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Teaching About Reengineering

Thomas H. Davenport

This session addresses issues in the teaching of reengineering in an academic context. Reengineering has been with us (under that name, at least) for over five years, and many universities have begun to incorporate the topic into curricula. However, it is often difficult to decide what to teach, how to teach it, and where within the university the teaching should take place. Among the specific issues to be treated in this presentation and discussion are the following:

Who should teach about reengineering? Certainly information systems departments are a valid place to teach this topic, and I believe that we can lay legitimate claim to being its originators. Yet at my university there are now courses on reengineering not only in IS, but also in organizational behavior (with a work design emphasis), operations management (with a manufacturing process emphasis), and even accounting (with a financial systems emphasis). Should we be concerned about this proliferation of reengineering venues? What should we do about it?

What is the right course context for teaching about reengineering? Should reengineering materials be combined with quality or continuous improvement topics? Even if we assume that reengineering courses belong within IS departments, there are still issues around the packaging of reengineering relative to other related topics. There are MIS courses at universities that are totally devoted to reengineering and closely related IT topics, e.g., IT enablers of reengineering, systems development issues around reengineering, etc. Alternatively, one might argue that reengineering is too narrow a concept to occupy an entire course, and should be combined with other materials in a course on "IT and Business Transformation" or "Business Change and Systems Change."

What ideological angle should we take on reengineering? The topic has a bit too much history to view it as simply a new and better way to take advantage of IT capabilities. Is reengineering a new form of systems analysis? Is it part of a family of operational improvement approaches, most of which don't have much to do with IT? How do we deal with the unfortunate fact that reengineering has become a synonym for downsizing and layoffs? What should we teach about the success rate, or supposed lack thereof, of reengineering? Is reengineering a fad, and if so is there a time when we should stop teaching it?

Assuming we can answer, at least to our own satisfaction, the above questions, how do we teach this subject? Should students learn reengineering by doing it? If so, how can this be made practical? With what methods, techniques, and tools should students become familiar?

Taking the customer perspective is reputed to be important in reengineering. Can we apply this to ourselves? Who are the customers for students educated about reengineering? What kinds of jobs are they expecting such students to fill and perform? Do they want both BAs and MBAs? What makes a reengineering student more valuable for these customers?

While I have opinions on all of these issues, I am by no means confident that they are correct or optimal. I suspect that there will be considerable benefit from the interchange of those with diverse experiences in teaching reengineering.