

Max weber's theory of bureaucracy in office space



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When a person thinks of the word bureaucracy, negative feelings may start to arise. Bureaucracy is often known as the “red tape” that makes it impossible to get things done in society today. The comical film *Office Space* shows in its opening scene what being involved in bureaucracy might feel like; a traffic jam. However, to Max Weber, bureaucracy is something inevitable and also establishes the most efficient and rational way that work activities could be organized. *Office Space* highlights Weber's principles of bureaucracy in a satirical way that illustrates how bureaucracy can sometimes stray away from efficiency and become problematic.

The first principle of bureaucracy that Weber (1978: 956) identifies is that of official jurisdictional areas. Put simply, this means that every bureaucracy has its own specialized areas, almost like departments. The main protagonist in *Office Space*, Peter Gibbons, and his coworkers Michael Bolton and Samir work in the software engineering department of the company Initech. According to Weber (1978: 956), the activities that Peter, Michael and Samir must perform such as TPS reports and changing the dates in the banking software are official duties since they are performed within their area of specialization. Since they are software engineers, that is what they are expected to do, just as Bill Lumbergh, Peter's boss is expected to fulfill his duties that are managerial. Weber (1978: 956) also emphasized that employees in these specialized areas must be fully qualified, and that only certain people are able to hold authority over another person. This idea of authority then translates into Weber's next principle of hierarchy of authority.

The hierarchy of authority in *Office Space* is pretty evident within the first ten minutes. Along with Bill Lumbergh as Peter's boss, it is stated that Peter has seven other bosses as well. The organizational structure of Initech is horizontally complex as there are eight middle managers assumptively doing the same exact job. The relationship between Peter and his bosses is " a clearly established system of super- and sub- ordination in which there is a supervision of the lower offices by the higher ones" (Weber 1978: 957). The differentiation of the levels of authority is evident when the employees talk about their salaries or seeing who has certain privileges such as a front row parking spot that Lumbergh has for his Porsche. These positions in the company create a set of rules and regulations that people follow based on their status in the hierarchy. For instance, when Peter neglected to put a coversheet on his TPS report, it is the duty of each of his eight managers to confront him and remind him about the memo he should have received about the coversheet according to the rules and regulations of their status.

The memo about putting a coversheet on the TPS reports is the best example of Weber's principle that management is based on written documents (1978: 957). Weber states that " The management of the modern office is based upon written documents (the " files"), which are preserved in their original or draft form, and upon a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts" (1978: 957). *Office Space* is set in 1998 where technology such as email was just gaining popularity in the workplace, so there was still use of physical documents for memos, personnel files and reports. This principle seemed to be symbolized by the work printer as Peter and his coworkers' consistently experienced difficulties with it, therefore the machine inherited

the symbol of the workplace frustration that is seen. At one point in the film Peter actually steals the machine so Michael and Samir can join him in destroying it, which may symbolize the fall of the current bureaucracy at Initech, and the start of a new one with Peter's promotion. Along with the physical written documents, Weber (1978: 958) also states that employee's must meet a certain qualification for their position.

Technical competence is crucial to an organization's success, which is why Weber states that employees should go through " training in a field of specialization" (1978: 958). However, in the film, we watch as Initech hires two consultants to come in and give recommendations on how to help the organizational structure perform more efficiently. The consultants, to no one's surprise, find that not all employees contribute to the efficiency of the organization itself, therefore they do not have the necessary specialization skills or competence. The bureaucracy at Initech is flawed itself and has transformed into something inefficient and unnecessary. Peter identifies with this as he tells the consultants that he only gets 15 minutes of work done in a week, which is the exact opposite of an efficient and productive employee. In fact, Peter gets punished in a sense by Lumbergh for not being efficient as he completed a TPS report incorrectly without a coversheet. Due to this performance, he is ordered to work over the weekend, both Saturday and Sunday. Since Peter did not work at his full capacity, which is another principle Weber identified, he was faced with consequences.

Office Space clearly illustrates that it may be difficult for some employees to work at their full capacity day after day, doing the same thing. Yet, Weber sees it as a crucial element to a bureaucracy as he states, " When the office

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is fully developed, official activity demands the full working capacity of the official" (1978: 958). Not only does an organization expect workers to deliver with their full working capacity, but they *demand* it. Another instance of an employee going against this principle is Joanna and her job at the restaurant 'Chotchkie's'. She is criticized by her boss for only wearing the minimum amount, 15 pieces, of "flare". Since she was not performing at her full capacity, it was not good enough compared to her coworker and his 37 pieces of "flare". Joanna then questions her boss, asking him why he would not make the minimum 37 instead of 15, demanding some more stable and exhaustive rules from her boss, which is also Weber's last principle of bureaucracy.

It is paramount for management to have rules that are stable, exhaustive and can be easily learned by employees (Weber 1978: 958). Bureaucracy depends on a strict set of processes to work efficiently, which is helped by a rigid set of rules. Knowledge of these rules identifies professionalism and specialization among employees. In fact, Weber goes as far to argue that "the reduction of modern office management to rules is deeply embedded in its very nature" (1978: 958). Employees in an organization like Initech rely on a set of rules to guide themselves, and to be able to meet the expectations of their employer.

With these principles of bureaucracy that Weber outlined, it seems that the employees of Initech have become stuck in what Weber called the iron cage. The iron cage traps individuals in certain types of societies, such as a capitalistic one, where there is much emphasis on rationality, and control. Perhaps the iron cage becomes the cubicle of the Initech employees, only

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broken by Peter when he unhinges the top part of his cubicle and it comes crashing down. The principles of bureaucracy by Max Weber were apparent in the film *Office Space*, which goes to show that bureaucracy may not always work as it is supposed to or designed to, and that it traps people in a routine style of life.

References

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