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Bureaucratic Organization

Although modern societies are for the most part lacking in castes, guilds, and other socially embedded ways of recruiting, training, and organizing workers, personal connections and social networks are still highly relevant to many aspects of working life, especially in regard to the way jobs get filled, as will be noted in Chapter 7. In a parallel fashion, the rules and procedures governing the way that particular kinds of work are done may simply reflect longstanding customs, even when they may not be effective or efficient. In today's world, however, a great many aspects of work organization are governed by a markedly different approach, one that is encompassed by the term *bureaucracy*. At first glance, this hardly seems like a progressive step, as bureaucracies are often thought to be collections of semicompetent plodders hopelessly ensnarled in red tape. As we shall see, there is some truth to this stereotype, but bureaucracies have a number of positive features, and for many kinds of work, their virtues far outweigh their vices.

The Rise of Bureaucratic Organization

Bureaucracies have been around for a long time. They were an essential feature of preindustrial empires such as Rome and dynastic China. In both cases, much of the extension and endurance of these empires can be attributed to the development and use of effective bureaucracies.¹ These administrative bodies were staffed by functionaries charged with the governance of territories hundreds or even thousands of miles distant from the empire's capital. In these far-flung realms, bureaucratic tasks and responsibilities were limited in number. Above all, preindustrial governments had to defend their territories from external enemies (often disparaged as "barbarians") seeking land and plunder. The control of their own populations was another priority, as domestic rebellions were regular features of imperial domains. Then, as now, defense was expensive business, and the maintenance of an

empire rested to considerable degree on the ability of the bureaucracy to collect taxes from the empire's subjects. Taxes also provided much of the financial support for the art, architecture, literature, and philosophy that remain as enduring cultural legacies of long-gone civilizations. Taxes were no more popular then than they are today, and they were a major source of tension between the government's bureaucrats and its subjects. Still, they were and are a necessary evil; as former Justice of the United States Supreme Court, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (1841–1935), has admonished us, "Taxes are the price we pay for civilization."

In addition to maintaining order and collecting taxes, preindustrial bureaucracies occasionally involved themselves in economic activities. Their efforts were generally not oriented to the economic development of the realm. The chief incentive was the opportunity to reap monopoly profits through government control over important industries such as salt production and distribution. But direct government involvement in the economy was limited, and most of an empire's work was done on farms and in workshops staffed by family members and slaves, using traditional modes of organization. As was noted in the previous chapter, these organizations were small in scale and were staffed on the basis of ascribed roles or apprenticeships that mimicked family relationships.

In addition to imperial governments, complex bureaucratic structures could be found in the realm of religion. Some of the success of the early Christian church can be attributed to its effective adaptation of Roman organizational principles. At the same time, however, many of the world's great and enduring religions, notably Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, have thrived for centuries with much looser organizational structures. Today, many religions struggle to achieve a balance between spontaneous spirituality and the routinization and formalization typical of bureaucratic administration.

Bureaucratic organization began to spread from a few political and religious domains into private enterprise as economies became larger and more complex. By the second half of the 19th century, the scope of management had been significantly enlarged as some industrial enterprises employed hundreds or even thousands of workers. At the same time, advancing technologies were creating a host of new occupational specialists. Coordinating the activities of large numbers of specialized workers posed new organizational challenges. While the size and complexity of enterprises were increasing, improvements in transportation expanded the territory served by many of these enterprises, creating more administrative difficulties.²

These changes in enterprise scale and scope necessitated heavy infusions of bureaucratic organization. Businesses ranging from steel mills to department stores needed new ways to coordinate the actions of hundreds of workers, to precisely schedule their work activities, and in general to keep things moving along in a smooth and predictable manner. Firms also were faced with the need to train and supervise a multitude of new workers, many of them from rural areas or foreign lands, who had been thrust into the new industrial environment.

While economic and social change was creating new challenges, it also was supplying a set of tools to address them. Railroads and then automobiles allowed administrators and managers to travel to widely diffused organizational units with relative ease, while new communications technologies, everything from telephones and typewriters to lowly carbon paper, made it possible to supervise and coordinate the activities of large numbers of employees.³ These technologies complemented new ways of organizing enterprises and their constituent workplaces. By the beginning of the 20th century, an organizational revolution was well under way, and bureaucratization was transforming the organization of work.

The Elements of Bureaucratic Organization

In delineating the key features of bureaucracy, it is useful to begin with what the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) referred to as “an ideal type.” This is a mental construct that delineates the key features of a social phenomenon that may not entirely correspond to real-world situations. One such phenomenon is bureaucracy. In analyzing bureaucratic organization, Weber delineated the essential elements of bureaucratic organization while being fully aware that actual, functioning bureaucracies only partially conformed to his ideal-typical schema.⁴

In addition to presenting the major components of bureaucratic organization, Weber devoted considerable attention to the cultural values and modes of thought that gave rise to modern bureaucracies. Bureaucratic structures and processes reflected what Weber took to be the dominant cognitive orientation of modern societies: rationality. *Rationality*, of course, is a loaded word with a multiplicity of meanings, so it is important to be clear on what Weber meant by it and how it related to bureaucratic organization. At the most general level, Weber saw rational thought patterns as a prime element of a historical process that he called “the disenchantment of the world.” By this, he meant the ability and willingness to explain the causes of events without invoking supernatural agents. When imbued with a rational approach to the world, people no longer conjured up devils, ghosts, and goblins in order to explain worldly phenomena. Instead, logic and empiricism were the primary sources of understanding why things happened as they did. For example, a rational approach to the avoidance of famines would not attribute crop failures to the actions of malevolent spirits but would look for the presence of plant diseases and other material causes of these problems.

Weber saw rationality as crucial to the design and operation of modern organizations because this mode of thought provided the most effective and efficient way of attaining particular goals. At this point, however, it is important to note that the goals pursued by a person or an organization may not themselves be the result of rational thought. Rationally designed structures and processes can be used to achieve goals that defy rational comprehension; as Captain Ahab in *Moby-Dick* noted of his pursuit of the great white whale,

“All my means are sane, my motive and my object mad.”⁵ Equally important, rationality can serve goals that are not just irrational but are unethical, immoral, and criminal as well. History has provided us with plenty of examples of rationality being used for barbaric ends, Nazi Germany being a particularly repellant case.

Weber recognized the difference between the application of rationality to means and to ends with his distinction between “formal” and “substantive” rationality. The latter referred to the rational use of means to achieve goals that were in accordance with a society’s ethical values, whereas the former was more restricted, being concerned with quantitative calculation and accounting in the service of the economy and its individual components.⁶ What was missing in Weber’s distinction, however, was the recognition that the ethical standards of some societies may not be in accordance with humane values. Again, the case of Nazi Germany, which emerged a little more than a decade after Weber’s death, provides a ghastly example.

When applied to the description and analysis of bureaucratic organizations, rationality is embodied in the way an organization has been put together and the manner in which its members go about their work. From this perspective, modern bureaucracies are best conceived not as “rational organizations” but as organizations with structures and procedures that reflect an effort to use appropriate means for the achievement of specific ends.⁷ Of all types of organization, Weber viewed bureaucracies as the most efficient, effective, and predictable; as he put it, “The fully bureaucratic



Photo 5.1 Organization charts indicate the hierarchical nature of bureaucracies

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mechanism compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with nonmechanical modes of production.”⁸

Modern bureaucracies exhibit specific structural and procedural features that contribute to effective and efficient goal attainment. In the first place, bureaucracies are characterized by *impersonality*. This, of course, is a quality that often infuriates people when they deal with bureaucracies—“they treat you like a number, not a person.” But this unpleasant reality is only part of a larger picture. Bureaucratic impersonality also means that everyone is supposed to be treated equally. Race, gender, ethnicity, and other ascribed characteristics should have no bearing on one’s interaction with a bureaucracy and the outcomes it produces. Ascribed characteristics are also irrelevant when it comes to filling positions within the bureaucracy. In direct opposition to working arrangements based on ascribed statuses, bureaucracies are staffed by workers who are chosen according to their ability to perform the tasks assigned to them, or at least their capacity to learn to do these tasks. Another common feature of bureaucracies, therefore, is a formal recruiting process. In traditional China, officials (often referred to in the West as “mandarins”) were selected on the basis of their performance in official examinations that tested their knowledge of the Confucian classics.⁹ Absorption of Confucian ideals gave these officials a common cultural mooring, but it had little relevance to the actual performance of their duties. In modern societies, government bureaucracies generally employ civil service examinations to recruit new employees, and many private organizations use job-specific tests for the same purpose. In similar fashion, promotion is supposed to be based on objective assessments of performance and not on attributes that have nothing to do with getting the work done. In short, bureaucratic impersonality, coupled with the use of rationally derived procedures, produces a “meritocracy” in which positions are staffed and jobs are done in accordance with the employees’ capabilities.

An emphasis on merit and expertise of some sort also ties in with another key characteristic of bureaucratic organization, an elaborate division of labor. Unlike societies based on gathering and hunting and traditional farming, industrial societies have a great variety of occupational specialties. The *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*, compiled by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, lists 842 occupational categories, encompassing 30,000 distinct job titles such as “emulsification operator,” “welt trimmer” and “pickling grader.”¹⁰ A single organization may have dozens or even hundreds of specialized job titles. At the organizational level, these specialized tasks are often incorporated into formal roles that define an employee’s area of responsibility. These roles are in turn governed by specific rules that set out what should and should not be done by the person holding down that role.

Beginning with Adam Smith in the 18th century, many observers have noted that the division of labor into a number of specialized tasks has been a major source of economic and technological dynamism. In a famous passage, Adam Smith wrote about the benefits of the division of labor in the

manufacture of a simple product, pins. Instead of a single worker performing all of the necessary operations, one worker cut wire into segments, another sharpened a point on them, another soldered a head to the shaft, and so on, for a total of eighteen separate operations. Dividing up the tasks allowed workers to develop specialized skills and to work at a regular, uninterrupted pace, while at the same time inspiring the invention of specialized machinery “which facilitate and abridge labor, and allow one man to do the work of many.”¹¹ The benefits of the division of labor also were highlighted by a 20th-century economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, who took the analysis well beyond the manufacture of pins. According to Galbraith, much of the dynamism of the modern world could be attributed to the advance of science and technology, which in turn resulted from “taking ordinary men, informing them narrowly and deeply and then, through appropriate organization, arranging to have their knowledge combined with that of other specialized but equally ordinary men.”¹²

As Galbraith implied, specialization creates the need for coordination. Bureaucracies bring order out of potential chaos in two ways. The first of these is what people tend to think of when they hear the word *bureaucracy*: rules, regulations, and strict procedures. All bureaucracies make abundant use of explicit and implicit Standard Operating Procedures to guide and control the activities of their employees. This, of course, can be another source of frustration when dealing with a bureaucracy because there may be situations not covered by existing rules, or the rules may be of dubious appropriateness. But even more frustrations, as well as endless opportunities for corruption and abuse, would ensue if the members of an organization simply made decisions on the basis of personal connections or individual whims.

Along with the use of formal roles and rules, bureaucratic organizations coordinate the work of their members through another property that is distasteful to many: hierarchical authority. The structures of most bureaucratic organizations can be (and usually are) depicted in an organization chart that puts every position at a hierarchical level that clearly indicates who is subordinate or superordinate to whom. In addition to aiding in the coordination of work, organizational hierarchies serve a number of other functions, such as delineating responsibilities and motivating workers by holding out the prospect of promotion. Organizational hierarchies are especially prominent in military and paramilitary organizations such as police forces, where observing rules and obeying orders issued by superiors are of paramount importance. Other kinds of organizations can get by with more egalitarian structures, but some degree of hierarchical ranking will be found in all bureaucratic organizations.

A final characteristic of bureaucratic organizations is their extensive use of, and reliance on, written records. It is no coincidence that the first extensive government bureaucracies emerged in Egypt, Babylonia, and China, places where written languages were first created and developed. As a practical matter, written records are essential for the preservation and dissemination of

rules, regulations, and operating procedures, along with essential documents such as contracts, tax records, and voter registrations. What began thousands of years ago with the first scratchings on clay tablets continues to a greatly magnified degree today, as modern information and communications technologies such as computerized databases and e-mail have extended the reach and potency of the written word.

At this point, many readers are probably thinking that this discussion of bureaucracy is seriously divorced from reality as they have experienced it. And they are right—not only do bureaucracies in the real world often depart from the above principles, but the imputation that they are the embodiment of rationality seems quite a stretch. Here we will again simply note that an ideal-type presentation of bureaucracy is only a starting point for further analysis, just as a mathematical description of the acceleration of a falling body has to first set aside the effects of air resistance in order to derive the formula for determining the rate at which the body gains speed. There will be numerous places in this book where real-world organizational structures and procedures and their consequences for the way work is done will be presented, along with the reasons for their departure from ideal-type bureaucracies. As a starting point, we need to consider which kinds of work environments are well suited to bureaucratic modes of organization and which are not.

Where Bureaucracy Works and Where It Doesn't

By now it should be apparent that *bureaucracy* and *bureaucrat* are not simply terms of abuse. Bureaucratic organization has some real strengths, but these are evident only under certain circumstances; when situations are different, bureaucracy's virtues can become its vices. Above all, bureaucracies are most effective when the tasks performed by their members can be reduced to routines. In turn, routines and the application of unambiguous rules allow the employment of workers who are not expected to demonstrate much in the way of creativity, innovation, or the ability to solve unique problems. All that is necessary is to efficiently and honestly follow formal procedures and see to it that established rules are applied.

We can see bureaucratic principles effectively operating in organizations such as a state department of motor vehicles. One of the primary tasks of the DMV is processing hundreds of thousands of vehicle registration applications every year. In quantitative terms, this is a daunting task, but it is greatly facilitated by reducing the process to a set of procedures governed by specific rules. For example, the cost of registering a car or truck is not negotiated for each vehicle, nor is the social and economic status of the vehicle's owner taken into consideration. Instead, a set fee is assessed on the basis of unambiguous criteria such as the weight or purchase price of a car or truck. Since the rules that govern the registration process have been established, all

that is necessary is to figuratively—and in many cases literally—check the boxes in order to note if the owner's address has changed, proof of insurance has been submitted, and the required fee has been paid.

At the same time, however, many kinds of work are poorly suited to bureaucratic organization. For example, scientists engaged in cutting-edge research are exploring unknown intellectual territory, and with all such endeavors, the outcomes are unpredictable. A scientist may achieve a breakthrough next week, next month, or maybe never. He or she may even have a moment of serendipity—searching for one thing but coming across something of value that was quite unexpected. As the history of science reveals, some important discoveries have occurred in the course of looking for something quite different. The unpredictability of research, along with the vagaries of the creative process, makes bureaucracy an unsuitable mode of organization. Unlike the situation with routine activities, there are no clear-cut structures, procedures, and rules to ensure a scientific breakthrough.

Many, if not most, work activities are located somewhere in the broad middle between motor vehicle registration and basic research. Within a single organization, some activities can be reduced to set routines, while other efforts at routinization make it more difficult to get things done. The education of children and teenagers provides good examples of the uses, misuses, and abuses of bureaucratic organization. In the first place, public education is a very large business at both the national and the local levels. K–12 education absorbed an estimated \$618 billion in 1999.¹³ American elementary, middle, and high schools were responsible for the education of more than 54 million students in 2003, in which year nearly 3 million young men and women graduated from high school.¹⁴

Making at least an effort to educate such a large number of young people requires the efforts of bureaucratic organizations ranging from the federal government's Department of Education to the departments of education of individual states, to local school districts, and finally to the administrators of individual schools. The advantages of bureaucracy are evident when we consider the operation of a single school district and its constituent schools. They have many routine duties that mesh easily with bureaucratic organization: ordering and stocking supplies, issuing paychecks, maintaining buildings and grounds, scheduling extracurricular activities, and so on. But what about the core task: educating young people? On one hand, a fair amount of learning can be—and usually is—highly routinized. Children acquire essential information such as multiplication tables and grammatical rules through drills, exercises, and other rote activities, and through it all, their progress is monitored through the use of standardized tests. These educational experiences usually do not conjure up pleasant memories of school days, but it cannot be denied that they provide an essential foundation for further learning.

On the other hand, many educational researchers and practitioners believe that formal rules and procedures are not particularly well suited to a school's educational mission because, despite decades of research, the

process of learning is still only dimly understood. It is therefore difficult to construct effective routines when there are no clear-cut principles on which they can be grounded. Further complicating matters is the simple fact of human diversity: what enhances the learning process for one individual may not work for another. In sum, an effective educational process cannot be reduced to routinized procedures that can be enacted for any group of students in any school setting.

The questionable value of using bureaucratic procedures in the educational realm is thrown into sharp relief when we look at recent efforts to more precisely evaluate educational outcomes. Evaluation is a basic requirement for effective bureaucratic organization; a goal-oriented organization has to periodically determine if its efforts are having their intended effects. Sometimes this can be a straightforward exercise: is the team winning games, is the hospital curing sick people, is the business making a profit? But schools, like many other organizations, lack straightforward standards of success or failure. In the first place, it isn't reasonable to apply the same set of standards to every school. Schools differ dramatically from one another in regard to how well incoming students are prepared for the next phase of their education, the extent to which their families are able to offer their support, the adequacy of their educational budgets, and so on. Second, and even more difficult to resolve, what exactly is the "learning" that is to be measured? Is it the simple absorption of facts, or is it a subtler, more diffuse kind of knowledge? Is it sufficient that high school students are able to solve linear equations and note the date of the Battle of Gettysburg, or should they also be able to evaluate abstract ideas and apply them to real-world situations?

One thing is certain: it is far easier to measure the first kind of learning than the second. Consequently, standardized tests that focus on specifics, often through the use of multiple-choice or true-false questions, are favored tools for determining how well students are being educated. But this is the bureaucratic tail wagging the educational dog. Tests of this sort are routinized procedures that allow certain tasks to be accomplished quickly and efficiently, but their validity and utility are far from certain. To repeat, bureaucratic procedures work best when the goals are unambiguous and when the organizational structures and procedures employed are well suited to the attainment of these goals. Neither of these stipulations is likely to be met when it comes to teaching and learning, and effective schools have to use bureaucratic structures and procedures when they are appropriate and avoid them when they are not.

Bureaucratic Organization, Work, and the Worker

The previous section stressed that the extent of bureaucratization should reflect the nature of tasks being performed and the skills that employees need

to bring to their jobs. In short, routine tasks should be bureaucratically administered, while others should not. But this is not the whole story. Bureaucracy is a powerful tool because it allows the mobilization and control of large numbers of people. Consequently, a lot depends on who controls the tool and the purposes for which they use it. This brings us to the next issue, the exercise of power in bureaucratic organizations and its consequences for individual workers.

Although the extent of bureaucratization should reflect the kind of work being done, the decision to organize things along bureaucratic lines may also reflect existing economic and social cleavages. As several critics have argued, a key element of bureaucratic organization, the division of labor, may represent an effort by management to simplify workers' tasks to the point where no skill is required to get the job done. From the perspective of management, this has two advantages. First, it lowers labor costs by allowing the use of unskilled, low-paid workers. Second, "de-skilling" removes an important source of potential power within the workforce. Employees with special skills are hard to replace, and this significantly improves their bargaining power when it comes to wages, benefits, and working conditions.¹⁵ In similar fashion, bureaucratic hierarchies may be established and maintained not because they contribute to the effective functioning of an organization but because they confer authority and prestige to some of its members at the expense of others. These points have been emphasized by Marxist critics of capitalist organizations, who have argued that both division of labor and hierarchy are organizational devices used to control workers and accumulate capitalist profits.¹⁶

Marxists have not been the only ones to take a critical stance toward bureaucracy. Other critics have been particularly concerned with the effects of bureaucratic organization on employees and the way they go about their work. One of the most trenchant criticisms of the effects of bureaucracy on individual workers came from Max Weber himself. For Weber, the formal rationality embodied in bureaucratic structures and procedures was itself problematic. After all, what Weber saw as the cultural basis of rationality, the "disenchantment of the world," carries a double meaning. Especially in everyday use, *disenchantment* connotes a sense of disillusionment to the point of cynicism. As Weber fully realized, a totally disenchanting world is flat and gray, containing little to elevate the spirits of men and women. As Weber noted in a famous passage in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, a totally disenchanting culture produced "narrow specialists without mind, pleasure seekers without heart; in its conceit this nothingness imagines it has climbed to a level of humanity never before attained."¹⁷

A more sharply focused insight into the effects of bureaucratic organization on individual workers has been provided by Robert Merton through his description of the "bureaucratic personality" and the circumstances that give rise to it.¹⁸ For Merton, bureaucratic structures and procedures are established to get certain things done, but sometimes they become ends in themselves.

When this happens, we may see the emergence of the “bureaucratic virtuoso,” a functionary who closely adheres to all the rules and procedures but hardly accomplishes anything of significance. Organizations and their personnel can succumb to this malady for both organizational and personal reasons. In the case of the former, “bureaucratic ritualism” may be used by organizations as a defense mechanism in a hostile political climate. For the individual bureaucrat, job insecurity may provoke a need to do everything “by the books” so no blame can be assigned when things go badly.

A more recent description and analysis of contemporary bureaucracy and its consequences for working life comes from George Ritzer, who has invoked the McDonald’s chain of fast-food restaurants as the archetypical early 21st-century organization.¹⁹ Echoing Weber, Ritzer describes four key features of McDonald’s operations: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and the control of people through the use of nonhuman technologies. There is nothing dramatically new here; “McDonaldization” has a lot in common with Taylor’s scientific management and Ford’s assembly line. But while Taylor’s ideas were never fully implemented, and the use of assembly lines was largely confined to the manufacturing sector, McDonaldization has gone well beyond the fast-food industry. The procedures, technologies, and managerial values that have made McDonald’s the world’s largest hamburger chain are now being applied to a great variety of organizational settings: retail establishments, schools, and even the sex industry.²⁰

Although critics have assumed that McDonaldization necessarily results in a thoroughly unpleasant and alienating work environment, careful research into the actual experiences and feelings of McDonald’s workers has presented a more complex picture. The most intensive effort at assaying the effects on employees of McDonald’s organizational structure and operating procedures was conducted in the mid-1990s by Robin Leidner.²¹ In some ways, her research supports the conception of McDonald’s as a stereotypical impersonal, bureaucratic organization. Although dealing with individual customers, one of the central activities in any fast-food establishment, is difficult to routinize, this is accomplished through the use of numerous formal rules and procedures, as well as prepared scripts that workers use when interacting with customers. Food preparation is highly routinized through the technologies that require little or no judgment on the part of the cooks, such as dispensers that always supply an exact quantity of ketchup and cash registers that tell cashiers how much change to give customers. For managers and owners of individual restaurants, McDonald’s provides “the Bible,” an exhaustive manual covering all the procedures and standards to be employed.²² In addition, the firm requires that prospective owners of franchises attend “Hamburger University” in Oak Brook, Illinois, where they are taught operational procedures and, more generally, are imbued with McDonald’s corporate philosophy.²³

These key elements of “McDonaldization” have served the firm well, although they have been criticized for making work at McDonald’s a

routinized, poorly paid job that requires little in the way of worker skills. At the same time, however, these organizational rules and routines can work to the advantage of McDonald's employees. The well-defined routines reduce uncertainty and conflict over who is supposed to do what. Routinization also shields employees from clashes with customers because the workers can defend and justify their actions by noting that they are simply doing what they were required to do. In Leidner's summation, "Depending on the context, service routines can help workers do their job, can boost their confidence, can limit the demands made upon them, can give them leverage over service-recipients, and can offer psychic protection from demeaning aspects of the job."²⁴

Of course, it is precisely this ability to invoke bureaucratically established rules that has allowed some individuals to justify unethical or even criminal behavior by claiming "I was just following orders." Several classic experiments in social psychology have demonstrated the willingness of people to inflict harm when they are ordered to do so.²⁵ We therefore also have to take into account the moral dimension when assessing the advantages and disadvantages of bureaucratic organization. Rules and regulations are an essential part of bureaucratic administration, but they also may allow, and even encourage, actions that individuals would not do on their own volition.

Alternatives to Bureaucracy

Up to now, it has been argued that, in direct opposition to everyday perceptions, bureaucracies actually provide an effective and efficient way to get things done. Bureaucracies at least have the potential to work very well when the tasks performed by their members can be reduced to routines without violating the goals of an organization. But in today's world, there is a great deal of work that does not lend itself to routinization. As was noted in Chapter 2, the majority of workers in the developed economies are employed in the various branches of the service sector. Many service sector jobs are quite routine and therefore easy to fit into a bureaucratic mold; think, for example, of cashiers, fast-food workers, and custodians. But many other jobs in this sector lie at the other end of the spectrum. A physician's practice, to take one example, includes a fair amount of routine, but at any moment, a patient can walk into the office with a malady that is hard to diagnose and even harder to treat. And even if treatment can be reduced to a routine with a predictable outcome, patients have a notable reluctance to being treated impersonally. The same can be said of students and other recipients of services, and in many sectors of the economy, people seem to be willing to spend considerable sums of money in order to avoid being treated as just another bureaucratically administered case. In parallel fashion, many aspects of bureaucratic organization, especially division of labor and hierarchical authority, have been implicated as major sources of job dissatisfaction, as will be noted in Chapter 11.

Changing expectations of customers and workers, along with economic and technological advances, have rendered many of the features of classic bureaucratic organization irrelevant and even harmful. Consequently, a variety of different organizational arrangements have emerged in both the private and public sectors as alternatives to bureaucracy. One of these is matrix organization. Instead of straight-line hierarchical authority extending from the top down, a matrix organization has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension, which puts the exercise of authority in a state of flux. The vertical dimension is composed of functional departments such as sales, manufacturing, and personnel. The horizontal dimension encompasses working teams centered on particular projects or geographical areas. To take an example of the latter, employees in the sales department report both to the sales manager in the firm's home office and to the chief executive for a particular geographical region. In a manufacturing firm, a matrix organization has traditional departments such as engineering, purchasing, and marketing, but personnel from these departments are organized into teams to work on the creation of a new product. This allows a cross-fertilization of ideas so, for example, the engineers will be more inclined to design products that are easy to manufacture at a reasonable cost, and the manufacturing staff will use production methods that result in high-quality products that appeal to customers and make life easier for the sales staff. Matrix organizations are often set up on a temporary basis, bringing together personnel from different parts of an organization to work on a new project. They have the advantage of flexibility and the potential to make the best use of personnel, but their ambiguous lines of command and competing claims to authority have to be sorted out in the course of working on a project.²⁶

One noteworthy example of matrix organization was Chrysler's use of "platform teams" in the late 1980s for the development of three new vehicles: a midsize family sedan, a sport utility vehicle, and a pickup truck.²⁷ In addition to involving all of the relevant departments such as engineering, finance, and styling, the team also included line workers and foremen to provide shop-floor experience in manufacturing realities. Not everyone accepted this organizational innovation; some engineers and managers quit because they (correctly) saw an erosion of the authority they once wielded. Others were reassigned to lesser duties or forced to take early retirement. Chrysler's top executives also had to accept diminished control. They could not simply issue orders; they had to convince team members that the changes they wanted had merit. Their willingness to delegate authority eventually paid off, and the validity of platform teams was vindicated when all three vehicles emerged on time and within budget and then went on to be strong sellers in a very competitive market.

An even looser form of organization may emerge when the environment is so unsettled that although there may be an agreement on general goals, there is no consensus on how to translate these goals into specific actions. Under these circumstances, the most appropriate organizational form may be what has been labeled an "adhocracy." Participants in an adhocracy have

to make it up as they go, continually determining what to do, who will do it, and even how to define success or failure. The members of an adhocracy are necessarily in a perpetual learning mode where feedback from the environment continuously influences their actions.²⁸

Two recent examples of adhocracy are the Linux open-source computer operating system and the Wikipedia online reference. It is even open to question whether these ongoing projects can be described as organizations. Both are very fluid operations that allow inputs from a large number of contributors with very little in the way of specialization and hierarchical control. But they both work. Linux is widely used as an alternative to commercial operating systems,²⁹ and although questions have been raised about the accuracy of some of its entries, Wikipedia contains a large and constantly growing number of articles that are consulted by hundreds of thousands of people every day.³⁰

Other, less radical, organizational arrangements have retained some features of classic bureaucracy while diminishing or even eliminating others. One popular target is hierarchical authority. A “flatter” organizational structure with few hierarchical levels, it is claimed, makes better use of the people it employs, facilitates communication, and increases employee motivation. Similarly, the empowerment of workers can increase organizational effectiveness. As one organizational analyst, Thomas W. Malone, has summarized a number of studies, “When people make their own decisions about how to do their work and allocate their time, they often put in more energy, effort, and creativity into their jobs.”³¹

Similar challenges have been mounted against another key attribute of bureaucratic organization, the division of labor. The division of work into a set of narrow tasks performed by workers with limited skill repertoires may be well suited to the efficient production of standardized goods and services, but it is manifestly unsuited to work activities that demand innovation, creative problem solving, and flexibility. Excessive division of labor, it has been argued, results in “trained incapacity,” the inability to depart from well-established routines even when they are obviously inappropriate and counterproductive. It also can be harmful to the psychic well-being of workers. Adam Smith, whose description of pin manufacture was presented earlier, noted what may happen to workers when their jobs are reduced to narrowly specialized routines: “The man whose whole life is spent performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.”³²

While cultural, economic, and social changes have made bureaucratic modes of organization unsuitable for many kinds of jobs, advances in technology have deepened this trend. Recent years have seen great strides in the development of technologies for gathering, distributing, and analyzing

information, and for many observers of organizational life, these technologies are profoundly challenging longstanding assumptions about organizational structures and processes. In Frank Levy and Richard Murnane's summation, "Because information and work are inseparable, any technology that changes how we use information has the potential to reorganize how work is done."³³

Whether or not this potential will be realized on a large scale remains to be seen. Although computers have a great ability to store, manipulate, and communicate large quantities of information at high rates of speed, there is no consensus on their long-term consequences for the structure of organizations and the way work is done in them. For some observers, computers and other information technologies have simply reinforced organizational hierarchies and the division of labor. From this perspective, computerized information-processing technologies have augmented the tendency of capitalism to lower skill requirements by simplifying tasks and converting more and more operations to preprogrammed routines.³⁴ Other observers have been more sanguine about the effects of computers on work organization because, as they see it, computers have empowered many workers by taking over routine procedures and increasing the need for higher-level work activities. While many office tasks such as taking sales orders, billing, and keeping financial accounts are easily handled by computers, others require human involvement of a nonroutine sort. For example, one human quality that cannot inhere in a computer is the ability to build trust. Many transactions, ranging from ordering a blouse costing \$30 to the purchase of a mutual fund worth tens of thousands of dollars, often require more than interaction with an impersonal, computer-based information system. A purchase often entails some discussion and even negotiation regarding price, delivery time, warranties, and so on. Even when buyers have decided to buy one of the organization's products or services, they still may need advice and guidance in order to decide exactly what to get. A computerized system can aid in the decision-making process, but customers need more than advice; they need to have a reason for trusting the advice they get. This requires employees who are knowledgeable about their organization's products and services, are able to communicate this knowledge, and are able to gain the confidence of customers and clients that they are competent and ethical.³⁵

By now, it should be apparent that the shortcomings of bureaucratic organization are mirror images of its advantages. Bureaucracy is an indispensable part of modern life, but a world run solely according to bureaucratic principles would not work very well, and it certainly would be an unpleasant place in which to live. The dilemmas and paradoxes engendered by the bureaucratic organization of our working lives will be a theme to which we will return on several occasions. In the next chapter, we will consider a mode of work organization that operates both in conjunction with and sometimes in opposition to bureaucratic organization: professionalization.

For Discussion

1. In addition to the registration of motor vehicles, what other sorts of activities are well suited to bureaucratic modes of organization? Is anything lost when these activities are bureaucratically organized?
2. In the course of your elementary and high school education, what was the mix of routine and nonroutine learning activities? Which one predominated? Do you think you might have learned more if different teaching strategies had been used?
3. Have you ever worked in a fast-food restaurant or some other enterprise that exhibited some aspects of "McDonaldization"? What were they? On the whole, did they make your job easier or harder? How so?
4. A Nazi official, Adolf Eichmann, infamously defended his role in the slaughter of millions of Jews during the Holocaust by arguing that he was "just following orders." Is this ever an adequate defense for acts done in an organizational setting? Under what circumstances should the exercise of individual responsibility take precedence over doing what the rules, procedures, and hierarchical authorities require?

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