Bureaucracy: An Analysis
Introduction

Bureaucracy is known to be one of the key words associated with governmental agencies and the governments themselves. Lately, they have been synonymous with ineffective decision making, no empowerment and general lack of progress due to bureaucratic systems.

There has been a lot discussed about bureaucracy in government systems and their effects and the way they help and hamper the working and interactions of the systems with each other. But bureaucracy is not only limited to the above, it permeates all the public private organizations equally. The effect of bureaucracy is sometimes vivid, while it’s hidden in plain sight in some other places.

In this report, we will analyse what constitutes a bureaucratic environment within workplaces. We will also analyse the effect of such environments with regards to the advantages and the disadvantages that such systems bring and we will also take a look at such systems from a future point of view to check how sustainable these systems really are. The aim of this essay would be to arrive at a conclusion about the viability of bureaucracies in today’s changing economic and official environment and the impact that bureaucratic system have on them. During the course of the report, we would be researching based on a number of scholarly articles and academic journals to better understand the topic at hand and give an unbiased report on the same.

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Bureaucracy is a system, a process at the heart of which lies a hierarchy. The hierarchy defines the flow of command and the level of decision making power. A lower level designation will always require a higher level approval for each and every decision that has to be made. Every decision has to have the consent of a chain of command in the hierarchy.

As given by Adler, there has been a great rush amongst companies to rid themselves of bureaucratic shackles and get their workforce moving along more efficiently with faster decision making process and less red tape. But in some sense, this entire exercise is misguided. Bureaucracy does come with its fair share of downfalls, the major ones being the time taken to make a decision and the efficiency of the organization as a whole. Some of the other side effects include widespread employee alienation due to senior-junior differences being emphasised in everyday work. But, sometimes, to provide efficiency and control over an organizations system, a certain level of bureaucratic environment is required (Adler, 1999).
Let’s take an example of a creative advertising agency and of a run of the mill manufacturing company. The advertising agency will find it hard to implement a bureaucracy, should not be advised to allow bureaucracy to overtake its systems and in general is a complete misfit for bureaucratic systems. This is because the type of work that an advertising agency does, it needs creative freedom of thought and action which drives its employees to achieve more. A bureaucracy will restrict the employees at every step and curtail their creative outlets which are counterproductive to the organizational goals. At the other end of the spectrum, in manufacturing setups, the job is mostly repetitive and requires that the upper management have a strong control over the middle and junior management. In such cases, a bureaucratic setup is more helpful as it asserts a chain of command for the system to work efficiently (Johnson et al, 2009).

Adler puts forth two types of bureaucracies which are present and are different from each other: there is the conventional type of bureaucracy which aims to control the authority that every employee has and gives the control of the employee to their higher ups. In the second type of bureaucracy, the aim is to enable the higher ups to enable the performers to perform better by using the control in their hands to motivate them and to reward them accordingly. The keyword in the first type is coercion and in the second one, it is enablement.

Balle(1999) has a different view of the bureaucratic systems. The bureaucratic systems are characterised by the co-ordinations within them, and thrive on economies of scale. The bigger the organization, the better it is for the organization to have a bureaucracy. Hence, bureaucracy does have the advantage of being more effective to control masses in huge organizations. The standardization of processes makes the system work efficiently and helps co-ordinate within different verticals of the organization. Big businesses and corporations are difficult to manage without bureaucratic systems and bureaucracies have ensured that the companies have prospered up till now and will continue to do so in the future. The key to their success has been the bureaucratic process which gives them greater levels of control in the organization. Hence, the instead of doing away with the bureaucracy altogether, companies should be making the bureaucracies work effectively by making small changes in the way they work. The rules which govern the bureaucratic systems often restrict the employees from doing their duties effectively and become more of a hindrance. Too many rules tend to confuse the employees. The cost of maintaining a bureaucratic system is also more (Balle, 2009).

Dwyer put forth some glaring disadvantages like the way bureaucracies work on basis of strict rules, and tend to serve their own goals instead of the goals of the organization. The bureaucratic systems become dysfunctional to the organization. Also, working solely based on rules and regulations
creates problems when there is a need to work beyond the rules. In such cases, the managers are not able to think out of the box and get stuck within the webs of rules pre-defined processes. The devotion to rules might actually lead to a displacement of goals and the managers may lose sight of the goals that they should be achieving (Dwyer, 2006).

Hales in his article, specifies that there have been many claims of paradigm change in organizations who have claimed to take out bureaucracy in a wholesale way and gone for an independent network dependent structure in their organizations. But, on closer inspection, the systems show that there has not been a change in the hierarchical structure of the system. There still is control from the higher ups on junior people. The levels of hierarchy have come down a bit but they have not been entirely moved or restructured. Thus, instead of claiming to have removed bureaucratic processes, the system only seems to have changed a bit in a few places (Hales, 2002).

The article also highlights that bureaucracies have been susceptible to periodic re-structuring efforts which aim at cutting down the fat from the system by way of reviewing the rulebooks and phasing out many of the old rules which are redundant and no longer relevant. The key difference between the post bureaucratic systems and bureaucracy is the removal of rigid structures. The emphasis is on the team instead of individuals. The performances are measured at a team level, which are collectively responsible for the product. Hence, the accountability and the internal relationships are horizontal across different teams rather vertical amongst managers and the hierarchical structures.

One of the biggest advantages of these changes is that the managers in the post bureaucracy structures are no longer limited to the routine administration, supervision, planning and monitoring of the work of his subordinates. But, now the manager is empowered to spur the creative process of the subordinates and think of ways to carry out work and tasks more efficiently in a better manner. The encouragement for innovation at the workplace becomes a reality in such cases as routine time consuming processes are replaced by the better ones. This in turn leads to better leadership than just resource management. Managers tend to become leaders instead of becoming agents of resource allocations and management (Walton, 2005).

The naysayers of the new post bureaucratic systems point out that the systems cut down on the managerial positions, but also lead to creation of more pressure on the managers. They are now responsible for a wider set of tasks than before which are more in sync with managing the business as a whole rather than limiting to managing a process or a function.

Hodgson also echoes the same reasoning as his peers. He proposes two terms in the post bureaucratic world which is very important and quite different from each other – de-
bureaucratization and re-bureaucratization. It is pointed out that all the talk about making workplaces more flexible and less driven by hierarchical structures and more attuned to creativity and independence is being packaged as de-bureaucratization. But in actuality, this change is more re-bureaucratization wherein the manner of bureaucracy is being changed without removing it completely (Hodgson, 2004).

When compared to bureaucratic organizations, the major difference in the post-bureaucratic systems is the need for internal trust. While trust is not necessary in bureaucracies where the directive is to follow orders, it is very important when people are more independent. The emphasis shifts from rules and regulations to organization missions. The decision making process is also different where in the flexibility of the decision making process is more in the latter. The expectations are also different – a bureaucratic organization expects a person to demonstrate consistency while the latter expects change (Sorenson, 2007).

The bureaucratic management in today’s world cannot flourish given the amount of controls that bureaucracy requires. The organizations require being more dynamic and flexible to respond quickly and efficiently to the challenges being posed by the global markets every day. It isn’t like the older times when the organizational threats were more internal than external. The organizations are more prone to external changes which require them to be less bureaucratic and more dynamic.

**Conclusion:**

In today’s economic scenario, the competitive advantage that any organization holds is more or less linked to its people. To enhance this advantage, the organizations need to give more freedom to its employees to think better. At the same time, we cannot completely ignore the ability of bureaucratic systems to give control to big organizations which is also important. Hence, instead of removing bureaucracy completely, organizations should be working on implementing it such that the disadvantages are taken care of.

As we have seen in the arguments presented above, the bureaucratic systems provide more control in the hierarchy. This is necessary to keep things in control. But, the above systems are more often than not used to demonstrate more power in the system. This tendency to show power and override needs to be controlled by keeping limits on the impact of bureaucracy in the system. As we have seen above, the bureaucratic systems tend to be more process oriented which focus more on rules being followed. What needs to be done today is to keep some amount of control while giving the managers freedom to take executive decisions on their own so that they develop leadership qualities
and become in house entrepreneurs working within the organization to create new ideas and innovate.
References