

Business Process Re-engineering

This is not a lecture, but it is a good example, of how life could be better. An example more convincing than any lecture!

After teaching for three days my BPR course, available at http://blogomotion.com/Download/business_process.pdf, (“BPR” means “Business Process Re-engineering” – a fashionable name for process improvement to achieve business advantage) to some people in Rome, I was to go back to the airport and fly back home. What happened then, was the best example available, why BPR is necessary, why it is not the same as introducing IT / Web support, and why it is so very interdisciplinary.

Already on arrival some days earlier, I was rather taken aback when my shuttle bus stopped somewhere in the middle of the rather crowded and badly-lit street, at a place not easily recognizable as any bus stop, except for a long queue of nervous-looking people with suitcases, and heard a laconic info from the bus driver “Termini”, the name of the main and biggest railway station in Rome. No railway station was there anywhere to be seen, but – thanks heaven for Google Maps and its Street View! – I managed to recognise a rather morose and ugly wall of a huge building as the station building. Naturally, this experience made me somewhat apprehensive before my return journey. So, to be on the safe side and feel more secure, I searched the web for ideas and found a professional-looking web site of a shuttle bus company “Terravision” (<http://www.terravision.eu/>). Wow, I could now buy my bus ticket on-line, thus avoiding the scary prospect of perhaps having to buy my ticket from the bus or his assistant. As they did not wear any uniforms, which I learned already on arrival, I was afraid I would not be able to recognize the right person easily (now I know I could – the assistant by shouting, the driver by smiling sarcastically at the stupid people attempting to board his bus).

So, until then I had already experienced a number of seriously “broken windows” (see Michael Levine, <http://www.amazon.com/Broken-Windows-Business-Smallest-Remedies/dp/0446698482>), seriously damaging my user experience. Lack of recognizable uniforms. Unprofessional behaviour – the assistant smoke a cigarette while talking to passengers. Badly lit location / venue / bus stop. No markings on where I was, lack of helpful information, the sight of obviously stressed people, queuing. Too bad!

However, I was then still ready to revise my first negative impression, and I was well on my way to do it, when I found Terravision’s sensible and well-organized web site, and could buy their ticket in advance without any unnecessary hassle, which I had by then learned to expect from shuttle buses’ notorious customer interface. The necessity to exchange my ticket for a separate boarding card before being allowed to take the bus looked like a rather crazy and unnecessary complication, as the ticket I bought was valid for a specific hour, but what the hell, do not expect perfection when you buy a 4-euro service, not a Rolls-Royce.

When I arrived next morning, on 20 November 2014 – well before the assigned time, to be sure – at the well-advertised Terravision Café at Termini, I was rather shocked again, when I saw a queue of people queuing to buy their tickets, thoroughly mixed up with people queuing to exchange their tickets for boarding cards. Obviously, the whole system of tickets and boarding cards was extremely clumsy, totally unnecessary, and awkward for everybody, both customers and for the rather angry-

looking girls inside the ticket booth. Yes, there was an A4-paper telling those with tickets to “jump the queue” before those wanting to buy tickets.

The whole queue thoroughly blocked the only entrance to the well-advertised Terravision café inside. I started expecting the worst, but the exchange process ticket-for-boarding-card went unexpectedly painless. I could not help overhearing, however, an elderly Swedish couple enquiring about the possibility of ensuring tickets for the next day, only to be told – in a rather brusque and unfriendly manner – by one of the girls behind the counter – that it was not possible longer than 30 minutes before bus departure. She did not mention the possibility to use their web site.

Clutching my precious boarding card in my somewhat sweaty palm, I endured without further ado being told that my bus was 20 minutes late, thanking business process analysis gods for deciding to go before due time, so I still had a lot of time.

- Where’s the bus stop? – I enquired.
- Just outside! – was the answer. Not a sign of a bus-stop sign there, but a tell-tale, suitcase-armed queue made any doubts obsolete.

I joined the queue, wondering how to tell the end of the queue from its head, and how we’d be able to sort those willing to travel to Fiumicino airport from those Ciampino-heading (no signs, no information boards, of course).

Finally, a bus to Fiumicino arrived. As I had already noticed a few days before, the fact that people exited the bus at exactly the same place as those wishing to enter queued, beautifully added to general chaos and irritation. I was happy for being observant, too, since the only indication on which way the bus was to go, was on its front, while its sides were decorated by a beautiful, but rather confusing sign “Rome <-> Fiumicino, Rome <-> Ciampino”. Good idea, this! You really can, with some effort, design a customer process in the worst possible way! A gentle touch of very stupid and confusing user interface makes a mildly bad user process into real horror!

And horror did start immediately, as any rather restive and desperate passengers attempted to enter the bus. Some had no tickets, believing they could buy them at the bus. Some had not exchanged their tickets for the required boarding cards, some were not sure to which airport the bus went, and some were unsure what to do with their luggage. The bus assistant immediately resorted to shouting, not so much to be heard, as to show his authority and passengers’ stupidity. A good thing was, he was too busy shouting to be able to smoke, or perhaps he was a non-smoker, I couldn’t possibly know.

Still shouting, he made, however, a very sensible move of telling the people who wanted to go to Ciampino, to form a separate queue. This could, possibly, give a thinking person a nice BPR-idea to actually mark two separate queues on the bus stop, and avoid some of the hassle in the future, but I do not think there was any *thinking* Terravision representative around. If there was, they might have discovered this genius solution many years before...

The bus to Fiumicino left, we Ciampino fans waited for our twenty-minute late bus to arrive. I decided to take a taxi when it was 09:40 (the bus would be 50 minutes late by then). As minutes went by, I could enjoy watching the growing restlessness of those waiting, and the total absence of any attempts to inform us about the situation from the nearby Terravision personnel. While I departed in the direction of the taxi stand, I could hear a Terravision lady shouting (they are good at shouting at this company!) that the bus would arrive later still because of traffic. You may be

interested to know, that on my way to the airport by taxi, I was told by the driver, that traffic from Ciampino to Rome was unusually light this morning... A blatant lie, too!

So this is the end of my Terravision story, but it'd be incomplete about adding some views on the feasibility of trying to achieve real BPR in any not market-driven situation. Socialism, as some of us can remember, was extremely adept at business process degeneration, rather than any improvement.

As I arrived at the nearby taxi stand, I was utterly surprised to find passengers waiting for taxis, not the other way round! Years and years of my age flew off my back and I felt thirty five years younger, in the middle of some communist era Eastern Europe city, where taxis, as any services, were scarce, and those in the power to bestow them on eager customers were arrogant, reckless and unfriendly. I gathered immediately that in Rome, taxi drivers' corporation alias trade union alias mafia must have won the privilege to limit the possibility to join this trade, thus ensuring for themselves endless monopoly benefits. In spite of my ex-communist training, it took me a while of patient and fruitless waiting first at the end of the line (the taxis then stopped at its head), then at its head (the taxis had by then switched their stopping habits), before I got back my uncanny ex-communist instincts and ran directly to grab a taxi before it had even come to the curb.

Here my BPR-Rome story ends. Ciao, Roma! I'll surely come back, yours is a beautiful city. Some BPR may make it a better place to live, and to visit, though! Terravision (what a f...ing arrogant name!), I hope you will pay my back four euro you stole from me, but otherwise, I and probably all other passengers, too, would rather pay one or two euro more, and get serious and better service in exchange. So that you can have an extra bus in reserve, in case of one breaking down again, or some real traffic jams in the future.