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Organization 2004; 11; 81

DOI: 10.1177/1350508404039659

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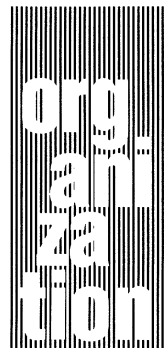
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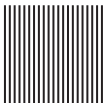


Project Work: The Legacy of Bureaucratic Control in the Post- Bureaucratic Organization

Damian E. Hodgson

Manchester School of Management, UMIST, UK

Abstract. *Much of the interest in 'post-bureaucracy' in both managerialist and critical circles resides in its perceived potential to break with the traditions of bureaucratic, hierarchical control in work organizations. In response to the challenges of the post-bureaucratic form, project management has been put forward by many as a 'tried-and-tested' package of techniques able to cope with discontinuous work, expert labour and continuous and unpredictable change while delivering the levels of reliability and control of the traditional bureaucracy. In this article I explore some of the contradictions and tensions within a department where such a 'hybrid' mode of control is implemented, embodying both bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic logics. In particular, I focus upon the discursive tactics employed to sell 'rebureaucratization' as 'debureaucratization', and the complex employee responses to this initiative. I argue that the tensions evident here cast significant doubt on the feasibility of a seamless integration of bureaucracy and the post-bureaucratic. **Key words.** control; discourse; post-bureaucracy; project management; resistance*



The rhetoric of the 'post-bureaucratic' organization (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994) has recently flourished, adapting themes from early discussions of 'flexibility' and 'flexible specialization', and encompassing the numerous recent debates over 'enterprise culture', the 'network organization', the 'virtual organization' and the 'knowledge economy'. The 'fact' that there has been a fundamental transformation in the nature



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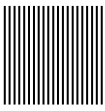
of work in developed economies over the last two decades is now all but taken for granted in popular and political discourse. For aficionados of the 'New Economy', this constitutes no less than a paradigm shift in the nature of 21st-century organizations.

At the same time, the contradictions implicit in this shift away from traditional bureaucracy to post-modern or post-bureaucratic forms of organization are rarely acknowledged in such discourse. In particular, the difficulty in co-ordinating and controlling the activities of the highly-skilled 'knowledge workers' (Blackler, 1995) involved in complex tasks without the existence of a bureaucratic superstructure tends to be seriously underplayed. Instead, such difficulties are seen as progressively overcome with the emergence of a new breed of self-motivating, professional 'portfolio employees' (Handy, 1994) who are not reliant on organizational career structures (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). In practice, a number of techniques are evolving to cope with the management of employees involved with irregular assignments and to apply a structure to complex and discontinuous undertakings. One such technique, imported from the fields of construction and engineering, is the discipline of project management (Lock, 1968; Cleland and King, 1988; Morris, 1994).

The intention of this article is to draw on empirical work to illuminate some of the tensions that exist within management systems whereby project-based staff both are disciplined and discipline themselves while working within 'post-bureaucratic' organizations. Over a nine-month period, an ethnographic study was conducted of a telephone bank in the UK, Buzzbank, focusing on the activities of a project-based team of IT staff working on a variety of assignments related to internal networks and internet technology (Hodgson, 2000, 2002). As senior management attempted to install a formal system of project management as part of what was termed the 'Strategic Plan', the contradictions inherent in the distinct logics of control in operation within the department became conspicuous. The empirical material will be analysed to explore this discursive reconstitution of an organization, exploring the tactics and games employed to legitimize this change and the numerous emergent tensions between the bureaucratic and the 'post-bureaucratic' in project-based working. The key questions to be addressed include: How far can the rhetoric of post-bureaucracy be reconciled with the bureaucratic requirements of project-based work? How do the employees and managers understand and manage the contradictory rationales within which they operate? And, ultimately, what does this tell us about the feasibility of the 'post-bureaucratic' organization?

Visions of Post-Bureaucracy

There persists in contemporary management discourse the strong notion of a rupture in modernist models of organization, in both the academic and managerialist literatures. On the one hand, since the early 1990s it

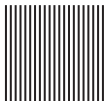


has been argued by writers such as Stewart Clegg, for example, that 'there are forms of emerging organization which bear little or no relation to modernist variations on the theme of bureaucracy' (Parker, 1992: 4). In a similar vein, more mainstream management writers have for some years heralded 'the coming demise of bureaucracy and hierarchy' (Kanter, 1989: 351) and the emergence of a utopian organizational form 'in which everyone takes responsibility for the success of the whole' (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994: 24). The concept of 'post-bureaucracy' may be traced back to a range of related developments over the last two decades, including popular management's 'discovery' of corporate culture in the wake of Peters and Waterman (1982) and the promotion of 'enterprise culture' in the 1980s (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; du Gay, 1994), both promising to sweep away the inefficiencies and dysfunctions of creaking bureaucracies. The forces behind this change are more controversial; Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 620) argue that post-bureaucracy has emerged as 'established bureaucratic controls have been found insufficiently responsive and adaptable to intensifying competitive pressures'. Other writers, such as Grey and Garsten (2001), appear more sceptical of this line, seeing the rise of post-bureaucratic discourse as relying upon the 'fast capitalist story', a contemporary dogma invoking the usual suspects of globalization, competition, new technology and an unprecedented speed of change.

Regardless of these debates, the concept of the post-bureaucratic organization is on the way to achieving the shorthand status of the popular management theme: much cited but typically poorly defined, with nebulous links to other fashionable concepts such as the 'Knowledge Economy', the 'Virtual Organization', the 'Network Organization', the 'Boundaryless Organization', and so on. Where some attempt is made to specify what is meant by this seductive concept, post-bureaucracy is most readily described by what it is not, reversing the stereotypical images of the creaking, paper-driven, inflexible and inefficient bureaucracy; thus Grey and Garsten, for example, refer to post-bureaucracy as a 'trend' encompassing 'a range of organizational changes which have as their espoused aim the erosion or dismantling of bureaucracy' (2001: 230). The most widely-cited definition of the post-bureaucratic organization is provided by Heckscher (1994) who, attempting to establish a Weberian 'ideal type', postulates specific distinctions between the traditional bureaucracy and an emergent post-bureaucratic model (see Table 1).

Clearly, the novelty of several of these themes is open to question; a number of these shifts are common to a whole range of contemporary management theories (see Huczynski, 1993), while others, as Heckscher admits, might be traced back 40 years to the mechanistic/organic model of Burns and Stalker (1961).

However, what I intend to examine in this article is the claim that a shift towards post-bureaucratic modes of organizing has been or will be



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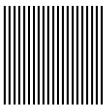
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Table 1. Characteristics of Bureaucratic and Post-Bureaucratic Organisations

Bureaucracy	Post-Bureaucracy
Consensus through Acquiescence to Authority	Consensus through Institutionalized Dialogue
Influence based on Formal Position	Influence through Persuasion/Personal Qualities
Internal Trust Immaterial	High Need for Internal Trust
Emphasis on Rules and Regulations	Emphasis on Organizational Mission
Information Monopolised at Top of Hierarchy	Strategic Information shared in Organization
Focus on Rules for Conduct	Focus on Principles Guiding Action
Fixed (and Clear) Decision Making Processes	Fluid/Flexible Decision Making Processes
Communal Spirit/Friendship Groupings	Network of Specialized Functional Relationships
Hierarchical Appraisal	Open and Visible Peer Review Processes
Definite and Impermeable Boundaries	Open and Permeable Boundaries
Objective Rules to ensure Equity of Treatment	Broad Public Standards of Performance
Expectation of Constancy	Expectation of Change

Source: Heckscher (1994)

accompanied by a corresponding shift in the mode of control exercised over employees in such organizations. Heydebrand, for instance, makes the transformation of control strategies central to his definition of post-bureaucracy as 'a thoroughly intentional, conscious postmodern strategy of increasing the flexibility of social structures and making them amenable to new forms of indirect and internalized control, including cultural and ideological control' (Heydebrand, 1989: 345). There are, however, two distinct schools of thought evident among those writers who take post-bureaucracy seriously. For some, post-bureaucracy is understood as ushering in a new epoch in which the old dichotomy, in labour process terms, of direct control or responsible autonomy (Friedman, 1977) is over-ridden and made obsolete (Willmott, 1993) by a more effective regime of 'ideational', ethico-moral control. Thus for Sewell, for example, the attraction of post-bureaucratic organizing is this transformation, breaking with traditional bureaucratic forms of control: 'The distinguishing feature of post-bureaucratic control is the creation of shared meaning, which obviates the need for the principles of hierarchy and explicitly rule-governed behaviour' (Sewell, 1998: 408). For others, such as Fournier, new strategies of control must work alongside existing bureaucratic frameworks, the result being hybrid modes of control which 'rely on a complex interweaving between bureaucratic logic and the autonomisation of conduct' (1999: 293).



The feasibility of this hybrid form and the tensions implicit within it will be explored through the empirical study below. In particular, the research focuses upon the implementation of project management procedures as a technology of post-bureaucratic control. Project management has been strongly promoted in a variety of sectors as offering management techniques able to cope with the discontinuity, flexibility and fluidity of work roles, the permeability of organizational boundaries, and the constancy of change. Critically, it is argued that this can be achieved without sacrificing the discipline, predictability and control of the traditional 'ideal-type' bureaucracy. Before examining these claims in more detail, I will attempt to provide some context to the rapid rise of project management over the last half-century.

Contemporary Organizations and the Promise of Project Management

The use of project management models and techniques has proliferated since coming to popular attention in the late 1950s on the back of their use in high-profile technical endeavours such as the Manhattan project and the Apollo space programmes (Harrison, 1981; Winch 2000). In these early days, the promise of project management in the US defence and aeronautics industries was seen to be vital to capitalist success in the Cold War (see Gaddis, 1959). Project management's 'distinctive competence' lies in its claim to deliver 'one-off' assignments 'on time, to budget, to specification', relying on careful planning and the firm control of critical variables such as resources, cost, productivity, schedule, risk and quality. More recently, project management has established a firm foothold outside its traditional sectors of heavy industry and engineering and even beyond related areas such as IT and pharmaceuticals; a recent study by White and Fortune (2002) indicates finance, insurance, banking, publishing and health as areas which increasingly rely on project-based working. The linking of project management and change management has increased project management's influence across industries, such that now the largest professional organization in project management includes special interest groups in areas as diverse as healthcare, retail, media, marketing, and hospitality. As a consequence the last decade has been a time of particularly rapid expansion for project management, as issues of change, knowledge management, and constant innovation emerged as central themes in popular management discourse. This popularity is reflected in the explosion of membership of project management professional associations, the Project Management Institute (PMI) in the USA, for example, reporting an increase in membership from 8,817 in 1992 to 60,000 by 2000 and over 90,000 by 2002. Unsurprisingly, this is largely accounted for within the field as evidence of the growing recognition throughout industry of the contemporary significance of project management as a critical success factor in today's post-bureaucratic



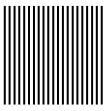
organization. Indeed, since the 1960s it has been loudly proclaimed by proponents of project management that the discipline is vital for economic success given the increasing uncertainty and complexity of the modern world (Cleland and King, 1968; Kerzner, 1995).

Despite this fiercely contemporary rationalization, most project management textbooks rely on Henri Fayol's *Elements of Management* (1916) when defining the specific responsibilities of the project manager—*Planning, Organizing, Commanding, Co-ordinating* and *Controlling*—despite the trenchant critiques of these principles from a number of writers, particularly Mintzberg (1973). Thus, almost 80 years on from Fayol, Morris is able to assert that project management is the same as 'any other kind of management, except that one moves through a pre-determined life cycle. Everything else, at this level, is covered by general management practices—planning, organising, controlling and so on' (1994: 307). Despite the later addition of more fashionable concerns such as 'leadership' and 'entrepreneurship' in recent texts (e.g. Cleland and King, 1988), much of the field remains mired in a 'classical' and technicist model of business administration. Ironically, then, I would argue that what distinguishes project management as of particular relevance to 21st-century organizations is its rediscovery of a very 19th-century pre-occupation with comprehensive planning, linked to a belief in the necessity of tight managerial discipline.

This throwback to modernism makes it all the more surprising that project management has been promoted as an ideal mode of organizing in nascent post-bureaucratic organizations and particularly that it is seen as compatible with an ethic of professional autonomy and self-discipline. Through project management techniques, it is claimed, organizational restructuring into semi-autonomous project or product teams may be effected without sacrificing the overarching system of bureaucratic control which relies upon traditional principles of direct accountability and surveillance. Thus, as Bresnen (1996: 264) argues, project management embodies 'a well-established pattern of discourse that has served to privilege the more commercial and pragmatic aims of improved project co-ordination and control at the expense of traditional powers and autonomy'. To understand how project management achieves this, it is important to look in some more detail at the techniques and procedures which make up project management methodology, before turning to its implementation in practice and its links to neo-bureaucratic restructuring of work.

Project Management and Neo-Bureaucratic Control

As proposed above, the key effect of the application of project management models and techniques is enhanced control over the conduct of employees, based on close surveillance and the limited delegation of discretion to those subjects involved in project work. In particular, the



quantification and detailed planning involved in project management serves to 'enhance the "calculability" of individuals through developing measures of routine predictability and control' (Metcalf, 1997: 309). This calculability and predictability is largely made possible by the establishment of a generic model for the process of project work, commonly described as the project life cycle, or PLC. The PLC is effectively the cornerstone of project management, representing a standardized model of the stages of a project said to represent the 'natural and pervasive order of thought and action' (Cleland and King, 1975: 186). Being 'natural and pervasive', it is remarkable how much effort goes into imposing this structure upon projects; Morris is particularly insistent that 'to achieve the desired project objective one must go through a specific process. There is no exception to this rule. The process is known as the Project Life Cycle' (quoted in Cleland and King, 1988: 19). Importantly, this presentation of the PLC as universal, natural and thus inevitable does much to undermine resistance to the imposition of associated aspects of project management, including the fragmentation and bureaucratic surveillance of project work.

A range of technical procedures, associated with the planning and control cycle, have been developed over the last 50 years and pertain to the progressive stages of the PLC. These procedures relate to the five basic phases typically defined as *conception*, *feasibility*, *implementation*, *operation* and *termination*. Throughout the cycle, from conception through to termination, the emphasis is firmly on technocratic, comprehensive planning and the quantification of intangible aspects such as duration and risk. In addition, the *work breakdown structure* (WBS) provides a representation of the flow of work over the course of a project, thus acting as a framework for the project timescale and a basis for manpower planning and budgeting. Various quantitative techniques such as Gantt charts, the critical path method (CPM) and programme evaluation and review technique (PERT) have been developed so that the WBS may be used for purposes of both control and assessment. Most importantly, though, these tools and techniques are referred to throughout the project as flexible representations of the project plan against which the actual progress of the project and the performance of staff may be judged. Thus the comprehensive planning process behind the WBS sets the framework which is referred to, throughout the PLC, to ensure the strict control of the project in operation, based on quantitative milestones which enable ongoing performance to be readily assessed against set standards. As a consequence of this fragmentation of the project, tasks assigned to project staff may be monitored via traditional bureaucratic means (demanding reports, supervisor inspections, etc.); in this way, the WBS acts as an individualizing technology and frequently undermines the autonomy traditionally exercised by the expert or specialist employee. So, for example, weekly deadlines for teams of project staff may be intensified to daily deadlines or in extreme times



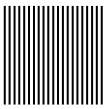
they may be broken down to hourly and even half-hourly deadlines. More recently, a vast range of IT applications such as Microsoft Project have been developed to assist in the monitoring of the progress of projects, automatically requesting and logging status reports from team members and alerting the project manager if these are late or incomplete.

In the first instance, then, project management can be seen as an essentially *bureaucratic* system of control, based on the principles of visibility, predictability and accountability, and operationalized through the adherence to formalized procedure and constant written reporting mechanisms. At the same time, however, project management draws upon the rhetoric of empowerment, autonomy and self-reliance central to post-bureaucratic organizational discourse. In principle, then, project management offers a system which attempts to integrate bureaucratic control and a form of responsible autonomy more in keeping with the interdisciplinary, knowledge-intensive nature of much project work in teams.¹ How, and indeed whether, such an integration is possible between ostensibly contradictory logics of control, is less certain. To explore the interaction between these bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic systems of control, I will now focus on the empirical work conducted within the IT department of a telephone bank operation, Buzzbank.

Methods

The research, which formed part of a wider project (Hodgson, 2000, 2002) examining ongoing changes in the financial services sector, focused upon a telephone bank in northern England which I have referred to under the pseudonym *Buzzbank*. In the late 1980s, Buzzbank had been set up by a major UK bank, which I will call *TN Banking*, and represented one of several success stories in the retail banking sector over this period. Through reduced overheads and the extensive use of new technology in the form of sophisticated marketing techniques and call-centre technology, Buzzbank had expanded rapidly in terms of market share and turnover, developing into a key component of TN Banking's global operations. My interest in particular centred on Buzzbank senior management's identification of project management as the prime 'critical success factor' for the organization; the development of project management expertise throughout the organization was seen as a key priority to maintain performance into the next decade. To an extent, the project teams researched could scarcely be more 'cutting edge', representing highly-trained 'knowledge workers' developing innovative high-technology applications and solutions in a new sector of an enormously profitable industry.

Over a two-year period in the late 1990s, I spent several months interviewing and observing the operations of project teams within the IT department of Buzzbank. Although access was initially agreed at a fairly senior level, subsequent interviews were negotiated and agreed on a one-



to-one basis with the employees involved. Over this time, I conducted semi-structured interviews with employees at all levels of the organization from senior management down, focusing in particular on employees involved in project-based work. Over a dozen extended interviews were conducted within the organization in total, lasting from one to two hours. The interviews tended to be 'semi-structured', in that I outlined in advance a number of general themes I hoped to cover while allowing the interviewee to bring other issues into the discussion and pursuing these as seemed appropriate. All interviews were tape-recorded and were transcribed in full within a week or so of the interview before being analysed. These interviews were supplemented by several two-day periods of non-participant observation where I was able to shadow a number of project teams going about their daily business. In these periods, I was frequently able to build upon the relationships I had made in earlier interviews through daily contact with employees, and both observe and question the day-to-day practices and conduct of these employees in a less formal context than arranged interviews—over coffee, in spare moments, over lunch or over a quick pint after a shift. Both the interviews and the themes explored through observation were informed by a full background search on Buzzbank and TN Banking and their historical evolution, guided where appropriate by contacts within the organization.

'Spare the Rod . . .': The Formalization of Innovation in Buzzbank

During the period of research, the most significant change occurring in Buzzbank was known within the organization by the rather grandiose title of the 'Strategic Plan'. The strategic plan involved a concerted attempt to formalize processes of innovation by building a bureaucratic structure around the current work systems, of which project management was to be the backbone. Over the previous two years, a number of significant appointments had been made, particularly in the IT division, in an attempt to institute aspects of the more reliable, structured approach perceived to exist in the parent company, TN Banking. It was widely perceived that project management procedures had been introduced in order to secure a reliable flow of income from this highly successful offshoot. The first step in this process involved the installation of two senior managers, Angus and Jack, from TN Banking, as head of IT Applications and IT Operations respectively. Both made it very clear that their over-riding remit in moving to Buzzbank from TN Banking was to 'bring a level of discipline' (Angus) and to 'bring an idea of professional structuring' (Jack). This can be seen as part of a company-wide strategy, involving the formal structuring of a number of processes in different departments, even to the extent of prescribing a dress code for Buzzbank employees for the first time. Examples of measures taken within IT to achieve this structuring include the establishment of formal project



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management procedures such as the development of a set of objectives for IT Operations, the establishment of clear reporting protocols and the introduction of a formal checklist to be completed as each project proceeds.

Both arrivals from TN Banking were equally forthright about the fact that in fulfilling their remit, some opposition had been provoked. As Angus complained:

‘(it’s) inevitable you get a reaction to that from people who’ve been here a long time, working in a small-village atmosphere and saying ‘You don’t need discipline . . . you don’t need all this discipline and bureaucracy.’

Interestingly, another senior manager in IT pinpointed the chief executive of Buzzbank as one of the key people unwilling to accept the imposition of a more bureaucratic form of discipline. The essential problem as seen from the point of view of those introducing this formalization was the culture of autonomy and innovation which was apparent in the accounts of several Buzzbank employees. One IT manager, for instance, contrasting TN Banking with Buzzbank, explained;

‘There, you’d be one of many grinding the wheel, whereas here you can forge a path, and people will listen to you.’

In light of the formalization initiatives, such values came to be presented as the natural, deeply-held culture of Buzzbank and particularly of the IT division. There was significant evidence that a culture of risk-taking and autonomy had been strategically promulgated by management over some years, and with significant success. Encouraging, reinforcing and rewarding innovation and creative responses to challenges, within the parameters of the company’s interests, were a key strategic goal in the early ‘pioneer’ days of Buzzbank.

The formalization and increased accountability implied by the strategic plan was justified by the new senior management mainly with reference to the particular size of the firm now, and the stage it had reached in its ‘life-cycle’. Indeed, the rationale given for such a change referred directly to:

‘the growth, and the maturity of the organization . . . it’s certainly the growth of the company, we never anticipated that it was going to grow that quickly last year, and it’s a lot to do with the *maturity* of the company.’

Elsewhere, the logic behind this as perceived by senior management was made more explicit:

‘as the business continues to grow, it becomes more demanding in what it wants to do, and we have to show we’re being equally responsible as to how we meet that requirement, and that has to be within a structure.’

So, in many ways, the articulations of Buzzbank senior management appeared to draw on academic/managerial discourses which associate



the *size* of the organization with a *need for formalization* (e.g. Blau, 1970). The deterministic link between size and bureaucracy was frequently cited by the new management to support their insistence on the strategic plan's vital importance for the survival of the organization.

This justification for the strategic plan was reinforced by the repeated use of the metaphor of a parental relationship to define the relationship between TN Banking and Buzzbank; as one IT manager explained, 'Buzzbank is really a child of TN Banking'. The organization was therefore portrayed by senior management in IT as approaching its 'next stage of evolution'. The immediate benefit of such a metaphor for those members of senior management charged with rebureaucratizing the organization is that it carries a very strong sense of inevitability. As such, it casts opposition to such changes as irrational and futile, standing in the way of natural 'evolution'. Furthermore, the imposition of a level of discipline is then legitimized with recourse to the parental relationship, wherein Buzzbank is categorized as resembling 'most adolescents'. Thus, strikingly, Jack argued:

'The nature of the business is that it's a pretty young business, and *like most adolescents*, they don't like to be told what to do but there has to be some kind of structure around things.'

What should be emphasized is that the effect of such a metaphor depends on how it is deployed. Garsten, for example, cites a very different deployment of the same metaphor in Apple, where she is told 'Apple is still an adolescent, still looking for its shape and form' (1994: 18), with no hint that this necessitates the imposition of some form of discipline. In Buzzbank, by contrast, resistance to these initiatives were therefore described by Angus as 'growing pains'. Resistance could then be categorized as unavoidable in the short term yet ultimately just a phase the organization is going through, without any real validity and fundamentally dysfunctional for the organization as a whole. Nonetheless, resistance was plain.

'The Strategic Plan': Sugaring the Pill

An interesting aspect of the introduction of project management accountability in the IT departments was the elaborate process of redefining and rearticulating existing discourses. The key aim of this process appeared to be to transform existing, deeply-held values hostile to the initiatives into values which were essentially compatible with the strategic plan. So, for example, the previous position within Buzzbank was described by Angus as:

'if you did something wrong, you just said "Oh dear, we got that wrong, let's try something different" and we haven't got the luxury of that.'

For many staff, this freedom to experiment was the very strength of the department. For the new management, however, this situation was a



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thorny problem, to which the introduction of project management discipline was a precise and essential solution:

‘If we capture how we do things right, at least it makes things repeatable, and we can record the improvement required when things don’t go right, which doesn’t happen in a rapidly-expanding, gung-ho environment.’

The importance of language as raised above is very clear here in its use in a constitutive rather than a representative sense, in creating the situation, the problem and therefore the solution. The subtly pejorative definition of Buzzbank (prior to their arrival) as ‘rapidly expanding, gung-ho’ highlights its perceived weaknesses. It is important to note the rhetorical use of these terms for characteristics which could equally be described in positive terms as growing, evolving, adaptable, proactive, flexible, and so on. Represented in these terms, however, such attributes become the source of problems; for example:

‘Two or three years ago, we’d start a project and never have a bloody clue when it would finish.’

Most significantly, a high degree of sensitivity was shown by management in specifying the precise terminology to be used in describing the changes occurring in the Buzzbank IT department. ‘Formalized’ was out of bounds; ‘structured’ was marginally more acceptable. Hence the first definition of the changes offered to me by Jack was:

‘trying to get some structure in place, get some planning in place.’

When later in the interview I referred back to this in different terms, my terminology was instantly corrected, politely but very firmly:

[Q:] ‘So . . . this idea of formalization . . .’

[Jack:] ‘Getting a structure.’

[Q:] ‘Right, yeah, getting a structure . . .’

This aversion to the term ‘formalization’ continued throughout the interview, Jack being careful to correct himself whenever he employed the term:

‘a very formalized—well, not formalized but *formal*—customer–supplier relationship.’

Elsewhere, another IT manager was yet more sensitive to suggestions that this implied in some sense ‘getting structures in place’:

‘I mean, when you say, “structures in place”, I don’t think that necessarily means hierarchical management structures as such, I think it’s more procedures, yeah? . . . I think it’s more like a sort of structuring of work, rather than a structuring of people.’

The new management thus went to some lengths to avoid giving the impression that the new initiatives involved anything like formalization or an increase in bureaucracy. One reason for this aversion may well be



the widespread denigration of such terms in contemporary popular managerial discourse of the Peters and Waterman variety. In the case of Buzzbank, however, management were *particularly* sensitive to accusations of introducing bureaucracy due to their understanding of the IT staff's fierce attachment to values such as flexibility, autonomy, discretion and innovation.

The new senior management therefore described two potential problems resulting from this antipathy to formality and structure. The first was the potential for a serious backlash against the Strategic Plan and project management procedures within the department. To a large extent, this problem was exacerbated by Angus and Jack's origins in TN Banking, as the distinction between bureaucratic TN Banking and flexible, innovative Buzzbank had previously been fostered and exploited by management in pursuit of a unitary, 'pioneer' culture within Buzzbank. The second problem was the danger of losing the organizational benefits of innovation and autonomy in Buzzbank; to quote Jack, the challenge was:

'trying to get that formal structure together, not to become bureaucratic, not to become slow to respond, but to be anticipating.'

Senior management's response to this was inventive, and, I would argue, relatively strategic and purposeful. Through a *rearticulation* of existing discourses, the discourse being introduced by senior management was cast as not only *consistent* with such discourses but, moreover, as crucial to their continuation and further development. This position can be traced through the analysis of a statement by Jack in which he comprehensively enunciated their approach to the situation. Firstly he outlined the danger of resistance (while subtly implying the perception of bureaucracy to be mistaken):

'If we're not careful, people will see bureaucracy—Why do I have to tell so many people I want to make this change? Why do I have to get you to sign this form?'

He then went on to attempt to synthesize the new managerial discourse with his rearticulation of embedded discourses, such that creativity/innovation and restriction/control may be seen as congruent values. Significantly, this was supported by appeal to the ultimate arbiter and *sine qua non* of service industry, the customer:

'The idea is that we want to try and facilitate more change, but we want to do it in a controlled way—so it doesn't affect customer service.'

The changes, in this light, were then referred to as difficult but inevitable, such that the real issue was one of (re)presentation rather than a fundamental clash of discourses:

'but there has to be some kind of structure around things, and we have to be very careful about how we sell that to different parts of the business, and indeed within IT itself.'



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Finally, the way in which both discourses can be integrated was articulated, and articulated in such a way as to present the discourses as complementary, indeed mutually dependent:

'we're not actually slowing down the ability of certain areas to change, so that we're actually enabling change to take place, fast but in a more controlled manner.'

In this way, the rhetoric of the strategic plan assimilates, integrates and rearticulates existing value systems within Buzzbank; to paraphrase Willmott's (1993) Orwellian description of culture management, *Autonomy is Slavery, Bureaucracy is Freedom*. It is worth noting that the attempts made to overcome resistance and transform the embedded discourse were frequently described by senior management as:

'education . . . a continual management of expectations, and communication, basically.'

On the one hand, this may be interpreted as simply a rhetorical device to couch the changes being attempted in unthreatening and positive language. At the same time, however, it reveals the extent to which the focus of this change was the *subjectivity* of individuals. However, this does not imply that such discourses will readily be internalized by employees. Indeed, as shall be discussed below, such initiatives elicited a level of direct and covert resistance which drew on the tradition of innovation, creativity and autonomy in Buzzbank.

'Bollocks, Rhetoric and Jargon': Resisting The Plan

Despite the broad range of relatively sophisticated techniques employed to smooth the way of the strategic plan and other formalization initiatives, evidence of resistance among IT staff ranged from the use of humour by employees to distance themselves from discourses of formalization, to more passionate expressions of discontent and even open revolt. Among senior management, the impression given was that despite initial resistance, the 'message had got through' that formalization did not threaten autonomy and flexibility but actually enabled it. For instance, Angus explained:

'having come through very rapid growth in a small number of years, probably within that there's an appetite for change . . . this discipline has given confidence to that tolerance of change.'

The impression was given by senior management that such an understanding had successfully been spread through lower management and other employees. Thus Angus also claimed:

'There was a perception that by doing this [reorganization] we were becoming less efficient—that's now been dispelled.'

The impression given was of an organizational change which was inevitable, which gave rise to some understandable but irrational resistance,



and which had now been effectively completed, for the good of the organization as a whole.

Elsewhere, however, the impression given was very different. Some of the statements of the project managers and project team members, mainly in direct responses to questions but occasionally in general conversation, appeared to support Angus's optimistic prognosis, describing the strategic plan as 'a good thing'. However, in the time spent by myself in the organization, the tone and target of much of the humour, as well as much stronger reactions, appeared to throw doubt on the extent to which this discourse had permeated among the general employees, particularly within the IT department. Humour was commonplace in the everyday banter both within teams and between teams in the IT division at Buzzbank, and the increasing levels of bureaucratization was the butt of most of the humour, particularly at the lower levels of the hierarchy. The main experience of project management as reported by many Buzzbank employees was one of intensified bureaucratic surveillance; as one team member in Buzzbank complained:

'It's all "Have you done this? Have you done this? Have you done this? Have you got it signed off?" . . .'

Across the project teams, the weight of bureaucratic rules and regulations were the butt of many jokes. In one discussion of project management methodology, my request to look at the manual used within Buzzbank was met with the response:

'I can get you the documentation, if you *really* want . . . if I can carry it!'

Unsurprisingly, there was clear evidence of a range of techniques by which this surveillance was avoided and/or resisted in the everyday practice of team members. To a large extent, however, the bureaucratic demands of project management were perceived by the employees as tied up with the broader management project in progress within the organization, the Strategic Plan.

One of the key examples was the negative reaction to what was seen as the managerial jargon employed in company literature circulated regarding the strategic plan. Typical comments upon receiving these documents were:

'I don't understand any of this—it's not in English, it's in Management!'

'God, I wish I went to Management School—I'd do great here!'

A similar response was provoked by a circular which gave details of the dress code to be introduced on the site, with employees reading out excerpts in pompous, mock-upper class accents:

'Collared shirts are essential, although the top button may be undone on hot summer days.'

'This one's for you, Ian—"Jackets are preferred, although a smart sports coat is acceptable"!'



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On other occasions the response was significantly more passionate. Typically, comments were provoked by the circulation of literature on the strategic plan, and again, excerpts of the document were read out by members of staff, adding ironic comments to underline the gap between the document and their experience of life and work in the department. However, on one occasion, this was followed up by a heated outburst by one member, Dan, throwing the document down and exclaiming to everyone within earshot:

‘It’s all *bollocks*, it really is! It’s nothing but rhetoric, just bollocks—bollocks, rhetoric and jargon!’

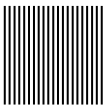
The same employee explained his anger to me later, indicating the behavioural standards and project management procedures which the Strategic Plan stated IT staff were to conform to:

‘If the staff are conscientious, they do all of this stuff *anyway!* If they *aren’t*, then they don’t give a shit and they’re certainly not going to sit around and read the damn thing!’

At other times, the employees appeared to comply with the formal requirements of the new system, in terms of filling in the necessary forms, reporting in at given times, completing the necessary work-logs, and so on. Even here, despite the relative sophistication of senior management’s rearticulation of key discourses, compliance on the part of Buzzbank employees in many cases bore all the hallmarks of instrumental behaviour, accompanied by insubordinate statements and humour ranging from the cynical to the confrontational. At other times, assurances were given to senior management and immediately contravened, fictionalized accounts of project activities were submitted late, or else procedures were observed meticulously to the detriment of deadlines and other constraints. The emergent organizational order was a precarious negotiation between alienated compliance and an autonomous disregard for bureaucratic demands; a ‘frontier of control’ (Edwards, 1979) was surfacing distinctly at odds with the post-bureaucratic ideal.

Discussion

In this article my intention has been to provide an insight into the tensions experienced between the bureaucratic and the post-bureaucratic ethos in project-based work. In the first instance, drawing on a series of interviews with senior and middle management in the IT division of Buzzbank, I have attempted to illustrate the discursive tactics through which initiatives such as the Strategic Plan and associated project management reporting systems were (re)presented to a suspicious workforce. The careful manipulation of terminology, the frequent allusion to metaphors of adolescence and discipline and most interestingly the attempt to co-opt existing ‘virtues’ into a reformed and contrasting



system of values reflect the difficulty of introducing bureaucratic controls into an organization both established and flourishing in a post-bureaucratic ethos—indeed, formed with the bureaucracy of the parent company as a constant negative role model. I have then attempted to underline this difficulty through a brief account of the experiences of a specific project team's reactions to the Strategic Plan and associated initiatives. The clearest sign of intransigence was the barbed humour, occasionally but not always accompanied by open acts of resistance.

The case itself is significant insofar as it involves the deliberate and strategic *rebureaucratization*, rather than the *debureaucratization*, of a contemporary organization. To return to Heckscher's typology, there is precious little evidence of 'organizational mission' replacing 'rules and regulations', or 'principles guiding action' taking the place of 'rules for conduct'. Indeed, broader post-bureaucratic themes such as 'institutionalized dialogue' over 'acquiescence to authority' and the 'high need for internal trust' seem to have little place in the Strategic Plan and project management methodology as evidenced here. How are we then to understand this case? To my mind, there are three possible interpretations which can be made of the shifting modes of control within Buzzbank. The first would be to see this as supporting the sceptical Weberian position held by many in the field towards the post-bureaucratic discourse; that this exemplifies the empty hype of post-bureaucratic rhetoric which has little impact on the continuing bureaucratic reality of most organizations. However, the measures implemented by the new managers are clearly intended to counteract the pre-existent management procedures in Buzzbank which ceded greater autonomy to the IT staff in teams.² For proponents of post-bureaucracy, an alternative interpretation might be that this constitutes little more than an exceptional case of failed or bogus post-bureaucracy, which says little about the feasibility of post-bureaucracy more widely. While I would not make any strong claims for generalizability here, my objective has been rather to gain some insight into the dynamics which support or oppose the development of post-bureaucratic models. I would argue then that a study of 'failed' or 'failing' post-bureaucracy offers analytical purchase on the feasibility or otherwise of the model more generally. A third and, to me, more compelling argument is that the 'rebureaucratization' taking place through the imposition of the Strategic Plan and project management procedures indicates senior management's recognition of and reaction to the risks inherent in post-bureaucratic work; that is, the dangers of devolved control and (albeit limited) autonomy within the workplace.

I would argue then that the range of changes implemented are intended to curtail or at least dilute the emergent post-bureaucratic ethos in Buzzbank, resulting in either a return to more traditional bureaucratic techniques of control, or else a balance of the bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic. In light of the financial success of Buzzbank, reasons for this 'rebureaucratization' are less than transparent. In one sense this



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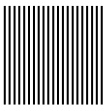
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change goes against the tide given that both the industrial sector (telephone/online banking) and the departments themselves (IT Applications and IT Operations) were certainly at the time at the 'cutting edge' of technological and sectoral change; an archetypal example of a situation where 'competitive advantage' depends directly upon innovation, creativity and the flexible mobilization of the knowledge and skills of expert staff. The accounts of the managers parachuted in from TN Banking to oversee the reorganization provide some insight into the strategic direction behind the changes, reflecting the increased economic importance of Buzzbank to the corporate whole. However, those economic and institutional pressures upon Buzzbank are clearly mediated by TN Banking senior management's constructions of the existing situation. Equally, the strategic response to Buzzbank's success is structured by norms not untypical of major financial institutions which privilege tight discipline and predictable returns on investment over a rhetorical commitment to empowerment and creativity.

Insofar as a specific model of management is envisaged within Buzzbank, the intention of senior management appears to be to develop a hybrid integrating bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic logics. The attraction of such a model, for senior management at least, is for the organization to attain the 'simultaneous loose-tight properties' promised by Peters and Waterman (1982), both creativity and predictability, autonomy and control. It is to resolve this dilemma that project management procedures and methodology have been introduced, to square the circle of innovation and control. Indeed, much of the recent expansion of the field of project management, particularly within the 'post-bureaucratic' organization, reflects its asserted ability to impose traditional 'bureaucratic' virtues of predictability, accountability, surveillance and control over the 'knowledge workers' of the 'New Economy'. This is certainly not to claim that project management is able to achieve these goals readily, nor that it may be smoothly integrated with other control systems to form the watertight surveillance network of dystopian prediction. Much of the empirical focus of this article has been on the extent to which both management and project workers recognize and articulate the difference between two broad logics of control; the autonomous, self-directed ethos of the post-bureaucratic subject and the bureaucratic exigencies of structured work and systematic reporting procedures. The intention has been to draw on the empirical material to cast doubt upon the viability both of a post-bureaucratic utopia and of the totalizing 'iron cage' of some critical theorists wherein bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic technologies blend seamlessly together.

Notes

The author would like to thank Chris Grey and Deborah Kerfoot for their help and support. The suggestions and constructive criticism of Svetlana Cicmil, as well as



participants in the 2001 EGOS subtheme, *The Odyssey of Bureaucracy*, are also gratefully acknowledged.

- 1 Barker's (1993) use of Tompkins and Cheney's (1985) concept of 'concertive control' is a productive illustration of this tendency.
- 2 Although it is likely that this time of autonomy and innovation was romanticized to some extent by Buzzbank staff.

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Damian Hodgson is Lecturer in Organizational Analysis at Manchester School of Management, UMIST. His current interests include: identity politics in the workplace; discipline, resistance and subversion; globalization and management knowledge; Foucauldian understandings of professionalism and professionalization and critical perspectives on project work. **Address:** Manchester School of Management, UMIST, PO Box 88, Manchester M60 1QD, UK. [email: damian.hodgson@umist.ac.uk]