimensions. So let's reengineer those technologies into the next generation of business processes. Let's find better combinations of human and technological capability.

If we do, then business reengineering becomes a strategy not only for performance improvement, but also for talent supply and business continuity. Ah, there I go getting idealistic again. . . . Hope you've enjoyed this series.