

3E6 Organizational Behaviour and Change: Crib 2006 (revised, May 23 2006).

These questions are tailored to meet the particular needs of engineering students taking what is a qualitative, social science based course so that they are neither disadvantaged by lack of background knowledge but also not precluded from displaying excellence. Thus each question is structured to test a) descriptive knowledge b) analytical skill c) critical awareness. Thus answers are decreasingly tightly specified across the three parts of each question. This approach has the advantage of allowing candidates with no background in the subject to score marks for descriptive knowledge whilst also offering candidates who, despite a lack of background, have developed a more sophisticated understanding to gain very high marks by demonstrating flair. In part c) answers, especially, there is scope for very considerable variation in answers – and marks.

1 a). Candidates have to make an argument for or against the idea that OB is a science. In order to do so they must define what they mean by a science and then use their knowledge of OB to assess its validity as a scientific endeavour. As such they may touch upon the generalisability of the knowledge that OB creates, flagging experiments associated with the Hawthorne studies, groups, etc. For example, candidates may examine the scientific status of theories of motivation in relation to science, and conclude that cultural variability may mean some approaches to motivation are not generalisable. Candidates will also note that much research in OB is scientific if the latter is defined as a systematic, rational and research based knowledge that may be used to inform practice. In order to make this point, one could make a simple distinction between a study of corporate culture and performance that uses a survey of 200 firms and the anecdotal knowledge of an individual manager.

b). This question opens up the issue of science more broadly and is aimed to have candidates reflect on how social science (of which OB is a part of) and the natural sciences differ. Candidates ought to make a number of key distinctions and use examples from the class and readings to illustrate their points. Social science differs from natural science because the 'objects' of social science, because people have 'agency' or choice – they are 'subjects' as well as 'objects'. Moreover, human behaviour varies over time and culture. People exist within a 'social structure' that is always changing and it is thus difficult to develop universal axioms and laws. Social science is also different because people can and do act differently in response to the way they are treated, including studying them and making predictions about them (e.g., the Hawthorne Studies). And social science itself is influenced by value judgements and political beliefs.

c). This question is aimed to have candidates think about the science of OB from a political perspective. In doing this, they ought to unpack the value-bias of many OB ideas and in particular recognize that OB knowledge in an organizational context has political assumptions and implications. This is because members of the organization often do not share the same interests, and those with the most power will have their interests and ideas prevail. More engaged students might examine how some OB ideas are designed to create shared interests and harmonious sentiments (e.g., culture management). Whose interest does this serve?

2 a). Groups are an important aspect of organizational life because a). while some work in organizations is done by individuals on their own, it is more often done in groups or teams b). group or teamwork is almost certainly becoming increasingly important because of quality circles, self-managing teams, projects, etc. c). individuals are always affected by group dynamics – the social psychology of interaction – and often in very complicated ways which operate at both unconscious and conscious levels of experience.

b). Candidates ought to answer this question in a manner that illustrates their understanding of group dynamics and processes. They will refer to the different ways in which the risk level of individual and group decisions is distributed. Under experimental conditions, risk-taking of individuals follows a simple normal distribution across a population. Some individuals will be risk adverse, most will take moderate risks, and some will take overtly risky decisions. The risk distribution of group decisions follows a much more complex pattern. Group decisions cluster around high and low risk propositions. That is to say, risk-taking by groups has a skewed binomial distribution i.e. groups are substantially more likely to take more high-risk decisions and somewhat more likely to take low risk decisions. The high-risk propensity is attributable to individuals feeling protected from decision consequence (they freeload risk) and to group hysteria (a version of group think) whilst the low risk cluster reflects drift to the lowest common denominator decision, probably attributable to conflict-avoidance.

c). Groupthink occurs when a group becomes infatuated with its own group norms so that individual judgment is lost. This leads to poor decision-making and an inability to recognize changed circumstances. This is one explanation of why successful organizations fail to adapt to new situations and go into decline. Psychologically it may be associated with group-level projections and introjections (e.g. 'we' are perfect; 'they' are useless). More engaged candidates may mention the empirical bases of this idea as it was explained by Ervin Janis. The idea of group think can be illustrated by the conformity experiments conducted by Asch. A group of people is primed to give the (same) wrong answer to the question – which of the lines A, B, C, D on the right is the same length as the line on the left. The research subject has not been primed, but gives the same (wrong) answer as everyone else. This reflects dynamics of groupthink. It is partly caused by peer pressure but it is also the case that the research subject cognitively misperceives the lines. Group think can affect the organization when it comes to making sensible, informed and rational decisions. If the decision-making group is isolated and self-contained, then group think may take place. Examples are strategic decisions making and decisions during times of crisis or competitive pressure.

3 a). According to Hechscher, the main features of the 'ideal-type' post-bureaucratic organization (PBO) are consensus/dialogue not rules, dialogue based on influence not status, influence based on trust, trust based on shared values, competence not authority, competence is public knowledge rather than private, network not hierarchy, open boundaries in the organization that creates an open system, individual treatment and recognition, and work processes that are flexible as time horizons change. Candidates may also mention organizations that proceed on an ad hoc basis in relation to work systems, information and structures. Projects are a good example of these post-bureaucratic organizations.

b). The post-bureaucratic organization is said to be superior to traditional bureaucracies for a number of reasons. First of all, it represents an open system and therefore flexibility, where as the bureaucratic organization tends to be more mechanical. Because the business environment has change so much in recent years, the more open post-bureaucratic approach to organizational form is more adaptable and agile. It can renew itself and redesign its process quicker. Moreover, it is more response to the environment since it is designed to gather and use information, where as traditional bureaucracies tended to be a bit less so. The post-bureaucratic approach also represents a different management style in which individual goals and difference are respected. Self-managing teams, culture management and the fostering professional skills means that motivation is generally more vibrant than in bureaucratic firms, which tend to engender alienation, anomie and inflexibility. Engaged candidates may even compare the advantages of the post-bureaucratic firm with the dysfunctions of the traditional bureaucracy.

c). There are a number of limitations in the research that argues we have entered a post-bureaucratic age. There is debate about whether it is new. Bennis (1966) predicted the 'death of bureaucracy' and Burns & Stalker (1961) identified two main types of organizational form, one of which was the open system. This looks a lot like post-bureaucracy. The PBO case rests on a small number of cases, often the same ones repeated by different authors, often in very high-tech and knowledge intensive business sectors: are these representative? And if so, of what – organizations globally or just in highly developed countries? How do we interpret evidence e.g. does 'delaying' mean less hierarchy? Does increased 'homeworking' mean a growth of high-tech knowledge work or low-tech 'putting-out'? Does the growth of the service economy mean a new kind of work or more traditional, routine work (catering, call centres etc)? Does 'de-division' of labour mean increased skill and empowerment or just multi-function technology? Moreover, the fact that bureaucracy is still a strong organizational force is often glossed over in the research. The end of bureaucracy is 'always around the corner' – predicted but never arriving – and post-bureaucracy is overhyped. Much of the literature is a 'celebration' rather than an accurate assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the post-bureaucratic form. Therefore, it forgets that traditional bureaucracy is actually useful in some environments. And the human cost of high-autonomy, low security and cultural controls is ignored.

4 a). Candidates can explore the popularity of change management in the area of OB from a variety of perspectives. The business environment is said to be changing more and more rapidly as business cycles shorten. This, organizations need to know how to change more effectively and efficiently, and hence the popularity of this idea. It could also be argued that organizations have also needed to change (and have done so – e.g., people come and go, equipment wears out) and as our knowledge expands in relation to OB, we have discovered better methods of managing change. More sceptical candidates may argue that change management is popular because it has succeeded becoming a 'business fad'. As such it is promoted and consumed as a 'fix all' panacea. Finally, the popularity of change can be linked to a broader wave of ideas associated with Business Process Re-engineering, downsizing and culture management, much of which has a controlling influence on the work process.

b). The political change model recognizes that organisations are political systems in which different individuals and/or groups seldom share similar interests or goals.

Therefore, change management will take place in a context of politics and power. The political change model recognizes change as a process by which individuals and groups compete over what the organization should do. Decisions reflect the political skill and power of these individuals and groups. The implementation of change is an exercise in the relative power of those involved. Engaged candidates will explain that this model was proposed because organizations are not 'super-individuals' but collections of individuals, therefore the definition of organizational purposes is not a given but depends on which view gets accepted as being that of the whole organization i.e. a political process. Moreover, because rationality is bounded, questions about how it is limited will be subject to dispute. Power and politics will influence the answers accepted. The Challenger Disaster video can be drawn into this question.

c). Change is resisted for a number of reasons and in a number of different ways. It may be because people have a fear of new things and therefore experience anxiety when contemplating change. Therefore, they do not participate in the change process. If we place the question of resistance to change in a political context, resistance may emerge because change threatens their material or psychological well being. Much of the time, change is assumed to result in conditions that are worse off rather than better off. Individuals may resist change if the process has been badly managed. For example, it may be that they do not know why change is being implemented, or don't believe the reasons given. Resistance may also stem from the fact that sometimes individuals are unsure of the effects or results and don't think the change will work.