Ten Years After
Reengineering, Ten Years After

*HarperCollins is reissuing Dr. Hammer's landmark book, Reengineering the Corporation, as part of its Business Essentials series. This is an author's note that he wrote for the new edition.*

Reengineering the Corporation was a publishing phenomenon, but it was also more than that: it launched a worldwide movement. To be sure, the success of the book itself was extraordinary, gratifying, and far beyond our expectations: millions of copies, more than 30 languages, the bestselling business book of the 1990s. It even gave rise to a mini-industry of spin-off books, about every topic imaginable so long as “reengineering” was in the title. This book also added a new word to the lexicon. When we first began speaking and writing about reengineering, we had to provide explanations and definitions of the term; when it appeared in the media, it was enclosed in quotation marks. No longer. Reengineering (and its cognate term process) have now become part of routine discourse, and not just among business people. Imagine our surprise a few years ago when a character on *ER* began discussing her assignment to the hospital’s reengineering task force!

To us, however, the real measure of this book’s success is not that it was sold and bought and imitated, or even that it was read and discussed, but rather that it was widely *used*. Thousands of enterprises around the world – large and small, manufacturing and service, public sector and for-profit – have implemented the principles of business process reengineering. We have lost count of the number of people who told us that they did not read this book, but that they studied it and put it into action; many have stated that it changed their lives. Of how many other business books can such things be said? While not all who embarked on reengineering were as successful as they and we would have liked – we never said it was easy – a great many have realized extraordinary results. In his book *Elephants Can Dance*, Lou Gerstner, the now-retired CEO of IBM, credits reengineering for having played a fundamental role in the transformation and turnaround of this once-endangered company. IBM is far from exceptional in this regard; its experiences have been endlessly replicated across industries and economies.

Indeed, it can be argued that much of the great leap in productivity of the 1990s should be attributed to the impact of reengineering. Without the basic changes in work practices that reengineering brought about, the decade’s massive deployment of technology would have had little impact; paving the cowpaths accomplishes little except enriching technology vendors. For instance, the most significant corporate technology investment of the last decade was in so-called ERP systems, integrated software systems that support multiple functions and departments across an enterprise. It soon became clear to companies trying to harness the power of this technology that ERP systems were in fact software tools aligned with end-to-end business processes, and that to take advantage of these tools companies had to rethink and redesign those processes – in other words, to reengineer. As newer technologies, such as the Internet, have evolved past their infancy into serious deployment, managers have repeatedly made the same discovery about them as well.

More than a decade after its introduction, reengineering is still going strong – and in fact is now being more widely deployed that it was during the heyday of the book. Some companies may eschew the term reengineering and employ other phrases, such as process redesign or transformation. But at their heart, such efforts fit our definition perfectly. While the first wave of reengineering primarily focused on back-room transactional processes (such as order fulfillment and procurement), the current wave has a much broader scope, encompassing creative work ranging from product development to marketing, as well as inter-enterprise processes such as supply chain, which transcend corporate as well as functional boundaries. One of the great lessons we have learned is that while implementing reengineering is even harder than we originally thought, perseverance will eventually see it through to success.
Reengineering the Corporation was not intended as the last word on the topic; we have both written other books expanding on and extending this book’s ideas. However, Reengineering the Corporation does remain the first word on the topic, and the best place for interested readers to begin. Upon rereading it ourselves, we were pleased to discover that there is virtually nothing in it that has been rendered incorrect or irrelevant by the passage of time. Indeed, we believe that reengineering is even more necessary today than when this book was first written. As the boom of the late 1990s has been revealed to have been in fact a bubble, companies in every industry are once again addressing the imperatives of powerful customers, intense competition, and relentless change, and have no choice but to reengineer their operations if they are to thrive – or even to survive.

This may be the time and place to reveal a dark secret about this book’s genesis: it was first purchased by another publishing house. When we delivered the manuscript to them, their editors reacted with horror. They said this was much too serious a book for them, and they rejected it! Fortunately, HarperCollins stepped into the breach, and the rest is history. We thank them for their foresight at the time, and for now including this book in their Essentials series.