

# The Challenges of Radical Change

**Andrew J. Flanagin**

## **Introduction**

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Choruses of “nice to meet you” were ringing through the office as the introductions took place. As I was presenting my coworker Cheryl\* to the departmental manager, I caught a glimpse across the office of Mary, a longtime employee of the government organization that had brought me in as a computer systems consultant. As I was beginning, “Cheryl, this is . . .,” I saw Mary reaching toward her computer monitor with a brush dripping with Wite-Out® to correct a typo she had made. It was a combination of the formal introduction process I was in the midst of, coupled with the hesitation that an outsider instinctively feels, that stopped me from yelling out.

Now somewhat distracted, I proceeded with the introduction ritual, while at the same time wondering whether my task was to be even more difficult than I had been led to believe. Although Mary had caught herself before actually touching up her computer monitor with the white liquid, it suggested that there was a long way to go before workers here would accept the changes to come. How was I supposed to implement a completely new computerized work process system in a department where some employees were obviously fairly new to computers? Could it be that the average employee still habitually used Wite-Out® rather than the backspace key? If so, how would they ever accept the dramatic changes that I was in charge of

implementing? How would I convince them that the new system was better than the manual one they had used for decades and that change was good?

### **The Consulting Practice and Work Processes at Personnel Services**

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Consulting firms normally bid against each other in order to procure a consulting contract. Usually, a detailed bid is derived from a set of specifications that is drawn up to reflect the nature of the work to be performed for the client. Consultants' bids typically include the scope of work to be performed, a time frame for completion, specific products or *deliverables* that will be part of the job, the qualifications of the firm and possibly of the individuals who will work on the project, and a cost estimate for the work to be done. Through such a process, several consulting firms had competed for a contract to automate and modify the functions of Personnel Services, a large governmental organization.

The overarching task of Personnel Services was to process applicants for the agency's several open job positions (there were 524 separate job titles and, at any given time, dozens of positions that needed to be filled). More specifically, Personnel Services had three main responsibilities: job classification, test development and administration, and recruitment and staffing. Thus, workers in Personnel Services were in charge of classifying all of the agency's jobs by defining the responsibilities of and qualifications for each, developing appropriate assessment criteria in order to evaluate the qualifications of many job applicants, and recruiting internal and external job applicants and selecting the best candidate(s) from among them.

The first two of these tasks—job classification and test development—involved specific education and training and were handled by a very small proportion of the Personnel Services staff. By contrast, job recruitment and staffing required the efforts of approximately three dozen employees at any given time. Mary, whom I had met on my first day in the office as she nearly marked up her computer monitor with Wite-Out,<sup>®</sup> was a typical employee in the Personnel Services department. Her job was to log in and track job applicants as part of the recruitment and staffing process. At the time, this process was done manually on note cards and files, as it had been done for the past 20 years or more. All job processing was performed using paper records where a file was created for each individual, which was then

passed physically from person to person in the department in order to track the progress of each applicant through the job selection process. Old files were sorted manually and stored in huge filing cabinets. After applicants were recommended for interviews based on their test results, departments would interview them and make the final hiring decision; then Personnel Services would finalize the process, filling the position and closing the job request. Like other personnel workers, Mary spent the majority of her time doing data entry and shepherding batches of job applicants through the lengthy testing and evaluation process.

Based on our bid, Leeds and Associates, a medium-sized management systems consulting firm, had been awarded the contract for the project at Personnel Services. The new applicant tracking system, or ATS as it was dubbed, would replace the manual job recruitment and staffing system that had been used at Personnel Services for the last several decades. The ATS, however, would not rely on paper records at all but would instead be entirely computerized. This was to be a radical change for the Personnel Services department.

### **The Consultant's Role**

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At the time, I was a fairly new consultant who had been out of college for only a few years and had just completed my first year working for Leeds. Although I had been involved with perhaps a dozen different consulting projects at this point in my career, this was my first project to manage. As manager, I had full responsibility to bring the project in successfully: on time, on budget, and to the satisfaction of the client. I was the leader of the three-person design team that had approximately six months to complete the redesign and implementation of the work process system that Leeds had contracted to supply. In this case, the cost and time deadlines were very strict, since data from the system had to tie in with a parallel system from another department by a specific date and because any cost overruns would require a special meeting of a legislative body in order to be approved.

My areas of expertise were in software design and work process engineering, with an emphasis on database systems. In other words, I designed and built software that kept track of large amounts of data, enabling many users to dynamically access and update information from remote locations, whether in different parts of the same building or different parts of the world. Although the technical side of the

job could be complex, it was also rather straightforward. Networked computers, database systems, and computer programming languages were the tools that were used to accomplish the necessary communication and information sharing tasks. In this respect, my job was like that of an air traffic controller: To avoid conflicts, I had to know where everything was at all times and make sure that the pieces fit together in a very specific manner.

The most interesting part of the job, however, was the work process reengineering portion of my work. In this role my job was to assess and modify the range of tasks that constituted the basic functions that workers performed in the completion of the organization's mission, of which they were only one part. This aspect of the job was also the most difficult because it dealt fundamentally with social change. In essence, work process reengineering involved locating the most appropriate areas for change in an organization (if any) and then convincing people who are typically entrenched in certain ways of working that there may be advantages to doing their jobs differently. Ultimately, this process required working closely with both management and employees in order to understand organizational objectives, the nature of people's work, and the underlying processes that were important for accomplishing organizational and individual goals. My job was made more difficult by virtue of the fact that, as an external consultant, I was an organizational outsider and was at least initially regarded with a certain degree of distrust.

### **Implementation of the ATS**

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The ATS implementation was particularly challenging, since several of the workers had never done any of their jobs via computer, working instead exclusively with handwritten or typed files that they moved physically from place to place. Furthermore, in addition to automating existing processes, the ATS was also to include a number of new reports and processes that would capitalize on the novel data that would be a fundamental part of the system. Finally, it was anticipated that the ATS would also initiate a number of entirely new functions that could not be predicted until after workers began to appreciate the capabilities of the new system and to recognize the potential changes that were possible.

Past experience had taught me that the most successful implementations of new systems capitalized as much as possible on exist-

ing ways of doing things. For example, such mundane strategies as using existing terminology in new environments to make people more comfortable had proven effective in the past. I recalled, for instance, an office automation project where I had named one portion of the process the “brown folder” function, mimicking the brown folders that had been used to store completed files. This made the new way of doing things more intuitive and familiar to the workers, which led them to accept the changes more easily. I had also learned that taking the input of employees seriously was crucial, as was finding ways to make workers a part of the change process. I knew that this helped reduce the shock of change, provide some sense of ownership of the new methods, and diminish the extent to which they perceived me as an outsider who was inflicting my ways of working upon their own.

### **The Organizational Environment of Personnel Services**

Most of the workers in Personnel Services had been with the department for a very long time, many starting immediately after high school and working their way up the hierarchy for as long as 30 years or more. Although the division offered free skills training as part of a staff education program, the vast majority of employees did not take advantage of this opportunity, preferring to continue in their positions long-term or until the few opportunities for advancement in their own department eventually became available. Thus, due to long tenures and low turnover, employees in the Personnel Services department were extremely familiar with one another, having worked together in close quarters for many years.

Like any group of people under similar circumstances, cliques of workers had developed and some people were better respected than others. For example, Monica, who had been in the department for about 10 years, was friendly, well liked by almost everyone, and highly regarded for her thorough understanding of job procedures and her computer knowledge. Although she was relatively new to the department, she was admired for her sense of humor, her approachable nature, and her high knowledge level. In fact, when discrepancies arose as to how to properly interpret nuances of the job selection criteria, Monica was one of a handful of people to whom others turned for advice. Furthermore, on several occasions Monica had been called on to settle personal conflicts between workers that

had gotten out of hand. So although she was not the highest ranking among the employees, she was clearly among the most respected, both professionally and socially. As one employee noted, "Monica is the one who really holds this place together." There were a few other employees like her in the department who were clearly regarded quite favorably by the vast majority of workers.

### **Implementing Change at Personnel Services**

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As my first task, I began to interview a number of workers to get a clearer sense of their work roles and the ways in which their various tasks fit together to process job applicants. Among the first people I spoke with was Betty, a clerk typist whose job was to enter and process new applicants. Betty was helpful in teaching me about what her job involved, but it was clear she was skeptical of the ATS. Eventually, as Betty and I talked more, she came to share her opinions quite openly. One day, she put her cards on the table. I still recall her words vividly: "We don't need any new system and there's no way in hell we'll use it if it is ever built." When I asked her to explain why she felt the ATS would not be used, she told me that there was no need to alter a method that in her view had been working efficiently for decades. In her words, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Unfortunately, Betty was not alone in this view. As the days progressed, I heard the ATS described as "unnecessary," "a waste of time," and as "another of Linda's pet projects that we'll never use," referring to the manager of the division who had made the decision to adopt the ATS in the first place. Perhaps the most extreme position I heard was from Sharon, a senior clerk who was a few years away from retirement, who said to me one day in the hallway, "You know, if you do build this ATS, I'll boycott it . . . it's just a few more years for me here, and I'm not about to learn a whole new way of doing things." Overall, although there was also support for the new system, employees seemed not to share their manager's view that the current method of processing applications was cumbersome and inefficient. Furthermore, they did not comprehend the extent to which their department was lagging behind others in the organization and how they desperately needed to automate and update their work processes in order to better mesh with other units.

Betty and other workers also made me aware of another fact: The project had been oversold to the minority of workers who were

receptive to the ATS. For example, one day I was interviewing Mark, a fairly new employee at Personnel Services. Mark mentioned that he was looking forward to a reporting feature that I knew was beyond the scope of the ATS, and I had to tell him that it would not actually support this function. The look of disappointment on his face was obvious as he replied, "Oh, that's too bad, I thought it would. That would have helped me a lot." Similarly, there were times I had to tell other workers that things they had been told that the ATS could do were not possible, even with modification to the current design. I got reactions ranging from a blunt and disappointed "Oh" to "Well, I wish they hadn't told us it would do that then."

Clearly, many features that employees perceived to be part of the ATS were actually beyond its capabilities, a misunderstanding that I feared might be in part responsible for their support of the system. In view of the resistance to the ATS by many employees who were quite set in their work methods, the potential disappointment that supportive employees might feel when the completed ATS did not meet their lofty expectations, and the strict budget and time frame we had to work within, I was skeptical that the project could ever succeed. I could not help hearing Betty's words from our last formal session together over and over again: "Good luck with the project. Maybe you can make it work." At this point, I was having plenty of doubt.

### **The Future of Implementation at Personnel Services**

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Thus, just a few days into the project, I was facing what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles to the successful implementation of the ATS. Furthermore, on a personal and professional level, I was a junior consultant in my first role as a project manager, and I was facing failure. From past experience, I was certain that no matter how good the software and hardware were, people would not use the system unless they were convinced of its value to them personally. Also, I knew that the key to its acceptance was not only the value of the ATS itself. Rather, people operate within social climates of complex relations that influence their reactions to things, such as the implementation of new technologies. If the ATS project were to succeed, these things would have to be taken into account and dealt with directly. Still, I wasn't certain how to garner the commitment of the employees and convince them that it was in their best interest to support the ATS project. Given these obstacles, I couldn't help but won-

der if Personnel Services was destined to retain the methods of the past rather than embracing current technology, even if the old and new methods clashed like Wite-Out® on a computer monitor.

It was under these circumstances that I walked to a downtown restaurant one afternoon to meet Dick Leeds, the president and founder of the company, for our monthly meeting. We greeted each other and took seats at a table by the window, looking out across the downtown skyline. After we had settled in, chatted a bit, and ordered our lunch, Dick posed the inevitable question, "So, how is the Personnel Services project coming along?" I took a deep breath and began. . . . ♦

\* This case has been developed based on real organization(s) and real organizational experiences. Names, facts, and situations have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals and organizations.

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