ORGANIZATIONAL PERCEPTIONS
OF
EMPOWERMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment is identified as managerial concept of dual extremes – much exalted by disciples who argue for its role as a universal panacea for all organisational ills; and much maligned by critics who dismiss it as nothing more than an amalgam of the various humanistic theories that have come before it. The predominance of journalistic and anecdotal research data is acknowledged, as is the vocabulary of hyperbole and rhetoric that surrounds the concept.

In light of the apparent absence of a recognised ‘school of thought’ or a well-researched body of evidence to support the concept, the extent and nature of the different practical forms of organisational change portrayed as ‘empowerment’ are explored, together with their causes, conditions and outcomes. A working definition of empowerment as ‘the transference of functional (as opposed to positional) authority’ is proposed.

In methodological terms, this thesis is positioned at the theory building rather than theory testing stage, with the objective to seek a degree of understanding of how and why the concept is adopted and utilised, rather than seeking definitive proof of existence. Five organisations across five different industry sectors (Municipal Civil Engineering, Electronic Manufacturing, Chemical, Parcel Delivery, and Leisure Tourism) are identified as making a public commitment to the empowerment of their employees. In the interests of confidentiality, the identity of each organisation is withheld, and they are referred to as: Citycorp, TelCo, ChemCo, ParcelCo, and Funworld respectively.

Comparative case studies are developed of each ‘empowerment’ initiative in order to reach an understanding of how each organisation perceived the concept – what they understood it to mean and what they thought it could do for their organisation. Research evidence was gathered from in-depth interviews with key informants, primary and secondary documentary evidence, and direct observation by the researcher.

In conclusion, no evidence of a functional transference of authority is found. A dichotomy between the apparent naivete of empowerment theory and the pragmatic reality of empowerment practice is identified, along with a definite opportunistic and utilitarian approach to the concept by each of the five candidate organisations.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>INTERPRETATIONS OF EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.1</td>
<td>DEFINITIONS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.2</td>
<td>IDEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.2.1</td>
<td>Discretionary Output</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.2.2</td>
<td>The Rationalisation of Work</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.2.3</td>
<td>The Role of Management</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.3</td>
<td>QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.4</td>
<td>QUALITATIVE RESEARCH</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.5</td>
<td>THEORETICAL ANTECEDENTS OF EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.5.1</td>
<td>Empowerment &amp; Scientific Management</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.5.2</td>
<td>Empowerment &amp; Worker Participation</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.6</td>
<td>MOTIVES FOR EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.7</td>
<td>THE PERSISTENCE OF EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>EMPOWERMENT, INSTITUTIONALISM &amp; ISOMORPHISM</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.1</td>
<td>INSTITUTIONAL THEORY</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.2</td>
<td>THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.3</td>
<td>ISOMORPHISM</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.4</td>
<td>IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>FORMS OF EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>THE IRREDUCIBLE CORE OF EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1</td>
<td>Scandinavian Airline Systems (SAS)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.2</td>
<td>SEMCO</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.3</td>
<td>Lessons to be Learned</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.5 A MODEL OF EMPOWERMENT
1.6 CONCLUSIONS
1.7 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
  1.7.1 A PRAGMATIC RESEARCH STRATEGY

2.0 METHODOLOGY
  2.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
  2.1.1 A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
  2.1.2 AN EXPLORATORY STUDY
  2.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
    2.2.1 TRIANGULATION
    2.2.2 QUALITATIVE vs. QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH
  2.3 RESEARCH DESIGN
    2.3.1 GROUNDED THEORY
  2.4 SELECTION OF RESEARCH SAMPLE
  2.5 DATA COLLECTION
  2.6 PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED
  2.7 DATA ANALYSIS
    2.7.1 DATA REDUCTION
    2.7.2 DATA DISPLAY
    2.7.3 CONCLUSION DRAWING & VERIFICATION OF FINDINGS
  2.8 CONCLUSIONS
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>DELIVERING THE MAGIC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1</td>
<td>DTM IN PRACTICE</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2</td>
<td>COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>EVIDENCE OF EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1</td>
<td>DEFINITION &amp; LEADERSHIP</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2</td>
<td>POLICIES &amp; PROCEDURES</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3</td>
<td>JOB REDESIGN</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.4</td>
<td>SKILLS TRAINING</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.5</td>
<td>PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT SYSTEMS</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.6</td>
<td>REWARD &amp; RECOGNITION SYSTEMS</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>CASE STUDY #4 – CITYCORP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>BACKGROUND</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>THE ROAD TO EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1</td>
<td>THE CONSULTANT/CLIENT SPLIT</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2</td>
<td>'VCT' &amp; 'CCT'</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3</td>
<td>THE WORKING PARTY</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.4</td>
<td>'FINDERS, MINDERS, &amp; GRINDERS'</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>EVIDENCE OF EMPOWERMENT</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1</td>
<td>THE PREVALENCE OF 'DIS-EMPOWERMENT'</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2</td>
<td>EMPOWERMENT BY DEFAULT</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 7.0 CASE STUDY #5 – PARCELCO

#### 7.1 BACKGROUND

#### 7.2 THE PROMISE OF EMPOWERMENT – ORGANISING FOR QUALITY LEADERSHIP (OQL)

- 7.2.1 THE PROFITABILITY MODEL
- 7.2.2 HEAD OFFICE

#### 7.3 EVIDENCE OF EMPOWERMENT – OQL IN PRACTICE

- 7.3.1 “INFORMATION HOOVERING”
- 7.3.2 THE MAGAZINE ‘X’ CONTRACT
- 7.3.3 EMPOWERMENT ON THE ‘FRONT-LINE’
- 7.3.4 EMPOWERMENT BY DEFAULT

#### 7.4 CONCLUSIONS

- 7.4.1 UNDERSTANDING & AWARENESS
- 7.4.2 ‘WALKING THE TALK’
- 7.4.3 “SPECIAL PROJECTS”
- 7.4.4 THE FUTURE FOR PARCELCO

### 8.0 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

#### 8.1 A WORKING MODEL

#### 8.2 A ‘CONSEQUENTIAL’ MODEL

- 8.2.1 KEY FACTORS

#### 8.3 SUMMARY OF CASE FINDINGS

- 8.3.1 PURPOSE
- 8.3.2 COGNITION
- 8.3.3 STRATEGY
- 8.3.4 SHARED INFORMATION
- 8.3.5 SKILLS TRAINING
- 8.3.6 MANAGEMENT PROCESS (POLICIES & PROCEDURES)
- 8.3.7 REWARD & RECOGNITION
7. a) Key Informants Interviewed 293
   b) Primary & Secondary Evidence 294
   c) Interview Questions 295

11.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY 298

FIGURES:

1. ‘Conger & Kanungo Model’ 54
2. ‘The Consequential Model’ 216
1.0 THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

1.1 INTERPRETATIONS OF EMPOWERMENT

Over the last two decades, ‘empowerment’ has attracted the interest of many organisational theorists and management practitioners (Argyris, 1998; Block, 1987; Burke, 1986; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1997; Kanter, 1983; Lashley, 1994; Neilson, 1986; Simons, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) as a concept which appears to offer tremendous potential in the enhancement of organisational effectiveness (Barner, 1994; Boer, 1991; Brown & Brown, 1994; Clutterbuck, 1994; Harvey-Jones, 1994; Kanter, 1983; Peters & Austin, 1985; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Indeed, the concept is now of sufficient reputation to justify a separate journal (Empowerment In Organisations – MCB Press) offering a series of case histories and earnest opinion pieces (primarily journalistic and theoretical) as to the vital importance of this concept in the world of organisational theory. However, the apparent outcome of all this attention has been at best an abstract awareness of the concept of empowerment, and at worst an ill-defined theoretical construct which seems to promise much but offers little in terms of evidence or a detailed methodology. As such, empowerment appears to have risen to prominence with no agreed-upon definition of what the concept is, and no clear picture of what processes are involved.

In this context, it is possible to identify a spectrum of opinion. At one end, critics dismiss empowerment as “an amazing propaganda coup”, (Koch & Godden, 1997) or “just another human resources idea”, (Darling, 1996). At the other end, advocates envision a world of “an ongoing interpersonal relationship that fosters mutual trust between employer and employees (and which) permits individuals to strive towards continuous improvement in quality, productivity, superior customer service, and vendor negotiations with minimal personal or professional risk and cost.” (Khan, 1997).
In either event, the concept of empowerment appears to offer a direct challenge to the traditional bureaucratic modus operandi of an organisation, with Fayol’s management functions — to plan, organise, co-ordinate, motivate, and control — no longer being the exclusive remit of a manager. Instead employees are offered a new environment of “autonomous decision-making capabilities and (a role as) partners in the business”, (Ettorre, 1997), with the corresponding benefits for the organisation being that “productivity accelerates, absenteeism falls, and job satisfaction increases”, (Ward, 1996)

### 1.1.1 DEFINITIONS

The literal definition of the verb ‘to empower’ is ‘to give someone power’. The exact nature of the ‘power’ being given, and the roles to be played by the donors and recipients of that ‘power’ remain unclear. Current interpretations offer a multiplicity of definitions and applications.

In Medicine, for example, rapid recovery times have been claimed through ‘empowerment’ of the patient for such conditions as Multiple Sclerosis (Murphy Miller, 1993), chemical dependency (Heyward, 1992), and developmental handicaps (Brown, Bayer & Brown, 1994). In these contexts, the process of empowerment is presented not as a conscious devolution of ‘power’ from the care provider to the patient, but rather as a means of enabling patients to *cope* with their condition and to develop a sense of *control* over the outcome of their illness.

In Local Government, urban decay is now being addressed via a similar enabling methodology whereby community ‘powerlessness’ is overcome by ‘empowerment’ or ‘enterprise’ zoning of property for capital investment and re-development.

In Education, the implementation of school reform is advocated through the ‘empowerment’ of teachers in order to reshape teaching and learning processes
In the commercial arena, the practical application of the concept of empowerment has been somewhat different. Any grand notions of autonomy, self-efficacy, or curing worker 'powerlessness' have been overshadowed by the more pragmatic pursuit of promises of a sustained market advantage through reduced managerial bureaucracy, increased employee commitment, more responsive customer service levels, and continuous improvement in product and service quality. It is the bottom line rather than a general concern for employee wellbeing that has driven the interest in empowerment. In this framework, power is seen as: “The ability to get things done, to mobilise resources, to get and use whatever it is that a person needs for the goals he or she is attempting to meet.” (Kanter, 1977, p.166).

Thus, perceptions of empowerment can be seen to range from: “a technique for raising productivity through increased employee commitment” (Scott & Jaffe, 1993), through a “magic wand” such that employees are empowered “like the Fairy Godmother’s transformation of Cinderella before the ball” (Dean & Evans, 1994), to an ideology of minimal substance, much like “The Emperor’s New Clothes” (Argyris, 1998). The pursuit of more fundamental definitions of the concept can be fruitful but serves only to identify a wide spectrum of interpretation.

Typically the purpose of empowerment is seen as instrumental - it is seen as a means to other corporate ends - with the result that the concept has usually been adopted as a short-term tactical manoeuvre rather than as a means to long-term corporate change. The full implication of a company-wide commitment to an empowerment programme has yet to be quantified.
The allure of empowerment can be seen to lie in the fact that it appears to offer all things to all men. Employees are promised increased job satisfaction through freedom from oppressive managerial rule, greater autonomy in the workplace, and increased ownership of their work. Organisations are promised happier and more productive workers, greater creativity and innovation from those workers, and increased operating efficiency through the ‘delayering’ of the bureaucratic corporate pyramid. The only people with anything to lose are the designated ‘middle managers’, between senior management and the workers on the ‘front-line’, whose fate appears to be sealed in the ‘delayering’ process.

Thus far, empowerment has been addressed as a concept that involves a series of indeterminate processes for its implementation. For further analysis, greater clarity of definition is warranted – is empowerment a substantive theory, or an ideology with a set of generally accepted tenets? A theory suggests the presence of a testable hypothesis. An ideology suggests a series of beliefs or convictions based on perceptions of events compiled into a series of tenets or a distinct dogma. In light of the fact that the apparent prominence of empowerment is built on a framework of singular, simplistic, and commonly subjective case studies, rather than a body of documented and robust research data, it would appear that the concept fits neither definition – it is a poorly tested theory and an ideology of questionable merit built on dissident opinion instead of general consensus.

The underlying logic of the concept is deceptively simple – employees are worth more and can contribute more than simple production output, but to undertake organisational change on the basis of such an assumption appears to prompt extreme responses, ranging from the hysteria of ‘lunatics running the asylum’ at the managerial end of the spectrum, to the near-utopian ideals at the employee end of that same spectrum.
For the purpose of further analysis, empowerment will be addressed as an ideology, albeit a questionable one, such that the supporting evidence, theoretical antecedents and assumptions may be examined in greater detail using a common frame of reference.

1.1.2 IDEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Thus, this moot ideology of empowerment has appeared on a wave of fervent exhortations to “take advantage of the human creativity that is there for the asking”, (Scott & Jaffe, 1993); but beneath the apparent simplicity and inherent superficiality of this commercial nirvana there are specific assumptions being made:

1.1.2.1 Discretionary Output

Organisations have access to a ‘discretionary output’ from their workforce over and above the standard pay-for-performance bargain, often referred to as ‘latent skills’ or ‘untapped resource potential’. Employees, by virtue of the kind of work they are asked to perform, have either never been required to give this output, or have consciously withheld it as a result of the apathy created by feelings of “powerlessness, meaninglessness, and isolation”, (Kane, 1986).

Proof of the existence of this output has traditionally been offered in the form of case histories - often superficial and subjective - of organisations whose levels of production and innovation have been transformed through the ‘empowerment’ of their workforce (Cleary, 1995, Newton & Wilkinson, 1994). However, the causality of this relationship between empowerment and productivity has yet to be clearly defined.
The argument that empowerment improves job satisfaction, which in turn improves productivity, is undermined by Victor Vroom’s 1964 estimate of a statistical correlation between satisfaction and productivity of only 0.14. The implication, therefore, is that the process of empowerment is a *functional* tool in the provision of the opportunity to use this output, rather than a humanistic *behavioural* tool in overcoming worker apathy or job dissatisfaction. In other words, an empowered work environment may create the opportunity for increased job satisfaction and hence increased productivity (on the assumption that a happy worker is a productive worker), but the act of empowerment itself cannot be said to directly increase job satisfaction. If a worker is not motivated by the opportunity for increased involvement, greater responsibility, or more direct ownership of work performance, he is unlikely to experience greater job satisfaction in an empowered work environment that produces such outcomes.

1.1.2.2 The Rationalisation of Work

It is argued that a strict adherence to the principles of Taylor’s Scientific Management and the Fordist rationalisation of work has produced sclerotic and oppressively bureaucratic organisations which are slow to innovate and respond to changing customer demands, and unable to compete effectively in modern business markets (Peters & Austin, 1995; Peters & Waterman, 1992). In this context, empowerment is presented as an idea with the right solutions for those very same managerial ills, with all the fervent exhortations and absence of specifics that such a ‘new solution’ entails.
Taylorism produced total managerial control, but at the expense of chronically slow decision making as the managers (who were now further removed from the most current information) sought more consultation and data before making a decision. Empowerment, on the other hand, purports to offer rapid decision making as the authority is vested in the person closest to the most accurate and up-to-date information. Taylorism offered employee oppression, empowerment offers employee liberation. Taylorism stifled innovation, empowerment offers creativity. It would appear that, as in politics, attention is generated by promising to deliver precisely that which the predecessor failed to deliver, with a convenient avoidance of specifics as to how such an outcome will be achieved.

1.1.2.3 The Role of Management

Fayol’s traditional management functions - to plan, organise, co-ordinate, motivate, and control - are regarded as being out-dated. The modern workforce, it is argued, is too well-educated and too demanding in their expectations of challenging and satisfying work to accept such a ‘command and control’ style of management (Harvey-Jones, 1994). As such, the role of modern managers should be to recognise the innate abilities of their workforce, and to adopt a more supportive and collaborative management style. In practical terms, managers are not needed to plan, co-ordinate or control at such a tactical level – the employees can do that for themselves. Thus, with the Fayolian functions transferred to the workforce, managers become responsible for the education and development of their employees in the performance of those functions.
1.1.3 QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

To date, research on empowerment has focused on the structural implications for the organisation - in particular, the removal of layers of bureaucracy in order to push responsibility and decision-making authority down the organisation to the front-line employees closest to the customer (Dean & Evans, 1994; Markels, 1998; Peters, 1989; Pickard, 1993, 1996; Stamps, 1998; Waterman, 1988;). The empirical data on which this research has focused have remained primarily financial - £X million in managerial salaries saved from cutting Y layers of the corporate pyramid; £X million in annualised cost savings generated by Y,000 ideas from 7,000 employees.

The implication here is that the simple act of 'delayering' the hierarchical pyramid is sufficient to create an 'empowered culture' within the organisation and hence gain access to this highly prized 'discretionary output'. In reality, the redundancies that characteristically precede or coincide with this form of 'empowerment' are more likely to create a siege mentality among the employees rather than release their 'untapped resource potential'. Creative or highly motivated work performance is difficult to achieve when the primary concern of your workforce is job security.

Indeed, it is questionable as to whether there is any real transfer of 'power' in the current interpretations of empowerment. There are numerous examples of increased worker responsibility, but as they have usually occurred as a result of rationalisation programmes which are themselves a near-term reaction to recessionary market pressures, it is a moot point whether any preparation was made for the subsequent re-assignment of the authority needed to handle this increased responsibility.
1.1.4 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The qualitative research into the process of introducing empowerment into an organisation can be seen to comprise primarily anecdotal case studies, more descriptive than analytic, and often more normative than descriptive. Stories of a Federal Express employee chartering a helicopter on his personal American Express card to ensure delivery of a package, (Peters & Waterman, 1982); or a hotel concierge booking a taxi to deliver a forgotten briefcase (Marriott’s 1994 advertising campaign) are presented as proof positive of the type of ‘magical’ transformations in employee commitment and motivation which empowerment can bring about.

In addition, several case studies of empowerment have risen to prominence:

- The revival of the Ford Motor Company is attributed to the ‘Team Taurus’ concept of empowered work teams created in the development of the Ford ‘Taurus’ in America, (Waterman, 1988).

- The transformation of the operating margins of Scandinavian Airlines Systems (SAS) is attributed to Chief Operating Officer Jan Carlzon’s figurative and symbolic inversion of the corporate pyramid in order to empower his front-line employees, (Carlzon, 1989).


- Semco - a Brazilian manufacturing company with products ranging from marine pumps to commercial dishwashers - managed to grow sevenfold during the 1980s, in an economy where inflation reached 900%, by operating a “natural business” where “the standard policy is no policy”, (Semler, 1993).
• Eastman Kodak's Black and White Film Division pulled off "the turnaround of the decade" through a dramatic reengineering of both the production operation and the organisational architecture of the company, transforming 1500 employees into 1500 'partners' in the long-term success of the organisation, (Frangos & Bennett, 1993).

• At Union Pacific Railroad, two-thirds (six layers) of the organisation's operational hierarchy was removed by the Company's new CEO in a period of only 120 days in 1987 in order to raise the decision-making authority of the front-line track inspectors. (Peters, 1994)

• AES Corp, an independent producer of electrical power, grew revenues from $200 million in 1990 to $835 million in 1996 on the basis of decentralised authority, open book management, and 'grassroots teams', (Markels, 1998).

In every case, the focus on empowerment has been on the idea of creating a 'promised land' where managers and employees work in harmony with each other; the employees are contributing of both heart and mind; the full extent of 'discretionary output' is being achieved; and the organisation is benefiting from improved productivity, customer responsiveness, and worker creativity.

However, little, if any, mention is made of the individual steps taken on the journey to this 'promised land', nor of the theoretical substructure which underpinned the original decision to pursue the concept. Often, the motives behind such actions can be interpreted as having little to do with a proactive mission to empower the workforce. As Davidow & Malone (1992, p.9) comment on General Motors' attempts at reorganisation:

"Its actions appeared to be driven more from management's desire for self-preservation through cost cutting than from a sincere interest in market responsiveness, customer needs, or the company's own employees."

1.1.5 THEORETICAL ANTECEDENTS OF EMPOWERMENT

When presented with such a diverse selection of case study subjects, all of which are purported to be exemplars of the empowerment concept at work, an identification of the core elements beneath the hyperbole of ‘personnel rebirth’ and ‘organisational transformation’ becomes very difficult. In the apparent absence of theoretical constructs or systematic practices to underpin what are, essentially, individual interpretations of empowerment practice, it becomes necessary to examine the theoretical antecedents that subsume the ideology of empowerment. The first of these is the notion that empowerment represents a humanistic response to Frederick Winslow Taylor’s doctrine of Scientific Management and its successors in the ‘work rationalisation’ movement.

1.1.5.1 EMPOWERMENT AND SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT

In the absence of a firm theoretical framework upon which to base their actions, many of the prominent examples of empowerment - Semco, Union Pacific, Scandinavian Airlines Systems, Johnsonville Foods - have pointed to the failure of their existing management structures as the justification for ‘empowering’ their organisations. It is the presence of the basic tenets of scientific management and the rationalisation of work within these traditional management structures which creates an apparent antithesis between the ideology of empowerment and the doctrine of Taylorism.

Taylorism, which includes the work of both F.W. Taylor and his contemporaries (Gantt, the Gilbreths, and Emerson), is held responsible for the detailed division of labour; the separation of the functions of planning and execution; the placement of direct control of production exclusively in the hands of management; and the creation of sterile, instrumental employment relationships.
The endless monotony of Henry Ford’s moving assembly line is presented as the stereotypical result of a strict adherence to Taylors’ management practices - an aggressive management seeking to maximise profits through increased productivity by wresting control from an essentially ignorant workforce, and governing how much work is performed, when and how quickly it is performed, and by whom - the ‘command and control’ model.

In contrast, empowerment claims to bring the purpose of the hierarchical management pyramid - the separation of control from the employees on the factory floor - into question, calling for greater responsibility for individual employees, and greater recognition of the abilities, experience, and creative potential of the workforce. In this respect, empowerment appears to take up a directly antithetical position to the basic doctrine of Taylorism. However, taking such a converse position to an existing doctrine does not, in itself, provide the theoretical substructure which empowerment seems to be lacking.

The derivation of ‘one best way’ of performing a task on the basis of a systematic analysis of the constituent or elementary motions of a job, and then tabulating the collected data in order to form ‘scientific laws’ of work, is often regarded as the definitive credo of Taylorism, and is seen to mark the beginning of the end for the autonomy of the worker.

Whilst it is true that time-and-motion studies did form an integral part of the development of systematic work methods, they were designed as a means to an end rather than as an end in themselves. Taylor’s purpose in seeking to analyse the work methods at the Midvale machine shop, and later at Bethlehem Steel, was not to overtly subjugate the workers, but to overcome the inefficiency of what he saw as ‘rule of thumb’ production methods. (Burawoy, 1985; Littler, 1982; Taylor, 1947).
The generally accepted working environment of manufacturing industries at the time was one of extreme antagonism between management and workers. Taylor saw this antagonism as being based on the worker's monopoly of production knowledge, and management's consequent adherence to an oppressive piece-rate payment system in order to maintain control. In this environment, the workers were given no incentive to improve upon their current production methods since management's likely response would be to reduce the piece rate in relation to the increase in productivity (Kelly, 1982; Wood, 1983).

In this context, the dual purpose of systematic work methods can be seen to be the improvement of the 'rule of thumb' production techniques, and the reduction of management ignorance of production methods such that the piece rate system could also be used as a motivational tool rather than solely as an oppressive control mechanism, replacing "output by pressure" with "output by demonstration," (Taylor, 1947).

In relation to a comparison with empowerment, two points are worth noting. First, Taylorism and empowerment can be seen to advance from the same premise of production knowledge being held by the worker, with a consequent ignorance on the part of management - either by virtue of a basic lack of knowledge (Taylorism), or by physical separation from the 'front-line' (empowerment). Second, in contrast to the notion of increased productivity being directly rewarded by increased pay, Taylors' aspirations can be interpreted as being somewhat wider:

"...The most important object of both the workmen and the management should be the training and development of each individual in the establishment so that he can do...the highest class of work for which his abilities fit him." (Taylor, 1947).
Critics have taken this as meaning simply carrying more pig-iron (Taylor's favourite) or laying more bricks (Gilbreth), but the underlying premise - maximising the potential of each employee - is equally applicable to empowerment. The divergence on this issue lies in the solutions proposed. For Taylor, the solution lay in making the responsibility for planning, control, and decision-making a management prerogative (thus overcoming any lack of production knowledge at the managerial level). For empowerment the experience and skills of the workforce are seen as grounds to challenge this prerogative on the assumption that direct experience of task performance is superior to external observation and analysis.

Therefore, seeking to justify the pertinence of the concept of empowerment on the grounds of a blanket condemnation of scientific management and work rationalisation as having 'failed' is invalid. Whilst, as Hales (1993, p.79) comments: "Any assessment of rationalised organisation in terms of costs and benefits is complex, because of the absence of a single yardstick by which to judge it," work rationalisation can be credited with bringing standardised consumer goods to the masses as a result of "...more efficient expenditure of effort, use of machinery and better utilisation of materials and work-in-progress,.

The subsequent interpretation (or, arguably, misinterpretation) of Taylor's Principles of Scientific Management by Fordist organisations does question whether the advances made were worth the price paid in terms of the human costs of using those production methods; but to attempt to build a case for one ideology on the grounds of the perceived weaknesses of an opposing ideology is illogical.
Equally, the converse scenarios of scientific management seeking to wrest control from the worker, and empowerment appearing to claim it back again, are also unconvincing. This notion of a battle for power between managers and workers has generated a preconception that empowerment is a *zero sum* process with responsibility and authority being devolved *from* managers *to* employees, with the subsequent task performance of both donor and recipient changing irrevocably. This argument, in turn, is substantiated only by examples of past empowerment practice.

In reality, the demarcation between donor and recipient is not that exclusive. Whilst it is true that the concept of empowerment suggests a *superordinate to subordinate* devolution of authority, such a process is equally applicable to senior and middle management as to supervisors and front-line employees. As such, empowerment can be related more to a complete reorganisation of chains of command and communication channels, than to a simple removal of specific layers of organisational hierarchy on the basis of power transference and consequent middle management redundancy. The transfer of power (in terms of the corporate pyramid) remains downwards, but the surviving managers are not automatically redundant.

Of greater significance here is the notion that Taylor envisaged employee expertise in work performance as needing to be carefully controlled ('managed'). This was ultimately interpreted as a call to remove the craft element from production and to simplify the process down to core (and highly repetitive) functions — the assembly line. Empowerment, on the other hand, appears to see the expertise as needing to be endorsed and encouraged through the creation of an organisational process that capitalises on such expertise. To justify empowerment on these terms would then lead to a re-alignment of the organisational hierarchy and its processes as opposed to a unilateral 'delayering' of the corporate pyramid.
Thus, while the prominence of a humanistic concept such as empowerment cannot be said to validate or undermine the principles of Scientific Management, an antithetical relationship between two opposing ideologies cannot be called upon to represent a theoretical substructure for empowerment – i.e. offering examples of the failure of Scientific Management does not, in itself, provide evidence of the logic or the likely success of an empowerment initiative.

1.1.5.2 EMPOWERMENT AND WORKER PARTICIPATION

Having brought into question the role of scientific management and work rationalisation as theoretical antecedents of empowerment, it is possible to consider the merit of another potential antecedent, namely that empowerment’s advocacy of increased responsibility and autonomy for employees reveals a common heritage with the worker participation/employee involvement movements.

The manifestation of work rationalisation in Henry Fords’ monotonous moving assembly-lines, and its rapid adoption by other Fordist organisations, gave rise to a human relations model of the organisation, first formulated in the 1930s and early 1940s which attempted to deal with the results of this manifestation, including monotony of work, absenteeism, high labour turnover, conflict, unrest, poor worker attitudes, and low morale.

Since then, various functional designs, such as job enlargement, enrichment, and rotation have been offered as solutions to the alienating excesses of scientific task engineering. The basic tenets of empowerment, which echo much of the work of Herzberg, Maslow, and McGregor, do appear to share many of the same aspirations, but the question as to whether these common aspirations constitute a comprehensive theoretical substructure requires further analysis.
Bowen and Lawler (1992) argue that: "In contrast to the industrialisation of service, empowerment very much looks to the 'performer of tasks' for solutions to service problems. Workers are asked to suggest new services and products and to solve problems creatively and effectively". Kane (1986) concurs that: "the workers no longer feel estranged from a sense of themselves as active, controlling and purposeful human beings". Hales (1987) continues: "the job incumbent is given some opportunity to 'manage' him herself: that is to plan, organise, co-ordinate, control or motivate his/her own work in some measure".

A sense of confusion arises here in that while Bowen & Lawler are discussing 'empowerment', Kane is discussing 'participative management', and Hales is discussing 'job enrichment'. The similarity of the reference material begs the question as to whether we have come across the basic tenets of empowerment somewhere before. Perspectives on this question fall into two distinct categories. Firstly, that empowerment represents a logical evolution of the humanistic argument in parallel to the movement from bureaucratic to more decentralised and ultimately adhocratic forms of organisation. Secondly, in contrast, that empowerment represents a simple reformulation of the basic measures of job enrichment, employee involvement, quality of working life, and participative management, in an attempt to manifest a variant format which is more applicable to current organisation structures.

The chronological development of employee involvement and participative management initiatives can be traced back to the mid-1960s. Since then, the instrumental argument that 'a happy worker is a productive worker' has been presented in many forms. In the 1970s, employee involvement was presented under the umbrella of 'worker participation' or 'industrial democracy', using 'joint consultative committees' and 'worker directors' (Cooper, 1974; Hackman et al., 1975). In the 1980s, 'participative management' came to prominence, and new terminology was developed to focus on 'team briefing', 'profit sharing', and 'quality circles' (Kelly, 1982; Robson, 1984).
Marchington, Wilkinson, & Ackers (1993) characterise the persistence of these concepts as: "New waves of employee involvement (which) keep on emerging as management continues to seek ways in which to gain employee commitment and co-operation." The chequered development of employee involvement ideas can be linked to the contradictory nature of the employment relationship - maintaining managerial control whilst eliciting employee commitment and co-operation. The continued reappearance of the employee involvement concept in various forms, despite a sporadic success rate, is indicative of the importance placed upon attempting to resolve this contradiction in the manager-employee relationship.

Nonetheless, to regard empowerment as merely the newest wave of employee involvement fails to take into account the longer-term implications of a commitment to an empowerment programme. The previous manifestations of the employee involvement concept were directed specifically at removing the job dissatisfaction generated by classical management techniques. The aim was to motivate employees whilst, at the same time, minimising the adversarial 'us and them' positions taken in labour relations. The ultimate goal of these techniques was a movement towards an attitude of 'we're all in this together'. In operating terms, the employees were still the 'workers', and the managers were still in control. The only difference was that, in theory, the nature of the managerial control would be more consultative than autocratic - management by benevolent paternalism rather than authoritarian dictatorship.

Indeed, it may be argued that previous interpretations of the human relations model only represented attempts to ameliorate the explicit problems of scientific management - the gains in efficiency and productivity would have been too attractive to dismiss the whole doctrine completely, and it is likely that the real purpose of 'worker participation' was to alleviate rather than cure.
Ralph C. Stayer, former C.E.O. of Johnsonville Foods, identifies the problem as follows:

"I began by holding employee meetings to get employee participation. I wanted them to share in a two-way exchange of information and, I hoped, some problem solving as well. It rapidly deteriorated, however, into a bitch session. The employees kept bringing up situations that needed "fixing". I made long lists of things to fix, and worked hard to fix everything before the next meeting. Fixing turned out to be a full-time job....Eighteen months later, I was still getting long lists to fix at every meeting. I ran out of patience before they ran out of things for me to fix," (Belasco & Stayer, 1993, p. 61).

Thus, the weakness in worker participation lies in the question of perceived ownership - both of work performance and of the issues directly related to that performance. Participative management may have succeeded in giving employees a voice, but there were few attempts to give them the tools necessary to bring about the changes they demanded, and little evidence of any marked change in perception, such that the employees themselves were aware of any encouragement or opportunity to take on the responsibility themselves to solve the problems they so readily brought to management's attention. In this context, the 'suggestion box' approach to management did go some way towards acknowledging employee awareness of problems in the workplace, but the provision of solutions to those problems remained a managerial prerogative. Only when we examine more radical examples of worker participation do we uncover any real similarities with the basic premises of empowerment:
In 1966, following the advice of Douglas Herzberg, American Telegraph and Telephone (AT&T) reorganised their claims and invoices departments in order to make each employee responsible for a specific geographic area rather than simply working with a random pile of documents. In this way employees became responsible for specific client accounts rather than for processing a predetermined number of documents. This, in turn, allowed employees to vary their work speed and work hours. The result of this exercise was a fall in errors from 13 to 3 per cent, and a 27 per cent productivity increase (Bosquet, 1977, p.98).

Philips (Holland) adopted the same perspective in the assembly of their colour television sets. The Fordian assembly line was broken down into experimental groups of seven workers (a predecessor of ‘cell manufacture’) who were given a stock of components and left to co-ordinate their work at their own speed. As a result, output increased by 5%, and absenteeism fell by 25% (Bosquet, 1977, p.99).

1.1.6 MOTIVES FOR EMPOWERMENT

For those advocates seeking to defend empowerment, it is possible, once the hyperbole of ‘untapped sources of creativity and innovation’ has been put aside, to develop both logical and moral arguments in favour of the concept. Wallace’s (1993) logical case is simply that: “...by moving decision making authority to the true sources of knowledge about a problem and its potential solutions, better decisions will be made”. The moral argument is equally straightforward. As ‘management excellence’ guru Tom Peters points out to Zemke and Schaaf (1989): “It is necessary to ‘dehumilate’ work by eliminating the policies and procedures (almost always tiny) of the organisation that demean and belittle human dignity.” (although this, in turn, suggests a more instrumental argument that employees work better when treated with a little respect).
However, these arguments only serve to underline the dichotomy between the apparent naivety of empowerment theory and the more pragmatic reality of empowerment practice. The simplicity of the moral and logical arguments provide support for the belief that employees can be ‘empowered’ with the wave of a magic wand, such that: “After a brief ceremony and perhaps a day or two of training, employees are both willing and able to make decisions, take risks, and manage themselves,” (Bohn and Adams, 1993). The implication here is that the employees are all ‘ready, willing and able’ to handle the increased responsibility of an empowered work environment; and that they are simply waiting for the opportunity to do so.

In practice, the chronology of empowerment has typically involved the removal of one or more layers of middle management within the organisational hierarchy (usually in response to a separate agenda of cost-based rationalisation), with a subsequent retroactive justification of the action taken as an ‘empowerment’ of the subordinate levels of the organisation. In this context, the managers appear to be putting the cart in front of the horse. The introduction of an empowerment programme should, in theory, enable an organisation to decentralise and, where necessary, ‘delayer’ its management structure on the strength of the increased responsibility and involvement of its employees; but simply ‘delayering’ and then seeking to rationalise the move as ‘empowerment’ reveals an attitude of opportunistic instrumentality rather than a proactive commitment to the moral rights of an employee or the crystal-clear logic of business operations.

The nature of this relationship with worker participation can be seen, at least in theory, to be one of marked advancement rather than simple reformulation. Participative management aspired to many of the same ideals of empowerment, but in practice it never progressed beyond the ‘paternalism’ stage of listening to employee complaints or ideas. The concept of empowerment calls for direct ownership of work performance, which suggests a more collaborative work environment in which managers and employees work together in the realisation of performance goals.
The successful creation of an ‘empowered’ work environment appears to offer rewards for all parties involved. The employees (in theory) experience increased job satisfaction from self-direction and utilisation of their skills and knowledge to their fullest potential. Managers are thus released from the adversarial role of strict implementation of autocratic policies and procedures, thereby allowing more time for strategic planning and customer responsiveness. The organisation (again, in theory) gains access to previously untapped employee resourcefulness, energy, enthusiasm and creativity.

Nevertheless, in seeking to identify the theoretical substructure which underpins these utopian ideals, we have found only a shared heritage with the romantic ideals of the human relations movement. Given such a precarious genealogy, the reasons for the persistence of the concept of empowerment, beyond the hyperbole and rhetoric of the prominent studies, warrants further consideration.

1.1.7 THE PERSISTENCE OF EMPOWERMENT

Ghoshal & Bartlett (1997, p.312) capture the chequered curriculum vitae of empowerment as follows:

"Promoted by management gurus and packaged by consultants, empowerment came to encompass anything from the introduction of an employee suggestion scheme to the restructuring of the organisation around self-managed teams. Although some of these initiatives bore fruit, many more paid mere lip service to this deceptively simple and appealing notion. To countless overloaded top executives struggling with issues and challenges they did not fully grasp, the idea of pushing their backlog of problems back down into the organisation had great appeal. Under the sanctioned umbrella of 'empowerment' many handed off responsibilities and delegated decisions so broadly, so quickly, and with so little support that the process could better be described as 'abandonment'.”
In the same negative frame, Hales & Klidas' (1998) study of empowerment in ten five-star hotels concluded that:

"Despite managers ability and willingness to espouse the rhetoric, 'empowerment' had brought increased employee voice (in how the hotel as a whole operated) in only one case, and brought a significant increase in employee 'choice' in their jobs in only two cases. Otherwise, 'empowerment' meant no more than increased employee responsibility for dealing with guest complaints and tightly constrained discretion over how to do so."

Given such a humanistic heritage and a less-than-startling performance record, the question arises as to why empowerment has persisted as such a prominent "notion" in organisational theory. It appears to have outlasted 'zero defects', Business Process Reengineering (BPR) and even Total Quality Management (TQM) in its ability to generate attention, discussion, and sufficient credibility to force some Executives to consider an empowerment initiative simply because everyone else in their industry appears to have one.

Several theorists have argued that there are broader trends at work here. For example, ongoing technological advancement is claimed to have prompted a reassessment of the traditional 'information conduit' function of the middle manager within the organisation. As Davidow and Malone (1992, p.10) argue:

"Computers can gather most information more accurately and cost-effectively than people, they can produce summaries with electronic speeds, and they can transmit the information to decision makers at the speed of light ..... frequently, this information is so good and the analysis so precise that an executive decision is no longer required. A well-trained employee dealing directly with the situation can now make a decision faster and in a more responsive fashion than the remote manager miles away."
Quinn & Spreitzer (1997) concur:

“Organisations are demanding more from their employees than ever before. Higher customer expectations, increased globalisation, more sophisticated technology – these are a few of the conditions at work. It’s an environment where traditional command-and-control hierarchies are increasingly less appropriate. Instead, employees must learn to take initiative, be creative and accept responsibility for their actions.”

Such broad trends may offer some validity, but to apportion blame on advances in technology or globalisation as the reason for ‘delayering’ an organisation is invalid. Computers may well have made the traditional ‘information conduit’ role of the middle manager redundant, but this is really only an opportunity to apply the ideals of decentralisation and empowerment, not a raison d’être. Indeed, the economic reality of the situation is considerably harsher. If the trends are combined with a more pragmatic business environment of constant pressure to streamline and rationalise the cost base in order to operate in increasingly competitive markets, it can be said that the true attraction of the concept of empowerment is its apparent functionality. What better way to justify or rationalise a severe cost-cutting initiative (in order to meet shareholder expectations of ever-increasing earnings per share) than to label the exercise as ‘empowerment’. Thus, in this context, it may be argued that the popularity of the concept of empowerment can be seen to have arisen not as a result of the logic of its utopian ideals, but out of its apparent usefulness as a managerial alibi.
1.2 EMPOWERMENT, INSTITUTIONALISM, AND ISOMORPHISM

The apparent eagerness of Senior Management Teams to 'jump on the bandwagon' of empowerment has, thus far, been approached as an issue of practical opportunism. However, this notion of empowerment as being merely a managerial alibi to justify the 'delayering' of an organisational hierarchy in order to meet oppressive earnings per share (eps) growth expectations from shareholders is somewhat astigmatic. The unquestionable popularity of the concept and its broad diffusion across organisational boundaries can be seen to echo the perceived drive towards organisational homogenisation or 'sameness' with which institutional theory (specifically 'new institutionalism') is concerned.

The broader trends — technological advancement, globalisation, enhanced customer expectations — are important here also, but there are larger and more complex issues to be addressed: the apparent commonality of approach (isomorphism) by organisations to the concept of empowerment, both in terms of adoption and utilisation, as well as the broader issue of identifying those core institutional pressures behind the original move to change the organisation's structure.
1.2.1 INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

"Institutionalisation involves the processes by which social processes, obligations or actualities come to take on a ruleslike status in social thought and action," (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). If organisations adopt these institutionalised products, services, techniques, policies or programmes as powerful myths, then their formal structures come to represent these institutional myths rather than the practical demands of their everyday work activities — i.e. elements of the formal organisational structure become legitimised by external mythology or normative pressures rather than any proven internal expediency or efficiency. For example, technical procedures of production, accounting, personnel selection or data-processing become ‘standards’ which offer legitimacy by establishing the organisation as appropriate, rational and modern. Depending on the competitive environment, the pursuit of this legitimacy can supersede any practical obstacles in absorbing these procedures.

Therefore, the degree to which an organisation’s formal structure can be seen to manifest institutional rules over and above its rational functional network, combined with an apparent move towards homogenisation on the basis of this institutionalisation (as opposed to practical expediency), can be seen to be a pivotal theme to any examination of the empowerment concept. In other words, understanding why an organisation should choose to take on an alternative operating framework (empowerment) — either as an add-on or a direct replacement of its existing structure — links closely to the ‘form and function’ tenets of institutional theory. In addition, the ‘bandwagon’ mentality demonstrated by many organisations in adopting empowerment simply because their competitors are doing it leads into an examination of isomorphic behaviour and the pressures behind it.

The lineage of institutional theory dates back to the work of Emile Durkheim in the early 1900’s, and from that origin the theory has managed to make a transition through both ‘old’ and ‘new’ institutionalism. In fact, as Powell and DiMaggio (1991, p.3) point out:
"There are many new institutionalisms — in economics, organisation theory, political science and public choice, history and sociology — united by little but a common scepticism towards atomistic accounts of social processes and a common conviction that institutional arrangements and social processes matter."

Key differences between 'old' and 'new' institutionalism lie in the interpretation of perceived 'constraints' on organisational rationality. 'Old' institutionalism, and in particular the work of Philip Selznick (1949), identified the potential for internal group conflict (via coalitions, cliques, or particularistic elements) to subvert the individual organisation's rational mission in favour of parochial interests. 'New' institutionalism (as represented by the work of Meyer, Rowan, Scott, Zucker, Powell and DiMaggio), locates the irrationality in the formal structure of the organisation itself, (rather than through any perceived conflicts of interest) within a population or field of organisations.

The assumed irrationality of organisational behaviour in both schools of thought generates a shared scepticism towards the rational-actor model of organisation - i.e. that organisational frameworks are derived from the rationality of individuals - and both emphasise the relationship between organisations and their environments - with 'old' focusing on the influence of the local community, and 'new' on the organisation's respective field, sector or societal influence.

Meyer and Rowan's (1977) seminal article offered a key insight - namely that formal structures have symbolic as well as action-generating properties. As such, structures can become invested with socially shared meanings and thus, in addition to their 'objective' functions, can serve to communicate information about the organisation to both internal and external audiences (Kamens, 1977).

Meyer and Rowan (1977) went on to identify three major implications of this notion:
1. That the adoption of formal structure can occur regardless of the existence of specific, immediate problems of co-ordination and control of members' activities that an organisation may face:

"Organisations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalised concepts of organisational work and institutionalised in society. Organisations that do so increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures." (1977, p.340)

2. That social evaluation of organisations, and hence organisational survival, can rest on observation of formal structures (that may or may not actually function), rather than observed outcomes related to actual task performance:

"Independent of their productive efficiency, organisations which exist in highly elaborated institutional environments and succeed in becoming isomorphic with these environments gain the legitimacy and resources needed to survive." (1977, p.352)

3. That the relationship between formal structures and the actual, everyday activities and behaviours of organisational members may be negligible:

"Formal organisations are often loosely coupled... structural elements are only loosely linked to each other and to activities, rules are often violated, decisions are often unimplemented, or if implemented have uncertain consequences, technologies are of problematic efficiency, and evaluation and inspection systems are subverted or rendered so vague as to provide little co-ordination." (1977, p.342)
For Meyer and Rowan (1977) these implications present something of a paradox, in that the apparent credibility, legitimacy and stability offered by highly institutionalised environments bring with them a need for organisational action to support the prevailing myths of that environment. Where those myths are at odds with practical operational necessity, the organisation is forced to maintain a “loosely coupled state” in order to survive – i.e. to balance the demands of both the institutionalised and operational environments. Often, the balance is maintained via ambiguity, vacuity or informality in order to avoid direct conflict with established institutional myths (and hence the potential loss of the much-prized legitimacy).

1.2.2 THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

Tolbert and Zucker’s (1996) characterisation of the current state of institutional theory offers many similarities to that of empowerment theory, in that:

“There is very little consensus on the definition of key concepts, measures or methods within this theoretic tradition.....institutional theory has developed no central set of standard variables, nor is it associated with a standard research methodology or eve a set of methods.”

Brint & Karabel (1991) expound this further by recognising that:

“...new institutionalism has been strongest in identifying distinctive organisational forms and their functioning. It has been less effective in generating ideas about why particular kinds of forms are chosen over possible alternatives, and why organisational forms change over time in particular directions.”

The consideration of change management within the framework of Institutional Theory would seem somewhat capricious, given that the primary focus of institutionalism is on the achievement of legitimacy through stability of form and function. However, the end-state of an homogenised population of organisations that is anticipated by new institutionalism suggests that varying degrees of change must take place for the homogenisation to occur.
Greenwood and Hinings (1996) comment that:

"Institutional Theory is not usually regarded as a theory of organisational change, but as usually an explanation of the similarity (isomorphism) and stability of organisational arrangements in a given population or field of organisation;...(however)...the theory contains insights and suggestions that, when elaborated, provide a model of change that links organisational context and intra-organisational dynamics."

The specific "insights and suggestions" referred to here are the degree of 'embeddedness' or acceptance of the institutional myth and the extent of the external pressures which can be seen to be driving the organisation towards convergence (and hence change) within the competitive environment. Greenwood and Hinings (1996) argue that a highly institutionalised environment (characterised by a strong federal presence or a high economic barrier to market entry) will ultimately stifle radical change, such that gradual convergent change becomes the only available option.

To that end, the rudimentary perception of any empowerment initiative can be seen to be of equal importance to the mechanics of the process itself — i.e. how the prospect of 'empowerment' was originally viewed is just as important as how the 'empowerment' was undertaken. If, for example, the concept is perceived as too radical for the current institutional environment, it is unlikely that the initiative would proceed without strong external pressure, and even then, the introduction would be gradual as the population moved towards convergent change.
1.2.3 ISOMORPHISM

Isomorphism may be defined as a process of homogenisation or a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions (Hawley, 1968).

Meyer (1983) and Fennell (1980) propose two distinct types of isomorphism: competitive and institutional. Competitive isomorphism, when framed within a market of free and open competition, assumes a system rationality that emphasises market competition, niche change, and measures of fiscal fitness (Hannan & Freeman, 1977).

Institutional isomorphism rests on the argument that: "the major factors that organisations must take into account are other organisations," (Aldrich, 1979, p.265). In other words, organisations are driven towards homogeneity through competition for not only resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy, and for social as well as economic fitness.

Powell & DiMaggio (1991, p. 67) identify three distinct mechanisms through which institutional isomorphic change occurs: 1) coercive isomorphism that stems from political influence and the problem of legitimacy; 2) mimetic isomorphism resulting from standard responses to uncertainty; and 3) normative isomorphism, associated with professionalisation:

1. Coercive isomorphism

As the term suggests, coercive isomorphism recognises the pressures, both internal and external and both subtle and explicit, that may be exerted on an organisation by other organisations (e.g. parent to subsidiary or customer to vendor), by the regulatory environment in which they operate (e.g. federal mandates), or by cultural expectations in society. These pressures are not mutually exclusive. For example, heightened environmental sensitivity within an organisation may originate from explicit regulatory pressure (federally-mandated emission controls) or through less-explicit customer buying behaviour.
2. *Mimetic isomorphism*

Organisational mimicry can be seen to originate out of uncertainty. When organisational technologies are poorly understood, when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty, organisations may model themselves on other organisations (March and Olsen, 1976). The organisation being copied may be unaware or have no desire to be copied – it merely serves as a convenient source of practices that the borrowing organisation may use. The mimicry may be unintentional, indirect (through employee transfer or turnover), or explicit via organisations such as consulting firms or industry trade associations who elect to benchmark the model organisations’ practices.

3. *Normative isomorphism*

Larson (1977, pp. 49-52) interprets the ‘professionalisation’ of normative isomorphism as the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work, to control “the production of producers”, and to establish a cognitive base and legitimacy for their occupational autonomy. Of particular relevance here is the growth of professional trade associations which span across organisational boundaries and hence promote the rapid diffusion of new models or normative rules about professional behaviour.
In this context, the nature and extent of the external pressures at work in the organisation’s competitive environment can be seen to have a direct impact on the planning, implementation and outcome of any ‘empowerment’ initiative. Indeed, it may be hypothesised that there would be a direct correlation between specific isomorphic pressures and specific outcome scenarios. For example, an organisation that is being led to greater cost control as a result of harsh market pressures (coercive) may, opportunistically, consider ‘empowerment’ as a ‘delayering’ tool in reducing corporate overhead. The consequent misunderstanding and misapplication of the concept would likely guarantee an unsuccessful outcome. Alternatively, an industry trade association endorses a member organisation that has successfully ‘empowered’ its workforce (normative) with the result that other member organisations benchmark the practices and processes of the endorsed organisation and hence approach the initiative with a higher likelihood of a positive outcome.

1.2.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPOWERMENT

Meyer and Rowan’s (1977) notion of a “loosely-coupled state” (and the subsequent balance between institutionalised and organisational needs) appears to capture several of the prescient issues in any proposed ‘empowerment’ initiative:

- The degree to which the perceived legitimacy of the organisation is tied to its institutional environment – i.e. is the formal structure a legal requirement, an industry/professional standard or a corporate tradition? How will changing the structure impact its legitimacy? How ‘embedded’ are the institutional myths to which the organisation subscribes?
- The degree to which survival is determined by stability/reliability or modernisation – i.e. is the organisation’s credibility built on the basis of its dependability or its ability to provide new products and/or services?
To what extent are the external pressures on the organisation coercive, mimetic or normative — and which of these is driving the decision to ‘empower’?

If an ‘empowered’ structure will directly challenge institutional norms, what is the extent of the anticipated imbalance and how will it be addressed?

If the organisation is led to empowerment via institutional norms, how will the imbalance with organisational norms be addressed?

Given the anecdotal and highly subjective nature of the current literature on empowerment, evidence of a robust institutional perspective on the subject is minimal. Nonetheless, institutional theory’s concern with the legitimacy and survival of organisations in both symbolic and functional form can be seen to align closely with several of the key themes of the concept of empowerment. In addition, the likelihood of identifying explicit isomorphic behaviour patterns within those organisations that elect to pursue the concept of empowerment would appear to be very strong.

Abrahamson (1996) identifies two norms of managerial rationality and managerial progress which impact on levels of interest in management techniques over time:

"Norms of managerial rationality are societal expectations that managers will use management techniques that are the most efficient means to important ends. Norms of managerial progress are societal expectations that, over time, managers will use new and improved management techniques. Together, norms of managerial rationality and progress create the need for a flow of management techniques that organisational stakeholders believe are rational, at the forefront of management progress, and that managers can adopt in order to appear in conformity with these norms."
The existence of these two norms can be seen to explain the presence of both coercive and mimetic isomorphic behaviour in the adoption of an empowerment initiative – coercive by virtue of the societal expectation, and mimetic by virtue of the inevitable focus on the latest trend out there.

Tolbert and Zucker (1996) propose a state of "semi-institutionalisation" where organisations have been subject to *objectification*. This involves:

"The development of some degree of social consensus among organisational decision-makers concerning the value of a structure, and the increasing adoption by organisations on the basis of that consensus... Examples of such structures that could be classified as being at this stage include team-based production, quality circles, gain-sharing compensation plans, internal consultants, sensitivity training programs for management, managers of work family policy, and employee assistance programmes, among others."

Further examination of the average 'shelf-life' of these structures reveals considerable similarities with the perceived life cycle of an empowerment initiative. As Tolbert and Zucker (1996) comment:

"...while they have acquired some degree of normative acceptance, adopters nonetheless are apt to remain cognisant of their relatively untested quality, and consciously to monitor the accumulation of evidence (from their own organisation as well as others) on the effectiveness of the structures."
When this brevity is combined with Abrahamson's (1991, 1996) focus on the fashionable nature of management techniques, the ultimate fate of most of these structures as fads or flavour of the month techniques becomes clear. However, the pressure of societal norms may explain why managers are led to consider empowerment as a new management technique, but the fact that the concept continues to survive beyond its reputation as a ‘fad’ suggests that there is some merit to it. In terms of Tolbert and Zucker's (1996) assessment, the survival of the concept would seem to depend on the achievement of sedimentation where the concept achieves stability across both dimensions of width and depth – i.e. the structure is diffused across a broad range of organisational boundaries, and is seen to perpetuate over a lengthy period of time. These, in turn, align with the central tenets of institutional theory – credibility and stability.

1.3 FORMS OF EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment theorists have given promises of what the concept could be, and the narrative case studies have offered individual interpretations of what it should be, but the hyperbole and rhetoric which accompany those exhortations only serve to cloud the issue of what empowerment means and what the act of empowerment really involves. Attempts by practitioners and theorists at reaching a conclusion have, thus far, tended to falter at the halfway point by attempting to classify different forms of empowerment without seeking to identify the theoretical presuppositions beneath them.

Brymer (1991) endeavours to make a distinction between two separate forms of empowerment - structured and flexible:
Structured empowerment: “provides specific guidelines for the front-line employees. It gives those employees the ability to make decisions but within specified and detailed limits.” Thus, Ritz-Carlton’s policy of granting staff the authority to spend up to $2,500 in satisfying a guest complaint is an example of a structured empowerment policy. Freed (1997) offers an example of Overlook Hospital in New Jersey where the hospital developed a “Table of Authorisation for the Commitment or Expenditure of the System’s Physical or Financial Resources” in order to achieve its empowerment goals. The table was seen to serve a dual purpose – it forced senior managers to commit in writing to the extent to which they were willing to empower subordinate managers, and it also facilitated the auditing of the results of that empowerment – i.e. just how much money was spent under the new authorization.

Flexible empowerment extends the degree of autonomy being granted and: “allows the employees more latitude in making on-the-spot decisions that directly affect guest service and satisfaction.” Thus, a flexible empowerment policy is presented in the form of general guidelines and suggestions rather than direct monetary limits.

Unfortunately, this dual classification represents only a distinction between differing levels of the same act of empowerment rather than different forms. The absence of specific guidelines in a flexible empowerment policy denotes greater autonomy, but it does not signify a distinct form of empowerment, just an increased level of the same process.

Bowen & Lawler (1992) differ from the either/or scenario by identifying three options for the empowerment of employees which: “Represent increasing degrees of empowerment as additional knowledge, information, power, and rewards are pushed down to the front-line”:
1. *Suggestion Involvement*

This option focuses on the potential creative input of the workforce rather than making any changes in the day-to-day work activities. The power being granted here is that of suggestion, with management retaining the rights of decision and final implementation. As such, this option echoes many of the early ideals of employee involvement rather than any clear sense of empowerment.

2. *Job Involvement*

This option introduces the process of job redesign or, more specifically, job enrichment, as employees are encouraged to bring a variety of skills to bear on their work performance. Typically, the use of teams allows employees to identify with a larger piece of work or portion of the service process. They are then able to function with less supervision, thereby re-orienting the role of the supervisor from director to enabler of the front-line.

3. *High Involvement*

Only at this stage do we begin to see any of the basic premises of the empowerment concept. All employees are given shared responsibility not only in their own work performance, but also in the performance of the organisation as a whole. Full participation in all aspects of the operation is encouraged by means of free access to corporate information, and the provision of new skills training where necessary.
These typologies of empowerment serve a primarily descriptive rather than prescriptive function. Structured empowerment programmes may have contributed to Ritz-Carlton’s winning the Malcolm Baldridge National Quality Award, but that does not make the policy universally applicable; nor does it offer any insights as to why that particular form of empowerment was successful in that situation.

The most common interpretation of empowerment - the act of ‘delayering’ the pyramid - also lacks a theoretical foundation. In reality, it represents the delegation (and often the abdication) of performance responsibility in reaction to the direct loss of an explicit management function rather than a conscious decision to empower.

Further, the notion of middle management redundancy that these actions have engendered has no theoretical grounding either - the ‘empowerment’ of employees does not automatically negate the middle management role. What it appears to demand is a re-orientation rather than an unconditional removal of that role. The exact nature of that re-orientation is still unclear, since most of the organisations which have experimented with empowerment have begun from the presumption that the first step is to perform radical surgery on the organisation chart, with the middle management ‘layer’ being the primary target for removal.

1.4 THE IRREDUCIBLE CORE OF EMPOWERMENT

The apparent propensity to abdicate performance responsibility (which arises as a by-product of the delayering process) appears to be the root cause of the confusion over the true meaning of empowerment. The devolution of responsibility is not, in itself, empowerment. Despite the association with the literal notion of a gift of power, it represents only one side of the equation. In practice, this notion of a gift of power has succeeded only in placing complex emotional constraints on an essentially functional issue.
By generating the notion that empowerment requires the ‘gift’ of power from managers to employees, a perception of ‘corporate munificence’ has been created in the sense that only the senior management of ‘visionary’ organisations are capable of empowering their workforce. Further, the suggestion that empowerment requires the irrevocable loss of power on the part of management, results in a situation in where the siege mentality of the survivors of the delayering programme is now matched by a managerial siege mentality where the middle managers endeavour to hold on to their positional power within the corporate hierarchy.

The functional issue beneath this emotional battle of vested interests is really quite simple. If employees at subordinate levels of the organisational hierarchy are to be vested with increased performance responsibility, there must be a corresponding investment of the requisite authority needed to achieve that performance - i.e. if the decision is taken to push responsibility further down the organisation, then appropriate steps must be taken to ensure that those responsibilities can now be carried out in their new location. Failure to do so (a common feature of many unsuccessful empowerment initiatives) results in a perceived abandonment of the employee, such that his workload and performance expectations have increased dramatically, with no corresponding increase in the requisite authority needed to meet those expectations.

It is here that the deceptive simplicity of empowerment comes to prominence. Removing a job function (for the purpose of example, a middle management function) and delegating the workload of that job to another employee (or dividing it between several employees) can be achieved with ‘the stroke of a pen’. However, the act cannot take place in isolation. On the assumption that the removed job function was an active rather than redundant element of the organisation, there will be operational policies and procedures as well as production output that will be directly impacted by the removal – files no longer kept current; databases no longer monitored; reports no longer produced. On the other hand, there is an equal opportunity for increased procedural simplicity in such a removal – purchases no longer needing a countersignature for example.
In either event, the ‘empowered’ employee faces the prospect of taking on new responsibilities and, on the assumption that there has been neither a corresponding simplification of policies and procedures nor a realignment of his current job description, must do so in addition to his existing workload. If he is not given the appropriate training or organisational support (in the form of a clearly defined responsibility and authority statement for the new role) for these new responsibilities, then he remains, at best, functionally handicapped or, at worst, abandoned in his new role. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the employee should choose not to feel ‘blessed’ and highly motivated at the prospect of more work for the same money.

As such, the irreducible core element of empowerment can be seen to be the transference of functional responsibility from one level to another. Only when employees are seen to be enabled with the necessary training and authority to fully undertake their responsibilities in the newly-empowered organisation, and actually get things done, can there be a balanced functional transference. Without that training and investiture of authority, the transference remains positional rather than functional, which has the potential to derail the entire organisation. If employees are given increased responsibility for work performance but are neither endorsed in some official capacity to perform those tasks nor supported by senior management in the practical delineation of their new roles, the result can be seen to be extreme frustration and a likely decision to underperform.

In this framework, the utopian ideals, which have been promised by advocates of the empowerment concept, become more attainable. By definition, employees are still working within the boundaries of their more general performance obligations to the organisation - deadlines, quality standards, and productivity goals - but their operational parameters are now multi-dimensional in the sense that they now have the tools available to complete a process or a transaction rather than seeking the input or permission of a supervisor.
It is this promise of more substantive work that underpins the notion of improved ownership of work performance. The creation of an environment in which employees are able to decide how and when the work is going to be done, and are able to follow the task through to completion, allows them to experience the production of "a result that somebody cares about," (Hammer and Champy (1994, p.69), rather than simply being a nondescript cog in a bureaucratic machine.

Where empowerment makes its marked advance beyond its worker participation heritage, is in the radical nature of this new performance bargaining arrangement. Rather than simply giving employees a voice and listening to their complaints, this new bargain, at least in theory, gives them the tools and places upon them the expectation that they can solve the problems, to the mutual benefit of the organisation and the employees themselves. In this way, a proactive cure for the sclerotic problems of bureaucracy is being sought through empowerment, rather than the more reactive alleviation of the symptoms - apathy, absenteeism, and turnover - through worker participation.

Thus, using this core of a transference of functional rather than positional responsibility, we can now examine two of the purported 'classic' (although distinctly autobiographical) case studies of the concept of empowerment to determine the extent to which such a transference took place:

1.4.1 SCANDINAVIAN AIRLINES SYSTEMS (SAS)

The story of the dramatic turnaround in the fortunes of the Scandinavian Airline SAS has reached an almost mythical status. After 17 consecutive profitable years, the airline slumped to $30 million in losses in 1979 and 1980. Yet within one year, under the leadership of Chief Operating Officer Jan Carlzon, the airline returned to profitability, generating nearly $80 million in revenues while the rest of the international airline industry tallied a record $2 billion collective loss.
The secret of this turnaround was presented as being Carlzon's decision to figuratively and symbolically invert the corporate pyramid in recognition of the importance of the front-line employees to the continued survival of the airline. His philosophy was simply that in the 'moment of truth' - the point of interaction between a customer and an employee - an employee should be 'empowered' to do whatever it takes to make sure that the customers’ expectations are met (and preferably exceeded). As such, the use of the pyramid symbol exemplified the idea that the employees traditionally placed at the bottom of the organisation should, in reality, be positioned at the pinnacle since, by virtue of their direct contact with the customer, they were the most important members of staff in the organisation. Equally, this notion of inversion carried a stronger message of change in the sense that the whole organisation would be turned upside down to achieve profitability.

In actuality, Carlzon's commitment to the inversion of the corporate pyramid was not, in this instance, that radical - the exercise had already been tried (with considerable success) at the SAS affiliate Linjeflyg, Sweden's domestic airline, of which Carlzon had been president from 1978-1981. Of greater relevance, is the point that whilst this one act came to dominate 'The SAS Story', and arguably prompted numerous imitation inversions in organisations throughout the world, there were several other factors involved in the success of the turnaround at SAS:
• The decision to ‘empower’ the front-line was made as part of a broader initiative to increase service and revenue in order to become ‘the best airline in the world for the frequent business traveller’ - it was not seen as an end in itself.

• The company had already been through an extensive rationalisation programme before Carlzon’s appointment, and so the empowerment issue was regarded as a separate initiative under a new chief executive. As a result, the ‘siege mentality’ that has accompanied other attempts at empowerment was avoided. In addition, the inversion of the pyramid was not accompanied by any mass ‘delayering’ of middle management personnel - the pyramid was ‘flattened’ in terms of communication channels, but there were no mass redundancies.

• The decision to specialise and focus on the business traveller played an equal, if not greater, role in the turnaround. This allowed the airline to use the flexible and more cost-effective DC-9s instead of the more expensive Airbuses and flagship Boeing 747s, which in turn allowed them to minimise costs while attempting to maximise revenues. The empowerment issue came in providing the level of service needed to fill those DC-9s with business travellers paying full fares.

The initial decision to empower was, by Carlzon’s own admission, a reactive rather than a proactive one. Costs had already been cut to the bone, and the market itself was stagnant, which left finding a dramatic increase in revenues as the only alternative to ‘mothballing’ the airline completely. It was this pressure (rather than the idealistic conviction in the moral legitimacy of empowerment for which he is credited) which forced Carlzon to consider the merits of an empowerment programme.
The sense of urgency in restoring the airline to profitability was further emphasised by the use of automotive metaphors such as ‘hot-wiring’ the organisation chart in order to ‘kick-start’ the company. The message of these metaphors was simply that the financial and temporal pressures which were being brought to bear on the company were such that traditional communication and administrative channels had to be by-passed to get things done (hence ‘hot-wiring’ to by-pass the ignition), and that the changes had to be made immediately rather than gearing-up for some launch point in the future (‘kick-starting’).

The programme worked very well in the short-term, and the goals of increased flexibility and customer responsiveness were achieved. In operating terms, communication chains were drastically reduced, and bureaucratic policies and procedures were circumvented. To underline the message of ‘passenger satisfaction at all costs’, front-line employees were encouraged to ignore the chain of command and to make the decisions necessary to solve any problems on the spot rather than seeking the input of their immediate supervisors (Carlzon even issued a company-wide memo authorising them to do so). This produced a dramatic change in structure, style and attitude, and stories such as a ticket agent sending an SAS limousine to retrieve a passenger’s forgotten ticket, became an integral part of the SAS legend.

However, by focusing only on the employees who came into direct contact with passengers, the role of the middle manager, rather than being removed, was simply overlooked. The consequences almost brought the turnaround programme to a halt. As Carlzon (1989, p.64) explains:

"...the middle managers, who were understandably confused by their new role within the organisation, became hostile and counterproductive. We had put them in a completely unfamiliar situation where they were squeezed from both directions....even after we reorganised the company (they) continued to sit in their offices lined with regulations books, policies, and directives. And when the people on the front-lines 'broke the rules' to help the customers, naturally the middle managers responded by reining them in."
The persistence of the middle managers in sticking with their policy manuals forced Carlzon to re-evaluate their role within the newly-flattened organisation. He came to the conclusion that: "Seizing...golden opportunities to serve the customer is the responsibility of the front-line. Enabling them to do so is the responsibility of middle managers", (Carlzon, 1989, p.68).

After three years, the reactive nature of the original empowerment programme came back to haunt Carlzon. The initial sense of urgency that the ‘do or die’ financial situation had given the programme had been a cohesive motivating factor in transforming the attitudes of the employees; but after three very profitable years, they began to develop their own agendas as to how those profits should be used - new planes, new uniforms, pay rises. The sense of teamwork that had brought the company together was replaced by more divisive personal interests.

In terms of an irreducible core of empowerment, it can be said of the SAS approach that the long-term viability of the empowerment programme was undermined by the failure to link responsibility and authority in the empowerment process. Front-line employees were encouraged to ‘break the rules’, but their authorisation to do so consisted only of a company-wide memo. The middle managers, who were completely overlooked in this reactive approach to empowerment, remained as very firm obstacles to the functional realisation of the apparent potential of this new organisational structure.

Thus, Carlzon may be credited with a radical approach to worker participation by endeavouring to give the front-line employees near carte blanche authority in meeting passenger expectations, but by not investing in the development of a corresponding support structure in which the role of the middle managers was re-oriented from control of policies and procedures to enabling the front-line employees to function in their new autonomy, it is questionable as to whether there was any real ‘empowerment’ of the SAS workforce.
1.4.2 SEMCO

Based in São Paulo, Brazil, Semco manufactures a wide array of industrial equipment, including: "pumps that can empty an oil tanker in a night, dishwashers capable of scrubbing 4,100 plates an hour, mixers that blend everything from rocket fuel to bubble gum, and entire biscuit factories, with 6,000 separate components and 16 miles of wiring", (Semler, 1993, p.1).

The 'legend' of Semco rests on its sevenfold growth during the 1980s, in an economy where inflation reached 900%. There are some comparisons to the SAS story. This company was also losing money when Ricardo Semler took it over from his father in 1980; and the turnaround is also directly attributed to his radical vision of the potential of an empowered workforce.

Beyond that, the approaches towards the issue of empowerment have been quite different. Carlzon came to believe in the importance of changing the role of middle management from administrator to enabler; Semler appeared to believe in a far more democratic work environment where employees were entirely self-governing and self-managing. The fact that his vision seemed to have been realised in a heavily-unionised work environment during "withering recessions, staggering inflation, and chaotic national economic policy", only served to increase his 'radical' reputation.

The success of Semco had not been achieved under the same short-term financial and temporal pressures as the SAS 'do or die' approach. The process took over 12 years and it is still continuing. There was, to some degree, a reactive element as the specific economic climate and corporate problems forced some decisions upon them, but overall the process appeared to be one of proactive experimentation and continuous improvement. As Semler (1993, p.5) explains:
“In restructuring Semco, we’ve picked the best from many systems. From capitalism we take the ideals of personal freedom, individualism, and competition. From the theory, not the practice, of socialism we have learned to control greed and share information and power. The Japanese have taught us the value of flexibility, although we shrink from their family-like ties to the company and their automatic veneration of elders. We want people to advance because of competence, not longevity or conformity.”

What Semco represented, in practice, was a working model of the ideal of participative management. There were no ‘managers’ or ‘workers’, only ‘co-ordinators’ and ‘associates’. Everyone had access to the company books; factory workers set their own production targets and schedules; co-ordinators set their own salaries and bonuses; and the company was run by six ‘counsellors’ (including Semler), and every six months one Counsellor took a turn as acting chief executive.

The identification of a distinct programme of empowerment in this organised chaos is difficult, since the company was aggressively committed to avoiding the use of ‘buzzwords’ and to labelling their initiatives as specific management ‘techniques’. As such, there has been no public commitment to any one organisational behaviour model. What can be noted is that transference of functional responsibility is there in abundance - every effort was made to push responsibility as far down the organisation as possible, while ensuring that this increased responsibility was matched by the necessary authority to encourage functional work performance. Every employee was trusted to schedule and produce work to his personal best, so there was no quality control department and minimal supervision. Over the years the bureaucratic pyramid which Semler inherited from his father was reduced from 12 layers of management to only 3, with the objective of creating a lean, flexible and responsive organisation.
1.4.3 LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

Notwithstanding their narrative (and autobiographical) formats, the case studies of SAS and Semco reveal that unless increased responsibility (whether as a result of rationalisation or proactive devolution) is matched with the corresponding decision-making authority to actually get the work done, the employees cannot fully function in their new roles, and hence cannot be regarded as being 'empowered'. As the brief life span of the SAS empowerment programme revealed, the long-term success of this transference of functional responsibility is dependent on the interrelation of other key factors:

i) A Proactive Choice

Semco’s growth came as a result of over 12 years of conscious experimentation with different management styles and structures in order to find which one worked best. SAS tried a short-cut by circumventing or simply ignoring their policy and procedure manuals, and the programme faltered after only three years. In each case, however, irrespective of the reactive or proactive approach, there was a clear decision to push responsibility further down the organisation (and closer to the customer interface) in order to achieve a predetermined goal.

In other words, empowerment was not taken on as the newest technique simply to be current with the latest trends in organisational behaviour theory, nor were the basic ideas of the concept manipulated in order to justify mass redundancies.
To successfully reapportion discretion and autonomy to the front-line employees requires more from managers than a simple rearrangement of the organisation chart. Effective implementation of an empowerment programme is dependent upon the creation of an environment in which employees can feel comfortable using their newly-granted discretion and autonomy.

Thus, as Semco's preferred term for manager suggests, the management role of 'co-ordination' may survive the move to an empowered work environment, but the more intrinsic roles of motivation and control are replaced by coaching and facilitation. In theory, the increased sense of ownership of work performance provides the necessary motivation, which, in turn, allows management to fulfil a more collaborative support function in which employees are assisted in the attainment of corporate goals rather than coerced.
1.5 **A MODEL OF EMPOWERMENT**

The absence of a clear theoretical foundation for a concept that seems to promise so much is disturbing. Confusion and ambiguity surround both the initial motives for the concept, and the exact nature of the steps to be taken in initiating an empowerment programme. In this framework, it is easier to identify what empowerment isn’t than to define what it is.

Part of the reason for this is that, as yet, none of the case studies presented have applied the basic premises of empowerment, to the letter. The individual interpretations which represent the ‘classic’ examples of the success of empowerment are, in actuality, the result of companies either being forced into the consideration of an alternative by economic constraints - SAS, Ford - or of simply trying different approaches without realising that those approaches constituted ‘empowerment’ - Semco, Johnsonville Foods. Whether through operational desperation or conscious radical intent, the notion of an empowered workforce was absent from each of these supposed exemplars of the empowerment concept. For SAS and Ford, the pragmatic reality was simply that the current operational model was not working, and they had neither the resources nor the time to fully research or experiment with a new organisational template – hence the decisions to ‘hot-wire’ and ‘short-cut’ the corporate bureaucracy.

For Semco and Johnsonville Foods, change was driven primarily by the individual CEO’s who saw either their current market (Semco) or their personal management style (Johnsonville) as being too different for a ‘traditional’ managerial philosophy.

However, this departure did not involve the automatic selection of ‘empowerment’ as the answer to all their managerial ills. Individual solutions were created in accordance with individual situations – only in retrospect did those solutions appear to contain sufficient commonality (dramatic changes in the managerial function; greater autonomy for front-line employees; ‘delayered’ corporate pyramids) to warrant their labelling as ‘empowerment’.
What has been identified is that even with a questionable heritage, inherent rhetoric, and a plethora of individual interpretations, there is still an irreducible core element to the concept of empowerment - a deliberate devolution of responsibility matched by the necessary authority and autonomy to undertake that responsibility - i.e. a transference of functional responsibility from one layer of the organisation to another.

Whilst this overcomes the erroneous perception that empowerment simply requires the removal of a predetermined layer of management, it does not, in itself, provide a clear working model of empowerment against which these individual interpretations of the concept may be assessed. There are other issues to be clarified over and above the act of transference - i.e. the identification of which functions or responsibilities to be transferred, and to whom and from whom the transfer should be made. Clarification of these issues requires a different paradigm from the organisational pyramid.

In their development of an analytical model of empowerment (see Fig. 1), Conger and Kanungo (1988) focus on the root constructs of power and control, and make a clear distinction between empowerment as a relational construct (the delegation of positional authority within the organisational framework), and empowerment as a motivational construct (enabling the achievement of self-determination and self-efficacy needs):

Their model presents empowerment as a five-stage process in which, in simple terms, the operating and structural conditions which foster employee 'powerlessness' are identified, resolved, and referred back to the employees, with a consequent strengthening of perceptions of self-efficacy, and a long-term persistence of the behavioural effects of the empowerment process. In doing so, the authors take the contraposition that employees are not necessarily 'ready, willing and able' to cope with an empowered work environment, and that management must take the initiative in increasing employee perceptions of self-efficacy such that they feel capable of taking on the new responsibilities presented to them.
Five Stages in the Process of Empowerment:

STAGE 1
Conditions leading to a psychological state of powerlessness
- Organizational Factors
- Supervision
- Reward System
- Nature of Job

STAGE 2
The use of managerial strategies & techniques
- Participative Management
- Goal Setting
- Feedback System
- Contingent/Competence-based reward
- Job Enrichment

STAGE 3
To provide self-efficacy information to subordinates using four sources
- Enactive attainment
- Vicarious Experience
- Verbal Persuasion
- Emotional Arousal

STAGE 4
Results in empowering experience of subordinate
- Strengthening of effort - performance expectancy or belief in personal efficacy

STAGE 5
Leading to behavioral effects
- Initiation/Persistence of behavior to accomplish task objectives

Remove conditions listed under Stage 1

Source: Conger & Kanungo (1988)
As a framework for documenting the mechanics of the empowerment process, the model's primary strength lies in its recognition of the notions of antecedent conditions and behavioural outcomes of empowerment, and its attempt to identify the psychological state of 'being empowered':

1. Antecedent conditions - employee powerlessness:

   The contextual factors which foster employee powerlessness are organised into four categories - organisational; supervisory style; reward systems; and job design. As such:

   "When organisations do not provide rewards that are valued by employees and when rewards are not offered for employee competence, initiative, and persistence in innovative job behaviour, employees' sense of powerlessness increases .... furthermore, when jobs provide very little challenge and meaning and when they involve role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload, employees' belief in personal efficacy suffer." (Conger and Kanungo, 1988).

   Thus, these factors are targeted as the 'symptoms' of an organisation that could derive the greatest benefit from an empowered work environment. The task of removing these conditions remains the responsibility of management who must undertake 'strategies and techniques' such as participative management, goal setting, modelling, and job enrichment, to enhance the perceived self-efficacy of the workforce and hence overcome the sense of powerlessness.

2. Behavioural Outcomes:

   Bandura's (1977, 1986) self-efficacy theories argue that:

   "The strength of peoples' conviction in their own effectiveness is likely to affect whether they would even try to cope with given situations... They get involved in activities and behave assuredly when they judge themselves capable of handling situations that would otherwise be intimidating." (1977, pp.193-4).
In this context, the dual expectation being placed upon management is not only the creation of the opportunity for expanded work performance, but also the development of the necessary self-confidence to undertake that performance. It is suggested that creating the former without the latter will only increase employee perceptions of powerlessness and hence undermine the overall empowerment initiative. Success in this area leads the organisation into the ‘promised land’ of empowerment where employees are more productive and creative, and the organisation is more efficient, effective, and responsive to customers.

3. Psychological state of empowerment:

In making the distinction between empowerment as both a relational and motivational construct, Conger and Kanungo underline the idea that the act of delegation of positional responsibility does not, in itself, constitute empowerment. However, they take the idea that there must be a corresponding delegation of the requisite authority one stage further by arguing that there must also be a corresponding perception of the ability to cope with this new authority (self-efficacy). As such, the state of ‘empowerment’ can only be reached when all three elements are achieved - i.e. the transference of functional responsibility matched by the perceived ability to undertake this expanded work performance.

The primary weakness of the model lies in the interpretation of the managerial role of ‘enabler’ as being that of creating a suitable work environment in which empowerment can take place.
This is an oversimplification of the empowerment process and does not consider the consequent organisational dynamics involved - i.e. how the organisation will function over the long-term with these newly-empowered employees who, by virtue of their enhanced self-efficacy, are more likely to expect opportunities in which they are able to take the initiative rather than seeking the input of an immediate supervisor. Thus, the process model may outline the role of management in initiating and nurturing the early stages of the process, but it does not recognise the longer-term re-orientation of the middle management role within the new operational framework.

In addition, the assumption that the identification of the conditions that foster employee 'powerlessness' is an exclusively managerial issue (with the subsequent use of 'managerial strategies and techniques' to rectify the situation), offers no clarification of the enhanced employee role within the process, other than using 'participative management' and 'job enrichment'. Here again, the likely results of the increased expectations generated by the anticipated enhancement in employee self-efficacy have not been accounted for.

Thus, the Conger and Kanungo model may be of use in the documentation of the mechanics of an empowerment process, but the subsequent analysis of the consequences of that process will require further, and more detailed, analysis.
1.6 CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the subject matter of this thesis - the concept of empowerment -- has been identified as a managerial concept that appears to hold an identity of dual extremes - much exalted by disciples who argue for its role as a universal panacea for all managerial ills; and much maligned by critics who dismiss it as nothing more than an amalgam of the various humanistic management theories that have come before it.

The case for high praise is supported by anecdotal case studies of purported transformations in the fortunes of organisations that have apparently dared to challenge the traditional ‘command and control’ model of management in the governance of their organisations. Upon this foundation has developed a dubious ideology which appears to offer numerous promises of what empowerment can do, with little, if any, hard prescriptive data on how those promises are to be realised.

Critics argue that once the hyperbole and rhetoric is examined in detail, there is no more substance than a reformulation of past participative management theories of job enrichment and employee involvement. Moreover, it is argued that the only reason for the apparent rise to prominence of the concept at all has been an opportunistic alignment with a contemporary phenomenon of organisational downsizing. The purported ‘dangers’ of empowerment are endorsed by an alternative series of anecdotal case studies, including the 1996 collapse of Barings Bank (Fay, 1997), supposedly as a result of the actions of one ‘empowered’ rogue trader; and, in more detail, Davidow and Malone’s (1992, p.9) research on General Motors:

"Its actions appeared to be driven more from management’s desire for self-preservation through cost cutting than from a sincere interest in market responsiveness, customer needs, or the company’s own employees."

58
The position taken in this study, however, is an acknowledgement of the apparent naiveté of empowerment theory (i.e. offering all things to all men) and the pursuit of a more pragmatic reality of empowerment practice, on the basis of an identified irreducible core - namely the transference of functional responsibility from one level of an organisation to another. Much of the evidence presented thus far has centred on a positional transference of responsibility, where external events (usually cost-driven) have resulted in the subsequent ‘delayering’ of an organisation, such that survivors are now faced with more responsibility and less supervision - tenuously interpreted as ‘autonomy’.

The argument presented here is that only when employees are seen to be enabled with the necessary training and authority to fully undertake their increased responsibilities in the newly-empowered organisation (and actually get things done), can there be a balanced, transference of functional responsibility - without the appropriate training and investiture of authority, the transference remains positional rather than functional.

Without evidence of such an enablement, organisations can then be said to be aligned more with empowerment theory rather than being prepared for the challenging task of implementing empowerment practice, which, in turn, suggests that it is this characteristically opportunistic approach to the concept, rather than the concept itself which is flawed.
1.7 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Thus far, empowerment has been characterised as being, at best, an abstract concept that suffers from general familiarity rather than understanding, and, at worst, an ill-defined theoretical construct which seems to promise much but offers little in terms of evidence or a detailed methodology. As such, empowerment appears to have risen to prominence with no agreed-upon definition of what the concept is, and no clear picture of what processes are involved.

Further examination has revealed empowerment to be a loose combination of a poorly tested theory and an ideology of questionable merit built on dissident opinion not general consensus. In addition, the current series of case studies on the subject are distinguished in their superficiality and subjectivity, such that they offer no robust link between empowerment and the improved productivity that the concept claims to deliver.

Advocates of the concept offer as evidence a plethora of narrative and autobiographical case studies that, when examined in detail, appear to present an amalgam of humanistic management initiatives (job enrichment, worker participation, self-directed teams) that are then, (typically in retrospect) grouped under the broader (and more topical) umbrella of 'empowerment'.

Critics offer equally narrative and autobiographical studies that, when examined, reveal an opportunistic abandonment of Fayol’s managerial functions in favour of immediate or near-term cost savings. As a result, the concept has most recently been labelled as a ‘fad’, ‘buzzword’, or “an amazing propaganda coup” (Koch & Godden, 1997), with many organisations criticised as merely ‘jumping on the empowerment bandwagon’.
From a theoretical perspective, the concept is equally flawed. It does not appear to be the clear antithesis of Scientific Management that its advocates would like it to be, nor does it reside neatly in the humanistic camp, advocating (it is claimed) direct employee ownership and clear performance responsibility rather than the less-demanding (and more intangible) employee involvement.

However, despite all these misrepresentations, misapplications, and misunderstandings, the concept of empowerment continues to persist into its third decade, which begs the question as to what it is about this concept that gives it such durability. Is the concept merely a managerial version of 'The Emperor's New Clothes' (Argyris, 1998), or is it that it is so malleable as to encompass every current managerial initiative with a more topical and 'user friendly' nomenclature. Alternatively, could it be that there really is value behind the patina of rhetoric and hyperbole, and that the concept has merely been abused and misused in the past.

Empowerment has risen to distinction among a corps of equally mystical managerial solutions – Management By Objective (MBO); 'Zero Defects'; Total Quality Management (TQM); Management By Wandering Around (MBWA); Business Process Reengineering (BPR); Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) – all of which have risen to equal, if not greater, distinction, only to be passed over in due course in favour of the next 'flavour of the month' initiative. While Empowerment maintains its own cadre of critics, the concept continues to prevail and appears to offer sufficient promise to organisations that they are willing to consider it (even with a conscious avoidance of the "buzzword") as a means of bringing about significant change.
1.7.1 A PRAGMATIC RESEARCH STRATEGY

From a research perspective, since so much of the data and opinion around the concept is unclear and contested, every aspect of empowerment would appear to be open for more detailed analysis. The theoretical origins of the concept; its relationship to predecessors and successors; the apparent durability; the deceptive simplicity; the nature of the promises offered; it's potential impact on an organisation and the personnel within that organisation; the perception of the concept at the senior and middle managerial levels and the organisations' front-line; past attempts at empowerment (both claimed successes and criticised failures); current and future empowerment initiatives. Additional research in all these subject areas would facilitate the creation of a more comprehensive and definitive theory of empowerment.

An empirically grounded theory, in turn, demands robust data, and in this instance the historical data has proven to be very limiting – the case studies are subjective, normative and most typically autobiographical. The development of a clear understanding of what empowerment is perceived to offer an organisation, and how the management team of an organisation would go about introducing the concept, could, therefore, best be achieved by the examination of a subject organisation in real time.

By identifying an organisation that was making a conscious choice to pursue the goal of an empowered operating model, the research initiative could then have the stated objective of reaching a full and detailed understanding of:

1. The financial and operational condition of the organisation before and after the initiative.

What drove the organisation to pursue a new operational template – i.e. how was the existing operating model perceived as being broken or flawed. How were those flaws quantified and what were the corresponding changes in those measurements upon completion of the empowerment initiative.
2. *Why empowerment was identified as a possible solution.*

To what degree was the existing model perceived as being beyond modification or repair, and how different or extreme would this new ‘empowered’ model be from their current template. What was the driving force behind this choice – cost reduction, greater productivity, industrial relations issues, competition – and who was pushing the effort – senior management or the front-line employees.

3. *What the senior management team of the organisation understood empowerment to mean, and how ready they felt the organisation to be, on the basis of that definition.*

Was empowerment perceived as a managerial issue (affecting the way managers performed their tasks), an employee issue (affecting how the employees performed their tasks), or a procedural issue (impacting the administrative policies and procedures of the organisation) – or was it seen as a combination of all of the above. In addition, on the assumption that the end-state of an empowered organisation could be clearly vocalised, how prepared was the organisation to make the transition – would the journey be long or short. What was ‘empowerment’ seen by senior management to entail.

4. *How the initiative was developed.*

What steps were taken to design, create and implement the initiative. Was it an exclusively managerial project, or was the entire organisation involved. Was guidance sought from external ‘specialists’ and were the examples of other organisations copied in the creation of the new operational template. Was the project driven by cost or by outcome. What time frame was set for this organisational transition.
5. How the initiative was implemented.

Was the change gradual or immediate, by trial department or organisation-wide. Was the initiative led from the top (via senior management endorsement) or built from the bottom up (via direct employee involvement and support). Was information on the project shared with the organisation in its entirety or in a piecemeal fashion on a 'need-to-know' basis. Was the new operating model presented as a *fait accomplis* or was it open to modification as the initiative moved forward.

6. Perceptions of the 'empowerors'.

How did those employees involved in the delegation of tasks and responsibilities see their roles changing and what was their reaction to the situation – a siege mentality (as demonstrated by SAS's middle managers) or positive acceptance of a new work design. Was empowerment perceived as a loss of authority/responsibility or the gain of a more proactive and creative work environment. Did they feel prepared for both the transition and the change in the organisation. Were they given the opportunity for input before, during, and after the transition.

7. Perceptions of the 'empowerees'.

Did those receiving the newly-delegated tasks and responsibilities feel adequately informed and prepared for the forthcoming changes. Did they see the change as an opportunity for more direct involvement in their work and greater ownership of a more creative work output, or was it simply 'more work for the same money'. Did they feel able to handle the transition or was there a perceived need for additional skills training. Were they given the opportunity for input before, during, and after the transition.
8. What changes, if any, took place

Having examined and assessed the initiative and the empowered operating model in theoretical terms, what actually happened to the organisation and its personnel. Was the project seen through to fruition or were there unexpected obstacles along the way. If changes were brought about, were they permanent or temporary. Were the changes true to plan or did events change mid-course. If no changes were realised, what were the reasons for that.

9. Did the initiative succeed or fail and what were the reasons for that.

On the assumption that the initiative commenced with a targeted finishing date in place, what was the status of the project at that date. Had the plan been completed successfully. Had the expected outcomes been realised. Were there any unexpected outcomes. Were they positive or negative.

The collation of such a detailed record of an organisational initiative that is claimed to be 'empowerment' would then enable the development of a truly objective assessment of the validity of the concept, without any predisposition towards either criticism or advocacy. This, in turn, would prevent the typical obfuscation of key issues and outcomes that has characterised many of the autobiographical accounts of successful 'empowerment' initiatives.

However, reaching such a level of familiarity and understanding with an organisation represents an enormous research challenge. It is possible, as Tracy Kidder's work with Data General Corporation in The Soul of a New Machine (Kidder, 1981) ably demonstrates, to become closely integrated and imbedded into the functional processes and communication channels of an organisation. Nevertheless, such a project would involve significant implications in terms of access, resources and time in bringing about what would essentially be a detailed picture of one organisation in one industry sector. This, in turn, has implications as to the general applicability of the research data to the creation of a broader definition and understanding of the concept.
Given the apparent lack of substantive research on the concept as a whole, there is an argument for a basic endeavour to seek an understanding of how organisations perceive empowerment. At present, it has been possible to identify a myriad of dissenting opinions that, in turn, generate a myriad of interpretations of the concept. An examination of this situation has revealed only that the concept is neither clearly defined nor understood.

If there is a common thread of perception among organisations (across a range of industries), as to why their management teams are pursuing empowerment, what they think it will do for the organisation, and how they expect the organisation to change (both structurally and functionally) as a result; then the collected data would represent a strong foundation for the detailed examination of the validity of the concept (over and above its current ‘fad’ status).

However, similarity of perception, in and of itself, could be achieved simply by following the lead of the same ‘management guru’ text. The initial similarity would need to be further examined by tracking the individual interpretations of this perception as each organisation embarks upon an empowerment initiative. This, in turn, would elevate the research from passive data collection to more rational analysis.
2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The aim of this thesis was to examine the different practical forms of organisational change portrayed as 'empowerment', together with their causes, conditions and outcomes. As such, the objective was not to measure the existence of nor quantify the incidence of empowerment within an organisation, but rather to develop a robust, empirically sound theory of its nature, concomitants and context. In doing so, it was hoped that some degree of clarity, definition and understanding could be brought to bear on a management philosophy which appears to suffer from extreme misunderstanding and misapplication, and which has yet to live up to expectations as a mechanism for the achievement of significant organisational change.

The continued invocation of empowerment within the commercial arena as a universal panacea for all managerial ills continues to be undermined by the absence of any academic credibility (via a commonly-accepted 'school of thought') or commercial merit (via a well-researched body of evidence of proven initiatives). Even with the aggregation of journalistic treatises and narrative success stories into a 'Journal of Empowerment in Organisations' (MCB Press), the concept still lacks theoretical substance and well-documented data. Basic questions such as 'what is empowerment?' and 'why do organisations continue to believe that the concept can do so much for them?' remain avidly discussed but essentially unanswered.
The literature review revealed an amalgam of malleable humanistic theories that could be moulded into a tentative substructure but no definitive positions worthy of revision or review. This suggested that, in methodological terms, there was a need for research at the theory building rather than theory testing stage, with the objective to seek a degree of understanding of how and why the concept is adopted and utilised, rather than seeking to test specific hypotheses. In addition, the emphasis on 'how' and 'why' precluded a more academic review of existing theoretical propositions in favour of a more practical exploration and documentation of organisational change initiatives portrayed as empowerment.

2.1.1 A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conger & Kanungo's 5 Stage Process Model of Empowerment, (Conger & Kanungo, 1988) facilitated the evolution of a rudimentary conceptual framework, namely that there is an irreducible core element to the concept of empowerment - a deliberate devolution of functional responsibility, matched by the necessary authority and autonomy to undertake that responsibility. This hypothesis could now be developed beyond the conceptual realm to practical reality - i.e. how and why do organisations that purport to be empowering their employees bring about this devolution of functional responsibility (if at all). Moreover, rather than attempting to identify any notion of an objective definition of empowerment, there appeared to be a greater need for the achievement of a fundamental level of understanding of how the concept is perceived and utilised, and for the identification of key areas for future research. This position was seen to predicate an essentially descriptive exploratory study, rather than an inherently academic study designed to test specific hypotheses.
2.1.2 AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Yin (1994, p.4) identifies three distinct categories of research strategy:

1. **Exploratory** - the study is used as a basis for formulating more precise research questions or testable hypotheses.

2. **Descriptive** - the study simply observes and records issues or events over time.

3. **Explanatory** - the study is used to trace operational links or causal relationships.

In this study, since the existing knowledge base was poor, and the available literature provided, at best, a narrative framework for empowerment rather than a conceptual one, the most appropriate characteristic of the strategy appeared to be that of an 'exploratory' study. Literature research and 'case studies' used to substantiate and authenticate empowerment initiatives thus far appeared to have remained essentially anecdotal in nature, choosing to focus solely on outcomes (usually quantified in revenue terms) with little, if any, attention paid to the original rationale behind the initiative.

Exploration of such core issues as *why* empowerment was originally selected as a means of organisational transformation; *which* methodology was chosen; and *what* obstacles were anticipated, would facilitate the development of a foundation to support future research. To understand the objectives and outcomes of an organisational change initiative, and why Senior Managers see the 'empowerment' of their employees as the key to the achievement of those outcomes, would provide greater clarity as to what managerial policies and procedures were directly impacted by the concept of empowerment.
Reaching such a level of comprehension required that both tangible and intangible issues be addressed. From an economic perspective, tangible commercial motivators behind a change initiative, ‘empowerment’ or not, could be identified – labour cost reduction, levels of employee productivity, competitive pressures, industrial relations etc. The intangible drivers are harder to identify and hence have proven to be the ‘missing link’ in the majority of the existing ‘case studies’ of empowerment. Factors such as opinions on empowerment, understanding of how to introduce such a concept, expectations of the initiative and its outcomes, are difficult to capture. They are, nevertheless, critical to the development of a clear understanding of why senior managers would choose to launch what are often dramatic internal restructuring initiatives on the basis of a managerial concept which appears to promise so much and yet, at the same time, is dismissed as being a ‘fad’ or ‘flavour of the month’ philosophy.

Detailed material on these issues would best be captured through an examination of an organisation at every stage of any initiative that the senior management team of that organisation should elect to label as ‘empowerment’. The literature search had shown that historical data on this subject offered little, if any, supporting research to explain why senior management teams elected to pursue empowerment, or indeed, what their expectations were of the outcome of such a course of action. By undertaking field research with an organisation that was in the process (or, arguably, in the throes) of an ‘empowerment’ initiative, answers to such basic questions as ‘what, why, when, where and how’ could be achieved. In addition, extending such research to target subjects in more than one industry sector would further enable the identification of any connection between organisations or industry-specific criteria in the pursuit of empowerment.
2.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The stated objective of this thesis was to reach a fundamental understanding of the structure, process and driving forces of empowerment, rather than any superficial establishment of correlation or cause and effect relationships. As such, issues of prevalence or frequency of empowerment within an organisation (which may prove to be critical to further analysis on the subject) were seen to be secondary to more foundational issues of meaning and comprehension of the concept itself. In addition, understanding the process of empowerment (i.e. how change is planned and ultimately occurs) was seen to be of greater relevance than the measurement of differences between identified variables in the organisation.

Five components may be identified in the selection of an appropriate research design and methodology:

1. **Purposes** – Why the research is being conducted (e.g. theoretical versus practical) which, in turn, influences the formulation of the research question, the methods used, and the ultimate validity of the conclusions drawn from the research.

2. **Conceptual Context** – Is the research being undertaken on the basis of a detailed literature review, or is the primary driving force the researcher’s theory of what is going on? Maxwell argues that a restrictive theoretical framework for the research can be avoided through the development of a construct that draws not only from the experiential knowledge of the researcher, and existing research theory, but also from more unorthodox approaches such as “concept mapping” (mapping out critical linkages) and “thought experiments” (brainstorming). Gummesson (1991) makes a similar distinction between pre-understanding (people’s insights into a specific problem before they undertake the research) and understanding (the insights gained as a result of the research which, in turn, will contribute pre-understanding for future research on the subject).
3. Research Questions – The nature of the question being asked, it is argued, predetermines the type of research methodology best suited to answering that question. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe (1993) further develop the issue of what influences the research question by identifying key players in the study: the researcher (student, academic, paid researcher, manager); the stakeholders (academic community, commercial sponsors); and the subject of study (the topicality or volatility of the subject matter). In each case, the nature of the research question is influenced by both the expected outcome of the research (and the audience) and the kinds of data needed to answer the question.

4. Validity – Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe (1993) make a distinction between positivist (objective) and phenomenological (subjective) viewpoints on the issue of research validity, with a positivist focus on “Does an instrument measure what it is supposed to measure?” and a phenomenological focus on whether or not “The researcher (has) gained full access to the knowledge and meanings of informants.” (1993, p.40). In simpler terms, the concern for the researcher is whether the research will involve objective, measurable phenomena or socially constructed phenomena requiring interpretation. Gummesson (1991) classifies validity as simply being a measure of the degree to which the chosen methodology is “a good fit” for the study topic. In this context, greater emphasis is then placed on the issue of research reliability such that: “Two or more researchers studying the same phenomenon with similar purposes should reach approximately the same results.” (p.80). Thus, validity questions whether or not the evidence gathered reflects the reality under examination, and reliability questions whether the same methodology, used by a different researcher, would yield the same results.
5. Methods — All of the preceding criteria influence the ultimate selection of research methodology, with the assumption that the proper formulation of the research question will determine the most appropriate methodology to be used. The methods available to a researcher are traditionally classified under two headings – *quantitative* and *qualitative* — although the groupings are not mutually exclusive, since both methodologies can use the same data gathering techniques (e.g. interviews, surveys, and observation).

2.2.1 TRIANGULATION

From a phenomenological perspective (taking the five components into account), it would seem that the choice of the appropriate research methodology is determined not by the research question alone. Rather the research question, the current ‘body of knowledge’ on the subject, and the practical reality of the environment in which the research will take place can all be seen to impact the choice of methodology. Abrahamson (1983) takes this argument further by identifying the danger of research becoming *method-bound* — i.e. that using one methodology exclusively exposes the research to the innate strengths and weaknesses of that approach. Prevention of such an outcome is achieved by the use of different, corroborative methods to counterbalance the weaknesses of one method with the strengths of another — a term known as *Triangulation*.

For example, Zamanou & Glaser (1994) used a combination of different but corroborative methods (questionnaires, interview data, and direct observation) in studying the area of cultural change within organisations. Jick (1979) used the same combination of methodologies in studying the effects of a merger on employees. With a stated research objective to document and examine the sources of anxiety, how individuals experience that anxiety, and its subsequent impact on the organisation, Jick recorded that the triangulation approach offered greater flexibility in the utilisation of conventional data collection methods and also allowed the researchers to feel more confident in their findings.
Further scrutiny of this argument requires a more detailed examination of the long-standing debate over the relative merits of qualitative versus quantitative research.

2.2.2 QUALITATIVE versus QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

The debate over the relative merits of qualitative versus quantitative research methodologies has traditionally centred on the extent to which each may be regarded as being truly scientific research. Yin (1993) addresses the dichotomy as having become: "...a caricature in the social sciences. Qualitative research is characterised as being 'soft' social science, interested in 'mushy' processes, and dealing with inadequate evidence. Quantitative research is considered hard-nosed, data-driven, outcome-oriented, and truly scientific." (p.57)

Mitchell & Bernauer (1998) offer a more detailed explanation:

"Quantitative methodologists seek to understand causal relationships...by conceptualising, measuring, and analysing information about the real world by means of numerical data representing explicitly defined variables. They analyse the data via statistical procedures to compare a large number of cross-sectional or longitudinal observations with the aim of identifying potentially strong, non-random, correlations between explanatory (or independent) variables and effects (or dependent variables).

Qualitative methodologists interested in evaluating and generalising causal inferences pursue the same goal. They also rely on explicitly defined variables but capture the values of these variables in words and analyse the data through other techniques.....Instead of isolating causal relationships through large numbers of cases and statistical procedures, qualitative methodologists evaluate such relationships by holding other variables constant through careful case selection."

Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.15) endeavour to further clarify the role of qualitative research as being:

"To provide quantitative research with a few substantive categories and hypotheses...then...quantitative research would take over, explore further, discover facts and test current theory."
Advocates of qualitative methodologies argue for their superiority on the grounds that statistical research methods are not scientific because they can only produce probabilistic generalisations, not universal laws. Gummesson (1991, p.76) argues that quantitative methodologies take a reductionist approach such that:

"The object of study (is broken down) into small, well-defined parts (which) leads to a large number of fragmented, well-defined studies of parts in the belief that they can be fitted together, like a jigsaw puzzle, to form a whole picture."

Miles and Huberman (1994) endeavour to dismiss the entire issue as being "unproductive" on the grounds that, "we have to face the fact that numbers and words are both needed if we are to understand the world." (p.40). Salomon (1991) appears to concur by pointing out that the issue is not quantitative-qualitative at all, but whether the research is endeavouring to take an analytic approach to understanding a few controlled variables, or a systemic approach to understanding the interaction of variables in a complex environment.

However, if Abrahamson's (1983) concerns over research becoming method-bound are considered, the classification of a research methodology as 'qualitative' or 'quantitative' can be seen to be confining. Declaring an epistemological preference solely to reach an acceptable categorisation fails to take into account the central questions — what is the purpose of the research and how will it be undertaken? Once these are answered, the issue of selecting a methodology becomes one of finding the most appropriate means to an end, irrespective of whether they fall under one category or the other. As Weinstein and Tamur (1978) point out, "Why throw away anything helpful?" (p.140). In this context, the researcher could be open to consideration of interviews, observation and diary methods (traditionally qualitative) as well as questionnaires and survey methods (traditionally quantitative) if they were deemed suitable for the achievement of the research outcome. This, in turn, would enable confirmation or corroboration via triangulation and expand the breadth and scope of the study beyond the sequential approach taken in the traditional qualitative-quantitative settings.
Thus, this division of quantitative versus qualitative as the evaluation of frequency versus meaning is simplistic at best. The perspective that qualitative methodologies are appropriate only where the research data is insufficient for ‘real’ scientific analysis by means of quantitative methods denotes a characterisation of methodology when, in fact, the attributes of ‘qualitative’ or ‘quantitative’ are equally applicable to the types of data collected. As such, quantitative data could be seen to be primarily numerical in form, with qualitative data being perceptual and attitudinal in dimension. Gherardi and Turner (1987) suggest that the issue is one of knowing when it is useful to count and when it is “difficult or inappropriate to count at all,” – i.e. when the data are non-standardised and there are no clear rules for saying what is variation and what is error.

It may be argued, however, that this clash between the purposes and capacities of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies is essentially a question of different research paradigms. If the contingency theory of organisations is to be believed, in that there is no ‘right’ organisational structure for a company, then the appropriate methodology for researching that company should relate directly to the research question at hand. Rather than taking an exclusively qualitative or quantitative approach to the project, the relative merits of each methodology should be considered in the face of the research material available and corporate access given.

If an assessment was to be made of how and why an empowerment initiative was launched, and whether it succeeded or failed (or was likely to), endeavouring to overlay statistical procedures (i.e. to classify the organisational samples on the basis of their relative separation or correlation from a questionable norm of anecdotal data) merely to pursue a quantitative agenda, seemed inappropriate. At this exploratory stage, there was sufficient debate as to the exact nature of empowerment and its core tenets, that an investigation of organisational perceptions of the concept was seen as an essential precursor to any attempt at quantitative assessment.
Thus, to return to the notion of three critical components – the research question, the ‘body of knowledge, and the real world environment – this thesis presented a clear position. The research question sought meaning and understanding of a concept rather than frequency or prevalence; the ‘body of knowledge’ was questionable, anecdotal, and unsubstantial; and the real world environment was a commercial one, which had, historically, impeded statistical analysis of tightly controlled variables. In this context, a qualitative rather than quantitative approach was determined to be more appropriate.

2.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Yin (1994, p.3) identifies a common misperception that the five most common research strategies – experiment, survey, archival analysis, history, and case study – should be arrayed hierarchically:

"We were once taught to believe that case studies were appropriate for the exploratory phase of an investigation, that surveys and histories were appropriate for the descriptive phase, and that experiments were the only way of doing explanatory or causal inquiries.....This hierarchical view, however, is incorrect. Experiments with an exploratory motive have always existed. In addition, the development of causal explanations has long been a serious concern of historians, reflected by the subfield known as historiography... The more appropriate view of these strategies is a pluralistic one."

As such, the selection of the appropriate research design and methodologies for any study can be seen to be dependent upon the following factors:
a) **The type of research question posed.**

The focus on *meaning* rather than *frequency* in this thesis seemed to preclude questions of 'how much', 'how often', or 'how many'. In this context, enumerative surveys or archival analysis that would seek to identify the incidence or prevalence of 'empowerment' within an organisation would not have been appropriate. Questions such as 'why' organisations choose to pursue empowerment, and 'how' they elect to initiate that pursuit, are more *explanatory* in nature and, hence, deal with: "*operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence*", (Yin, 1994, p.6).

b) **The extent of control an investigator has over actual behavioural events.**

Since the researcher had no control over the creation of an empowerment initiative and was unable to either manipulate relevant behaviour within the organisation or to control specific variables within the initiative (e.g. who was empowered, in what way, and by whom), an experiment (which demands "direct, precise and systematic manipulation of behaviour by the investigator", (Yin, 1994, p.8)) was not feasible.

Histories, on the other hand, are appropriate where there is virtually no access or control. As Yin (1994, p.8) comments:

"*The distinctive contribution of the historical method is in dealing with the 'dead' past – that is, when no relevant persons are alive to report, even retrospectively, what occurred, and when an investigator must rely on primary documents, secondary documents, and cultural and physical artefacts as the main sources of evidence.*"

A *case study* utilises much of the same methodology as historical method, but with the addition of two key sources of evidence – direct observation and systematic interviewing.
c) The degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events.

Whilst some element of historical review had been used in identifying the theoretical antecedents of the empowerment concept (and the anecdotal 'case studies' which claim to support it), the issue remains very much a contemporary one. An historical analysis would have helped in the triangulation between the past and present history of a company, and in the selection of pertinent analogies, but an examination of how empowerment was currently being perceived and utilised demanded a contemporary perspective. By using a case study approach, the researcher was able to utilise a wider range of evidence - documentation, artefacts, interviews and observations - than might have been available in a conventional historical study.

d) The development of a theoretical proposition.

In order to maintain a clear sense of direction for the investigation through the selection of research subjects and data collection and analysis, a rudimentary proposition or hypothesis was essential. The level of detail attached to this proposition could be seen to range from the preferred to the realistic. In this instance, specifying the type of organisation (industry base, maturity, size, market share, etc.,) and its relative advancement (i.e. just starting/just finished an empowerment initiative) would have represented an adherence to the precepts of quantitative research methodology in building a stable investigative model, but it would, nonetheless, have been idealistic. Given the likelihood of some difficulty in identifying organisations which were willing to both make a public commitment to an empowerment initiative and to then allow an outside researcher to investigate that initiative through non-participant observation and interviews, a more pragmatic frame of reference seemed appropriate.
Thus, with a process focus on operational links in an environment in which the researcher had minimal control over behavioural outcomes, the most appropriate qualitative research methodology was determined to be the pursuit of a series of comparative case studies in which the front-line employees and managers of target organisations were interviewed to identify the perceptions and expectations of their ‘empowerment’ initiatives. As Yin (1994, p.12) comments in his quotation of Schramm (1971):

"The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result."

Given that the research had already been determined to be at the theory building as opposed to theory testing stage, the question of generating theory on the basis of case study data led to the concept of grounded theory:

2.3.1 GROUNDED THEORY

Originally developed in reference to sociological research, this term was first coined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to refer to research that produced ‘theory grounded in data’:

"Generating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked-out in relation to the data during the course of the research", (1967, p.6).

Thus, Glaser and Strauss draw a clear distinction between qualitative theory generation and quantitative theory testing. The process of ‘drawing-out’ conclusions from a small number of case studies is undertaken in order to reach a fundamental understanding of the structure, process and driving forces behind a phenomenon. As Gummesson (1991, p.83) argues:

"This contrasts with the testing and refinement of existing theories and models, which is the primary concern of mainstream researchers."
As Jones (1987) comments, grounded theory works because,

"rather than forcing data within logico-deductively derived assumptions and categories, research should be used to generate grounded theory, which ‘fits’ and ‘works’ because it is derived from the concepts and categories used by social actors themselves to interpret and organise their worlds," (p.25).

Whilst this is an essentially ‘inductive’ approach, the collection and presentation of detailed, relatively unstructured information from a range of sources may be used to prompt further, more wide-ranging research, or to provide more substantial hypotheses to be tested further. It is particularly good for dealing with interview transcripts in that the approach recognises that the large amounts of non-standard data make data analysis problematic. Easterby-Smith et al (1991) identify seven main stages to the systematic analysis of such data in order to, “tease out themes, patterns and categories,” (p.108):

1. Familiarisation – reading the transcripts several times.
2. Reflection – a process of evaluation and critique of the data.
3. Conceptualisation – identification of potential concepts or variables.
4. Cataloguing concepts – once they are determined to be robust.
5. Recoding – re-verification of concept references.
7. Re-evaluation – and identification of additional work needed.

Critics of ‘grounded theory’ argue that it enables researchers to deliberately avoid specifying theoretical propositions at the outset of an enquiry. Advocates argue that such criticism represents a pre-occupation with the development of theoretical constructs on the basis of established, traditional approaches, rather than concentrating on the lessons to be learned from the actual empirical observations of the study.
Given the predominance of non-standard data in grounded theory, the most research approach taken in the collection of such data is the case study. Case study research strategy has received its own share of vilification on the grounds that the opportunistic and often idiosyncratic approaches taken in gaining access to organisations, and in the collection of research data from within those organisations, precludes the generation of substantive, empirically-based theories. Single case studies are regarded as being too specific, and multiple case studies are typically criticised for having too few observations for any meaningful generalisation. Indeed, in criticising the existing case studies of empowerment as being anecdotal and descriptive, we are condemning their lack of ‘generalisability’ to other situations.

However, as Yin (1994, p.31) comments, this criticism is based on an imprecise consideration of case studies as “sampling units” from which statistical generalisations can be drawn. According to this sampling logic, the case studies are required to be representative of a larger pool of organisations, with a consequent reliance on inferential statistics and confidence intervals to verify this degree of representation. However, this logic is only appropriate when the incidence of phenomena is being assessed.

Gummesson (1991, p.79) argues that two distinct dimensions of theory generalisation should be recognised - the quantitative determination of how much, how often, and how many as the basis for probabilistic generalisation; and the qualitative examination of specific phenomena and key operating mechanisms as the basis for a functional understanding of the interactive processes at work.

Normann (1970, p.53) concurs:

“If you have a good descriptive or analytic language by means of which you can really grasp the interaction between various parts of the system and the important characteristics of the system, the possibilities to generalise from very few cases, or even one single case, may be reasonably good.”
Yin (1994, p.31) makes the same distinction between “statistical” and “analytical” generalisation, arguing that multiple case studies should be regarded not as multiple respondents, but as multiple stand-alone experiments. In this context, a previously developed theory can be used as a template with which to compare the empirical results of the case study on the basis of replication logic rather than sampling logic. A theory can then be generalised on the grounds of either a literal replication (where the case studies display similar results), or a theoretical replication (where the case studies produce contrasting results but for predictable reasons).

Thus, the aim of this thesis was to identify organisations which were actively pursuing the ‘empowerment’ of their workforce, and to endeavour to reach an understanding of why they chose to pursue empowerment as an organisational objective, and what they believed the concept could do for them. This approach required the collection of data that was grounded in a more robust research methodology than the narrative material collected on the subject to date, but which was also appropriate and sensitive to the need to understand rather than measure the phenomenon.

Miles & Huberman (1994, p.17) capture the need for such qualitative research as follows:

“Something is known conceptually about the phenomenon, but not enough to house a theory. The researcher has an idea of the parts of the phenomenon that are not well understood and knows where to look for these things – in which settings, among which actors. And the researcher... has some initial ideas about how to gather the information. At the outset, then, we... have at least a rudimentary conceptual framework, a set of general research questions, some notions about sampling, and some initial data gathering devices.”
2.4 SELECTION OF RESEARCH SAMPLE

The ideal subject organisation for this research was identified as being a company that was claiming to be ‘empowering’ its workforce. In addition, the most opportune point for contact with that organisation would be at the earliest possible stage of their ‘empowerment’ initiative (in order to both capture the original plans and rationales behind the initiative, and to witness as much of its development as possible). The development of a sample group on the basis of such criteria presented two problems – how to locate such organisations, and how to then gain an appropriate level of access to undertake the research.

Potential candidates were located by means of attendance (by the researcher) at a series of ‘professional development’ seminars in which representatives from large national and multinational organisations gave presentations on topical managerial issues (industrial relations, employee development, customer service, Total Quality Management (TQM), marketing, organisational growth, etc.). Given that empowerment had a tarnished reputation as a ‘flavour of the month’ management fad, it was anticipated that finding organisations willing to make a public commitment to the empowerment of their workforce would prove to be difficult. In this eventuality, the parameters of the search would have been expanded to include those organisations pursuing ‘employee involvement’, ‘job enrichment’, and ‘participative management’ initiatives.

By subscribing to the mailing lists of several companies that host such ‘professional development’ events, selecting candidates across a range of industries, and looking for such key words as ‘empowerment’, ‘employee development’, and ‘organisational change’ (in the title and supporting sub-text of their presentations), it was possible to identify six candidates that claimed to be empowering their organisations. (In the interests of preserving the anonymity promised to each subject organisation, the exact title of their presentations will not be disclosed).
Each of the six organisations was approached and presented with a research proposal. In recognition of the time and inconvenience involved in allowing access to an outside researcher, a *quid pro quo* bargain was offered, in which a summary report of findings would be offered to each organisation once the fieldwork was completed. Anonymity was guaranteed, which, in turn, would allow each organisation to share in the summary findings of the entire sample group. In addition, the field visits were restricted to two one-week periods at times deemed by all parties to be appropriate in the development of each initiative. Whilst this time frame did limit the potential for a strongly ethnographic approach to the fieldwork, the two week period was acknowledged as offering minimal inconvenience to the organisations.

Five of the six organisations elected to participate in the research study. The sixth felt that whilst the observations of an impartial third party would be valuable, the time required would present too much of an inconvenience to their employees at such a critical time in the organisation’s development.

For the final five organisations, access was requested to all levels, from the key decision-makers of the initiative, to the managers and front-line employees directly impacted by the changes. Interview and observation schedules were set in advance of Week 1 of the field visits, with Week 2 interviews (including second interviews of candidates selected in Week 1) and observations arranged following the completion of Week 1.
The five sample organisations were identified as follows:

a) **TELCO**  
- A telecommunications assembly plant (part of a global telecommunications organisation) that was endeavouring to grow beyond its history as a telephone repair centre for British Telecommunications (BT) (and before that for the GPO (General Post Office) and to compete with both Far Eastern competition, and the growing number of Japanese organisations building assembly plants in the same geographic area. TelCo’s original presentation focused on the career development of employees and the production flexibility needed to be competitive in their industry. As such, the tangible issues (which were addressed explicitly in the initial conference presentation), were relatively easy to identify (cost reduction, productivity levels, production flexibility), but the intangible issues required more investigation, particularly around TelCo’s explicit choice to avoid the word ‘empowerment’ altogether.

b) **PARCELCO**  
- A national delivery service that was undertaking a complete reorganisation of its operating framework, combining separate sales and delivery networks into individual Strategic Business Units (SBU’s) in which the General Manager of each SBU would be ‘empowered’ to make all the necessary decisions to ensure the profitability of his unit. ParcelCo’s original presentation focused on the Industrial Relations obstacles ahead of them and, in an atmosphere of remarkable candour, the need to achieve profitability for the first time (ParcelCo had not achieved profitability since being spun off as a separate division from its parent organisation several years earlier). Again, the tangible issues were easy to identify (cost reduction, profitability, restrictive bargaining agreements), but the intangible issues around empowerment within a highly unionised work environment presented a significant research opportunity.
c) FUNWORLD

- A theme park that was experiencing a dramatic transition from an autocratic organisational structure, overseen by a strong entrepreneur, to its new role as a division of a much larger, more bureaucratic parent organisation. Funworld's original presentation focused on the involvement of a seasonal workforce in the delivery of a "magical" customer experience in the park. After several years of high capital investment in attractions and infrastructure in the park (tangible motivators), the senior management of the organisation had come to the realisation that continued investment in new and expensive signature rides was cost prohibitive, and that in order to encourage repeat visits, each family visiting the park should be experiencing a high level of customer service. Therefore, the front-line seasonal employees were to be 'empowered' to do whatever it took to ensure that each customer's visit was "magical". With only a 60% return rate of seasonal employees each year, the issue of how to address both functional job training and the creation of an 'empowered' work environment in an atmosphere of minimal job security represented an interesting research opportunity.

d) CITYCORP

- A municipal engineering department in a Local Authority Borough that was facing the loss of its traditional civil service work environment in favour of the harsh commercial reality of a new 'host' civil engineering company. In this instance, the Assistant City Engineer (ACE) was overseeing the entire process, and saw the best means to a smooth transition as being the creation of a completely new organisational template (of his own design). The roles and responsibilities in this new template would, by his definition, be more 'empowered'. The original conference presentation focused on the internal issues of dealing with employee morale in the involuntary transition from a perceived 'comfort zone' of longstanding civil service to the harsh reality of a commercial 'host' environment. The research opportunity centred on the obstacles presented in the 'empowerment' of a workforce where the vocal majority was diametrically opposed to change of any kind.

e) CHEMCO

- A production site for a global chemical organisation. Having survived the divestiture of “non-core” businesses, the parent organisation was now endeavouring to focus attention on the continued growth in efficiency and profitability of the “core” businesses (tangible motivators). Guaranteed anonymity was a critical issue here (to the point of signing a ‘secrecy agreement’ which bound the researcher for a period of 10 years after completion of the fieldwork). ChemCo’s original presentation focused on the introduction of flexible scheduling methods (in the pursuit of operational efficiency) in an environment of highly restrictive bargaining practices. The research opportunity was the commitment of the parent company to a very strong internal PR campaign around ‘empowerment’ and ‘involvement’ in an environment of extreme distrust in pending Collective Bargaining negotiations.

2.5 DATA COLLECTION

Having identified a comparative case study as the appropriate research method for this study, further decisions had to be made as to the specific design of those case studies - in particular, whether a single or multiple case study framework should be used, and whether that design should concentrate on an holistic approach or focus on embedded subunits.

Single case studies are appropriate where the case represents a critical test of existing theory, where the case is a rare or unique event, or where the case serves a revelatory purpose. In the absence of a clear and empirically sound theory of empowerment, the opportunity for a critical test was unavailable, and since there was a clear intent to avoid the replication of the previously-criticised journalistic ‘case histories’, one single case study would not have been sufficient
By focusing on a series of individual cases within a multiple design framework, it was hoped that the evidence gathered would be more compelling and hence present a more robust argument for further research of empowerment.

In examining the theoretical antecedents of empowerment, a holistic perspective was maintained in the assessment of the alleged impact of an empowerment programme on an organisation. However, within a case study framework, it was felt that a focus on embedded subunits in the organisation, such as identifiable process units (teams/departments) or projects, would facilitate a better understanding of the driving forces and operational factors at work in the empowerment programme. In addition, the potential for cross-comparison of projects or organisational subunits would facilitate theory generalisation from cases which could, in light of the opportunistic approach to corporate access, be drawn from very different industrial sectors.

Case studies demand the utilisation of multiple methodologies rather than one specific research technique. These included:

1. **In-depth interviews with key informants.**

   Face-to-face interviews can be used for multiple purposes, including the exploration of organisational questions (Kerlinger, 1996). They provide the researcher with the opportunity to establish rapport with the respondent and to ask probing questions to improve accuracy, completeness and meaningfulness. Disadvantages include the large amount of time that interviews take to conduct, and the possibility of interviewer effects, including interviewee social response bias (Judd et al, 1991).
Senior management and in particular those officers directly responsible for the creation, implementation and ongoing management of the empowerment programme in the organisation were interviewed. The interviews took place face-to-face, and were open-ended in structure. Question design centred on reaching an understanding of what ‘empowerment’ meant to each informant, why they chose the concept as a means of organisational change, how they went about introducing empowerment into the workplace, what obstacles they had encountered, and what they expected the initiative to achieve as an outcome for the organisation. In the interests of accurate documentation, a tape recorder was used, with appropriate permission obtained from the informant.

2. **Structured interviews with groups and/or individuals.**

Interviews with those directly affected by ‘empowerment’, such as first line supervisors and front-line employees, were undertaken either as individual interviews or, where necessary, focus groups, depending on the amount of access granted and time available. The interviews took place face-to-face, and were open-ended in structure. Question design centred on reaching an understanding of what empowerment meant to the interview subjects and how they perceived the current empowerment initiative in their organisation. A tape recorder was used where permission had been obtained.

3. **Preformulated questionnaires (e.g. job satisfaction).**

In the interests of expediency, preformulated questionnaires were to be used when deemed appropriate as a method of data collection, and where permission had been granted to use them. Questionnaires are most appropriately used when the perceptions of individual respondents are of primary interest (Babbie, 1992). They have the main advantage of reducing interviewer bias and of being relatively inexpensive in terms of time and resources. However, disadvantages include questionable data quality related to non-response bias, accuracy and completeness (Judd et al, 1991)
4. *New case-specific questionnaires.*

If the individual case parameters precluded the use of preformulated questionnaires, a case-specific questionnaire would be developed (where permission was granted to use it).

5. *Analysis of primary documentary evidence.*

This evidence included budgets, organisational charts, diaries, calendars, personnel records, previously collected survey data, and any other material deemed relevant for accurate documentation and recollection of the case study.

6. *Direct Observation* - of work processes, management and team meetings, and employee interactions - in each case as a non-participant. Babbie (1992, p.289) identifies observer-as-participant observation as a type of unstructured observation in which the researcher: "identifies himself or herself as a researcher and interacts with participants in the social process but makes no pretense of actually being a participant." The validity of observer's influences in this method can be both a strength and a weakness (Kerlinger, 1986). Inferences made by observers during data collection may improve the meaningfulness of the data, but they may also decrease the validity of the data by virtue of researcher bias.

7. *Analysis of secondary data if primary data was not available.*

Where access to primary data was withheld, secondary data such as annual reports, existing case studies and journal articles were examined.
2.6 PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

a) Gaining Sufficient Access to the Organisation

As with all research in organisations, the primary concern is that of access, both to the organisation itself and to primary evidence and key informants once inside the organisation. Of necessity, the selection of cases was to some degree opportunistic, given the level of co-operation required from the research subject. In this respect, this case study based methodology was seen to represent, in theory at least, an idealistic research environment with a more practical built-in flexibility. It was hoped that by focusing on organisations, which had made a public commitment to empowerment - typically through their adoption of exemplar roles within their respective industries - the problems of access would be minimised. By stressing the desire to 'learn in detail' rather than to be explicitly iconoclastic, it was hoped that fears of the researcher undertaking some form of journalistic exposé would be allayed. In addition, it was hoped that the offer of a summary report of findings from the research would be perceived as representing sufficient value to the organisation to make the likely time involvement of key personnel worthwhile.

In practice, gaining sufficient access to the key decision-makers proved to be very difficult. The Senior Management Teams (SMT) of each organisation were all willing to present the story of the initiative, but were unavailable (or unwilling) to spend additional time in discussing the key concepts and thought processes behind the original decision to launch the empowerment initiative. In addition, several teams consisted of seven or eight members, which presented logistical problems in making sure that their opinions and perspectives were captured accurately.
b)  **Identifying Key Informants**

The working model of empowerment was used to determine the identification of informants within a ‘typical’ organisation - senior managers, personnel and training officers, first line managers or supervisors, and employees. Identifying the respective informants responsible for the empowerment initiatives of the targeted subjects was not as straightforward. In many instances there were clear advocates and critics of the initiative, but the identification of the key stakeholder or decision-maker proved to be problematic. For example, the CEO might have endorsed the initiative, but the point of origin was later revealed to be a team effort (many of whom had since left the organisation or moved on to other departments or divisions). The Citycorp study in particular proved to be problematic, because the Assistant City Engineer proved to be the only person who saw the change initiative as ‘empowerment’.

c)  **Collecting Balanced Data**

It was anticipated that many of the interviews would be undertaken with those corporate officers who were directly responsible for the empowerment initiative. In this respect, the primary data was likely to be generated from enthusiastic (and, arguably, biased) informants rather than anonymous or objective respondents. At the outset, it was hoped that the discovery and subsequent inclusion of an unsuccessful empowerment initiative would help to counterbalance this. Equally, the interviews with those members of staff who were directly, and perhaps unwittingly, affected by ‘empowerment’ could generate a less enthusiastic response that would require an equally balanced and objective assessment.

In practice, the SMT’s of each organisation proved to be the vocal minority. Full access was given in each study to every level of the organisation. Unfortunately, every manager, supervisor, and front-line employee interviewed (i.e. all layers below the SMT), shared frustration and confusion over the launch and progress of initiatives which, to them, had nothing to do with what they saw as empowerment. This proved to be difficult to ‘balance’ alongside the positive affirmations of the SMT.
d)  *Data Collection Methods*

The use of pre-formulated and case-specific questionnaires was declined by all five organisations on the grounds that it would inconvenience their employees. Later research revealed that several of the target organisations had recently undertaken questionnaire-based surveys (for other non-related purposes) and did not want the exercise repeated. From a research perspective, the potential that ‘yet another’ questionnaire could be tainted by respondent bias, made this an acceptable loss. Fortunately, none of the interview respondents expressed concern over the use of a tape recorder, and so all comments were accurately recorded.

With full access given, there were no issues over direct observation (personal safety issues in the chemical and telecommunications plants notwithstanding). Access to both primary and secondary data was, in most cases, freely granted. Every effort was made to honour corporate confidentiality issues. ChemCo’s concerns over confidentiality were addressed via a signed secrecy agreement. TelCo elected, in two instances, not to share data - one on the grounds that the material had not been shared with the rest of the organisation; the other on the grounds of copyright protection (the material had been developed by a third party vendor).
e) Viability of The Working Model

The Conger & Kanungo (1988) model was adopted for use as an investigative template to guide the selection of candidates, data collection and analysis. However, the consequent variety of case study subjects selected and the clear lack of evidence of empowerment in each initiative required that this approach be revised. Efforts were made to modify the model both prior to and during the analysis phase of the research to take account of these outcomes. Nonetheless, it quickly became apparent that rather than 'testing' each initiative against the Conger & Kanungo template, a new, more inductive model had to be evolved from the research data from the five cases. At first glance, this may appear to be overtly opportunistic, in the genre of 'ready, fire, aim' research, but in actuality such an approach adhered to Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory methodology in the sense that the rudimentary template was likely to be "systematically worked-out in relation to the data during the course of the research" (1967, p.6).

In addition, taking such an inductive approach to the research data, as opposed to concentrating on the preservation of the original research proposition can be seen to be in alignment with qualitative theory generation on the basis of a fundamental understanding of the structure, process and driving forces behind a phenomenon.

f) Insufficient Evidence of Empowerment

This was a critical and potentially sensitive issue. The researcher was fortunate enough to gain access to multinational and global organisations that were regarded as exemplars within their respective industry sectors. Each had made a public commitment to the empowerment of its workforce. Having then been granted sufficient access to key informants and personnel to achieve an in-depth understanding of their empowerment initiative, the expectations of the summary findings report which was produced in return for access to the organisation was extremely high.
Unfortunately, in each case the research failed to identify a clear devolution of functional responsibility within the organisation. What did stand out in each study was a clear dichotomy between the expectations and opinions of the 'empowerors' and the 'empowerees'. The presentation of those findings back to the respective organisations required considerable preparation, care and attention to detail. It was hoped that the commitment to complete objectivity at the outset of the study (as opposed to any notion of an attempt to expose or refute their initiative) would enable the Senior Managers of each organisation to see the value to be gained from an unbiased account of the 'view from the trenches'.

In practice, the initial disappointment for each individual organisation was ameliorated by the fact that none of the other candidates in the study had provided irrefutable evidence of empowerment either. Only the ChemCo SMT chose to challenge the research directly and request that a secrecy agreement be signed to limit the dissemination of the information in the report.

2.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Miles & Huberman (1994, p.1) address the critical question of how valid meaning may be drawn from qualitative data, thus:

"What methods of analysis can we use that are practical, communicable, and non-self-deluding – in short, will get us knowledge that we and others can rely on."

The simple answer is that the analytical approach taken should be appropriate to the type of data collected. However, researchers are faced with a plethora of qualitative methodologies – Wolcott's (1992) tree identifies over two dozen strategies, and Tesch's (1990) matrix identifies 27 separate types of qualitative research. In this context, the potential permutations of data generated from these various methodologies would appear to preclude a standardised method of analysis.
Mishler (1990) argues that no study conforms to a standard methodology, but rather each one calls for the researcher to bend the methodology to the peculiarities of the setting. This argument is equally applicable to forms of analysis — namely to adopt whatever approach makes the best use of the available data, whilst ensuring that the methodology is credible, dependable and replicable.

For this thesis, there were explicit features to the research data that suggested a specific analytical approach:

- The research represents an attempt to capture the opinions and perceptions of key stakeholders and participants 'from the inside' in order to reach a point of empathetic understanding (verstehen).
- The availability of primary and secondary documentary evidence (annual reports, meeting notes, diaries, calendars, survey data) enabled the researcher to isolate themes and expressions in advance to then be reviewed with informants during the face-to-face interviews.
- The qualitative approach centred on brief but intense contact in a ‘field’ situation in an attempt to document the key dynamics within the day-to-day running of the candidate organisations.
- To quote Miles & Huberman (1994, p.6), “The researcher's role is to gain a 'holistic' (systemic, encompassing, integrated) overview of the context under study: its logic, its arrangements, its explicit and implicit rules.”
- In response to the stated preferences of the sample organisations, no standardised research instruments were used. As such, the researcher became the main 'measurement device' in the study.
- The interview data collected was open to differing interpretations, with the researcher ultimately imposing a framework on the basis of more compelling theoretical arguments or on the grounds of internal consistency.
For these five case studies, it was possible to gather a vast quantity of primary documentary evidence – annual reports, budgets, organisation charts, diaries, calendars, and personnel records – some of which was provided in advance of the Week 1 field visit. This material was further enhanced by detailed observation notes of work processes and extensive interview transcripts.

Given the nature of the data, two distinct analytic approaches seemed possible in order to generate significant meaning or understanding from the data:

1. An *Interpretivist* or *Phenomenological* Approach, where the researcher endeavours to remain objective in the reduction of the data and seeks to arrive at a ‘Lebenswelt’ or ‘practical understanding’ of the essence of the data via continued readings and re-readings of the source material.

2. An *Anthropologic* or *Ethnographic* Approach which, in contrast to the detachment of interpretivism, recognises the direct involvement of the researcher in the descriptive process of condensing material across a wide range of data sources. A coding methodology is used to capture commonalities or relationships between variables or themes within the data.

Whilst both approaches may be applied to the analysis of interview transcripts, the deciding factor proved to be the absence of pre-formulated research instruments (specifically the questionnaires which were declined by the sample organisations). As such, the degree to which the researcher was able to maintain an entirely ‘external’ perspective (and hence endorse a robust phenomenological analysis of the material) was impeded by the highly descriptive nature of the observation process and the interpretations of the interview transcripts.
In addition, the transcription process itself required that the ‘raw’ audio material be edited and corrected before any coding process could begin which, in turn, further extended the likelihood of researcher bias in the collation of the source material. Further, the Week 1 interviews were transcribed prior to the Week 2 field visit with each organisation. On the one hand, this can be seen to enable a more structured and directed interview schedule for the second week, but on the other, the collected data can also be said to have been ‘influenced’ by the researcher during the transcription process.

2.7.1 DATA REDUCTION

The process of condensing thousands of pages of documentary evidence, observation notes, and interview transcripts into an organised assembly of information was, in itself, a form of analysis. Multiple subordinate processes were involved – selection, simplification, abstraction and transformation – and occurred continuously throughout the research project as the material was constantly coded, summarised, organised and, where necessary, discarded. In addition, the overall design of the research was an element of this reduction, since the decisions made as to the framework design and research approach ultimately constrained the parameters of the research and excluded some variables over others.

The coding process can be seen to be either ‘tight’, where a rigid template of scoring criteria is established for the purposes of consistent and replicable content analysis, or ‘loose’, where the material is sorted and sifted in order to identify patterns, themes, similarities and/or differences. There is a clear trade-off here. A ‘looser’ framework enables the researcher to remain open to case-specific characteristics or idiosyncrasies; a ‘tighter’ template may sacrifice case sensitivity in favour of more comparable data.
In this piece of research, since the stated objective was that of a detailed understanding of the phenomenon, it was felt that a rigid template would lean more towards a quantification of what rather than a sense of understanding of how. As such, a ‘looser’ coding approach was taken via detailed notations and comments in the margins of the source material and the ongoing sorting and identification of similar phrases, themes and patterns within the material. The separation of field visits into Week 1 and Week 2 enabled this ‘first pass’ at suspected themes or relationships to be probed and verified or refuted by additional or repeat interviews and/or observations. In this way, the material was more easily summarised, clustered and prioritised.

2.7.2 DATA DISPLAY

In theoretical terms, the most appropriate outcome of the data reduction process is an organised coalescence of the research material in a format which best enables conclusions to be drawn and findings to be verified. Ideally the information should be presented in an accessible and compact form such that any observer may follow the rationale behind the research and understand the significance of the findings. The available choices are considerable — matrices, charts, graphs, maps, tables, models etc.

In this instance, the driving force of ‘understanding’ presented two options — the deductive model presented in the working model (the Conger & Kanungo model), or an inductive template generated from within the coding process itself.

The absence of concrete evidence of empowerment in any of the five candidate organisations became clear after the Week 1 field visits. In addition, the coding of the first interview transcripts revealed an apparent discontinuity between the conceptual framework presented by the Senior Management Teams (SMT) of each organisation (the ‘empowerors’) and the pragmatic reality captured in the interviews with the ‘empowerees’. Further, the level of frustration amongst the ‘empowerees’ appeared to correlate closely to the lack of awareness and communication demonstrated by the SMT of each organisation.
This predicament facilitated the clustering of the data around an outcome or 'consequential' matrix where the apparent failure to recognise the significance of a specific element of the empowerment process or, indeed, the deliberate undertaking of an action in direct contrast to that element, could be seen to generate an explicit outcome or consequence for the organisation.

This matrix prompted further codification of each case study around key elements within the apparent failure of the empowerment initiative — industrial relations, communication processes, initiative design, personnel education, familiarity of the SMT with the concept, etc. These key elements then formed the basis for the final 'cells' of the 'consequential model'.

2.7.3 CONCLUSION DRAWING & VERIFICATION OF FINDINGS

Even with an inductive display matrix that arose out of the data reduction process, the potential for the generation of definitive conclusions from the case studies became apparent after the Week 1 field visits and interviews. The absence of any evidence of a functional transference of responsibility, and the clear dichotomy between the 'empoweror' and 'empoweree' views of the world within each organisation prompted a dramatic realignment of objectives for the Week 2 field visits. Rather than broadening the search to find even the remotest hint or suggestion of empowerment in the organisation, the second interviews focused on verifying whether or not the organisation had so completely 'missed the mark' on the issue as the first Week's material suggested. As a result, the issue of verification took precedence over 'confirmability' or 'replicability' of the research.
In this context, any further research of empowerment that sought to be considered as robust and defensible on the basis of quantitative analysis would be premature, and any subsequent establishment of correlation or cause and effect relationships would be superficial at best. There appeared to be sufficient ambiguity in the current literature on the subject of empowerment to warrant an exploratory study of the concept in order to reach a more fundamental understanding of the structure, process and driving forces behind the phenomenon, rather than settling for probabilistic generalisations.

The selection of the most appropriate strategy and methodology for such a study was driven by the need to understand how organisations perceive empowerment. This process required interviews, direct questioning, and documentation of evidence, whilst maintaining a holistic view of the subject matter. Quantitative study would have required the development of a detailed model for subsequent testing and validation - a process which was negated by the current absence of sound and accredited criteria for such a model. Qualitative research methodologies (in this instance a series of case studies) facilitated the understanding of contemporary phenomena - i.e. without pursuing assessment or validation - in order to then generate more substantive hypotheses for further research and analysis.
3.0 CASE STUDY #1 - CHEMCO:

3.1 BACKGROUND

‘ChemCo’ is a manufacturing plant site for a multinational chemical company. The site is the largest world-wide for the commodities produced in this division, employing over 500 people, 70% of which are classified as ‘blue collar’, and the remaining 30% as ‘white collar’ - management grade.

As a result of a corporate ‘re-focus’ on core businesses in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, the ChemCo site is shared with manufacturing plants of those chemical companies who chose to purchase ChemCo’s ‘non-core’ businesses, offering the ChemCo workforce a daily reminder of the potential for dramatic change and job insecurity in their industry.

Given the long-term, multi-million pound capital investment required to develop productive plant capacity, the economic reality of ChemCo’s product market is extremely cyclical - high prices per tonne can make the high cost of a new plant seem feasible, but as the millions of tonnes of product from each new plant enter the market, the price then drops in response to greater product availability. At the time of the field research, ChemCo had recently emerged from a severe recession, with prices for their key products at an all-time high - in fact, the plants were selling everything they could produce, with a growing waiting list.

ChemCo’s workforce, by virtue of the skills utilised in the site’s production output, is very heavily unionised. Historically, the parent company’s labour relations with those unions had been heavily influenced by the value per tonne of ChemCo’s product output at the time - leading to a history of short-term agreements in direct relation to equally short-term productivity and/or cost gains. The impact of this cyclical relationship was being felt as the company endeavoured to ratify a labour agreement dating back to 1991 in a production environment in which, with prices at an all-time high, lost tonnage equated directly to lost profits.
3.1.1 CHEMCO CORPORATE

As an organisation, ChemCo has a history of 'jumping on the bandwagon' for every topical management concept that any consultant should choose to offer - a fact referred to with great disdain by many of those interviewed. To quote the Quality Improvement Manager at the ChemCo site:

"This company is a sucker for any buzzword going. I was originally brought in six years ago to support the introduction of a series of initiatives based on 'Zero Defects', and we're still fiddling with Total Quality Management (TQM) to this day, only now we're applying the principles directly to the plant (engineering) side rather than the production side, and calling it Total Productive Maintenance (TPM). Unfortunately we have a tendency to package each new initiative so neatly that the label 'flavour of the month' is inevitable and we often end-up throwing the baby out with the bath water. In the past we've had worker participation, job enrichment, job rotation, action teams, and now improvement teams - all of these have generated a lot of interest and support, only to be dismissed a few months later for a new initiative."

For an organisation with 67,000 employees at over 200 locations in 30 countries around the world, such initiatives have been characterised by broad mission statements, value statements, or corporate commitments. The current initiative, labelled 'AAA', represented a commitment to 'Autonomy, Accountability, and Achievement' - a very "broad-brush" programme designed, to quote the ChemCo Site Manager (CSM): "To inspire and motivate ChemCo employees as the company moves out of a deep recession."

The three 'A's' of the AAA programme were defined and clarified in an internal press release as follows:
AUTONOMY:

'We can engage the heart as well as the mind of each employee by moving away from central deterministic processes and by devolving more responsibility to individual business units. By delegating and agreeing clear objectives, and by giving staff the freedom to act, we can release the energies that will lead to real achievement.'

ACCOUNTABILITY:

'It follows that we will have to raise the level of accountability as well, making it sharper and more clearly defined. This will give everyone a greater sense of ownership, responsibility and, ultimately, pride in their achievements. It will also help to create greater cohesion within the business units and the ambition to improve working processes at every level.'

ACHIEVEMENT:

'By instilling throughout the business a greater degree of autonomy and accountability we (corporate) are confident that the resulting achievements will lead to major successes. The first step, and the hardest, will be for (HQ) and the business units to change the culture and working practices (of ChemCo) to allow an increase in autonomy and accountability that extends to the grass roots.'

The AAA programme had been launched and led by the Executive Director of ChemCo’s parent company with a significant internal public relations effort and the publication of a manifesto of sorts, which appeared to support much of the rhetoric of an empowerment initiative:
"We cannot rest on the laurels of our excellent technologies, our assets, our very good market positions and, most importantly, our excellent people, because our competitors can claim many of the same strengths. The key to having a superior competitive advantage in the future will lie in our ability to focus our resources and release the creative energy and motivation of our staff. Without losing the (competitive and operational) strength of a big company, we want to create a company in which everyone:

- knows what they are being asked to achieve
- has the space to get on and do it without unnecessary interference, but with full authority and accountability
- gets properly rewarded for that contribution.

We want to capture the sharpness of a small company whilst being large enough to make our presence felt against our competition. (However), too often in a big company, and in (ChemCo) in the past, the individual responsibility and contribution has got lost in processes, procedures, matrix organisations, territorial or functional decisions - any number of things that stifle creativity and motivation through red tape and bureaucracy."

Thus, at Corporate Senior Executive level, the commitment had been made, and the expectation set, albeit with an apparent absence of detail or specifics, that the ChemCo organisation required a complete transformation if it was to maintain its competitive edge, and that the main driver of that transformation would be the “creativity and motivation of the staff”. It then fell to the individual site and plant managers to create specific vehicles and initiatives which would provide “concrete and quantifiable evidence” (CSM) of progress towards that general corporate mandate.
3.1.2 THE INVOLVEMENT INDEX & ‘PITP’

Firm encouragement to demonstrate progress towards the corporate mandate was
given to the ChemCo sites and individual plants by the parent company through the
creation of an ‘Involvement Index’ by which managers were supposedly enabled to
demonstrate the degree to which their front-line managers (FLM’s) were creating team-
based projects within their respective departments. For the purposes of the index,
evidence of ‘involvement’ was defined as any employee being:

“A contributing member of a team which has clearly identified a specific issue,
aligned to business objectives, and has set goals and timescales for measurable
improvement of the process.” (CSM)

As a measurement exercise, the relative scores on this index were tabulated
monthly to demonstrate which plants and which sites were most actively involved in
team-based initiatives. In practice, the ‘measurement’ required only that the plant
manager sign-off that the crews under each FLM were involved in a team initiative of
one form or another.

Opinions on the accuracy and validity of the exercise varied considerably.
To quote the ChemCo Site Manager:

“I know it’s not the most statistically valid exercise we have ever done, and I’m
not sure how much attention will really be paid to the corresponding rankings of the
scores - we’ve all done some creative math in putting the scores together (everyone was
scoring consistently above the 90th percentile) - but it does send a clear message that we
are serious about employee involvement. If we are going to maintain a competitive edge
everyone has to be involved in making this organisation better - it can’t just be a one-off
initiative any more - teams have to become part of the way this business runs, part of our
culture.”
For the FLM’s being measured against this index, their endorsement tended to be somewhat further removed from the company line on the issue. To quote one frustrated FLM:

“It’s rubbish - a complete waste of time. I mean, how difficult is it to prove that someone’s involved in a team project of some sort? - and with my production quotas and the ’91 labour agreement still to be sorted out, I’ve got more than enough paperwork as it is....besides, there are enough high profile teams out there to keep Head Office happy - I really can’t imagine they’ll be coming to double check my report any time soon.”

Another mechanism for encouraging enthusiastic support for the corporate mandate was Senior Management’s endorsement of ‘Performance Improvement Through People’ (PITP). Though not a quantifiable exercise in the same genre as the Involvement Index, PITP did require the provision of proof that every opportunity for multiskilling and cross-training was being taken advantage of in each plant on the ChemCo site. The acceptability of that proof was at Senior Management’s discretion, but since ChemCo had only recently emerged from a severe recession and was still monitoring overtime hours very closely, any multiskilling or cross-training initiative which could demonstrate an immediate correlation to reduced overtime was automatically endorsed.

Here again, the jargon of PITP was closely aligned to the rhetoric of empowerment. To quote the SMT memo which addressed the PITP programme:

‘The improvement of business performance through people can only be achieved if right from the outset the Management Team firmly believe that the greatest asset a business has is its people. Furthermore, that they know and believe that within the people they employ there is at all levels an enormous untapped source of skill, knowledge, ability, enthusiasm and commitment that if released and fully utilised can transform a business and its performance.’
In the same vein as the AAA programme, this SMT endorsement of the PITP initiative appeared to use all the appropriate buzzwords, but there is an equally strong lack of specific detail as to exactly how the “untapped source” would be “released and fully utilised”. The memo went on to outline:

‘How do we achieve this?:

- **Commitment to change from the Senior Manager who sees clearly where he wants the business to go and communicates his vision**
- **Involvement of people in understanding and shaping influencing the business objectives, developing an action plan and implementing it**
- **Gaining commitment through this involvement process to the business objectives and continuous improvement**
- **Take action to develop skills, knowledge, motivation, commitment, confidence, job satisfaction by:**
  - Excellent Communications
  - Investment of time and resources in training and education
  - Organisational development to create headroom and provide rewarding and challenging jobs
  - Empowerment of people to put their own ideas into practice
  - Coaching and helping people to learn implement new skills and ideas
  - Managing By Walking About
  - Measurement and recognition of success.’
At this point it becomes apparent just how many managerial philosophies and schools of thought have been taken on board over the years at ChemCo - the keywords and precepts of virtually every management fad of the last two generations are represented in a memo which purports to outline the road map for a dramatic organisational transformation.

The harsh reality of the ChemCo work environment appeared to be somewhat different. Beneath the verbal endorsements of the importance of a company-wide commitment to employee involvement, everyone interviewed expressed a keen awareness of the real priorities in place at ChemCo - namely to get the 1991 Labour Agreement ratified (the ChemCo site was the only one in the company to not have achieved this objective) and to do so without any interruptions in production. To quote one engineer:

"It all looks great on paper, but no-one's going to push too hard on cross-training for fear of upsetting the unions over demarcation, and no-one's going after broader job descriptions because that's just an open invitation to down tools these days. Our retails (prices for ChemCo's output) are simply too high to stick your neck out that far - and the Union's not stupid - they know they have us over a barrel - why else would we be the last site to ratify the 1991 Agreement?"
3.1.3 THE 1991 LABOUR AGREEMENT

Beyond the verbiage of 'AAA', 'PITP', and the Involvement Index, there was a realisation on the part of Senior Management, both at corporate and site level, that ChemCo’s history of short-term agreements with their Unions (usually putting up as hard a fight as the current price for their output would allow) was likely to be a major stumbling block to organisational transformation. During the re-focus on core businesses and the subsequent emergence from recession, one of the key commercial factors had been crippling levels of overtime pay for both the production and plant (engineering) sides of the business. These were due to shift differentials, demarcation agreements, and detailed working practices established with the Unions in a decidedly erratic programme of Industrial Relations over the years. To quote one Plant Manager:

"When you put millions of pounds into building a plant, you need that plant to produce at an optimum level if you are going to see your return on net assets (RONA). Right now, corporate is expecting a RONA of at least 20% and we can't do that with such high levels of overtime. Unfortunately, the overtime is not due to operational or even scheduling inefficiencies, which could be easily addressed, it's due to past IR agreements which have boxed us into a corner."

The solution for the rest of the company had come in the form of the 1991 Labour Agreement, which had outlined a new system of 'bankable hours' to replace overtime hours, (which were typically paid at time-and-a-half or double-time depending on the hour and day of the week).

The system simply established a contract between the employee and the company for a stated salary in exchange for a set number of annualised hours. The employee was then scheduled for a lower number of hours, leaving a 'credit in the bank' of hours for which he would be paid but which he might or might not have to work. When a situation then arose in which the employee would formerly have been paid overtime, under the new system, the hours would simply be drawn from the bank at regular scale. Once the credit balance was used up, the employee would revert to overtime.
A further benefit of this system, for corporate at least, was that the application of bankable hours across the board would supersede any existing demarcation agreements (i.e. under current agreements, some positions were classified as ‘authorised for overtime’ and others were not). This, in turn, would facilitate more flexible working practices through multiskilling and cross-training outside of the demarcation lines formerly recognised with the unions.

The SMT was convinced that this could reduce their overtime hours by a very large margin, since the majority of overtime occurred at the end of the pay period as, to quote one Plant Manager:

"There is suddenly an urgent need for an employee to stay on for a couple of hours at the end of a shift to finish something up - those 'couple of hours' start to add up when everybody's doing it."

They were equally convinced that the employees would benefit from a credit balance in their bankable hours at the end of the year (i.e. the employees would ultimately walk away with more than if they had worked overtime) - providing the FLM's were efficient in their scheduling of staff during the year.

As for the Unions, the whole situation appeared to make the ChemCo Union Steward very nervous:

"We simply don't like the sound of it. Management is asking us to take a lot of it on faith, our members don't support it (a lot of them have come to rely on the overtime), and to be honest it's just too different from anything we've ratified in the past. It's too much of a leap, and with everything else going on in the company - the sell-off of the non-core businesses and all that, the trust simply isn't there.

We want to work with Management - we're supporting the multiskilling and cross-training in principle because it's good for our membership in the long run to improve their skills, but this is just too much too soon."
The lack of trust was prevalent in the majority of employees interviewed. Many of the veterans (15 years or more) had calculated exactly what the financial impact of the new system would be and, interestingly, none of them anticipated a credit balance in hours at the end of the year. To quote one very sceptical electrician with 25 years with the organisation:

"They're up to something... first the sale of plants that were all of a sudden 'non-core' and conveniently hundreds of workers get transferred to companies that are not required to honour existing union agreements, and now they want us to forget that we ever heard the word 'overtime'... and we're supposed to trust them that there'll be hours left in the bank at the end of the year. I don't believe it for a minute... there's something else going on here."

Thus, for an organisation that purported to be praising the value of their human resources at the highest levels, ChemCo's operational reality appeared to be one of extreme distrust. The other sites which had ratified the 1991 Labour Agreement had done so either out of financial duress (their products were not at a cyclical high and hence their operations were, from their perspective, increasingly likely to be classified as 'non-core') or on the basis of a probationary period in which the likelihood of a credit balance of hours at the end of the year could be assessed.

For the ChemCo site, the bargaining position was reversed. Senior Management simply could not afford a production stoppage, and since everyone involved in the negotiations seemed to be aware of that fact, the ratification process moved at a very slow pace and, in doing so, helped to undermine any plant wide commitments to employee involvement since no-one was willing to be seen to be 'rocking the boat' at such a delicate stage in the negotiations.
3.2 EVIDENCE OF EMPOWERMENT

3.2.1 MIT's; RCM's; & SI's

The basic tenets of the empowerment process involve ownership of work performance, increased involvement and responsibility, and the operational autonomy needed to meet that increased responsibility. Evidence of this at ChemCo (over and above the rhetoric of ‘AAA’) was presented in the form of various team initiatives - Manufacturing (or management) Improvement Teams (MIT’s - operational), Reliability Centred Maintenance Teams (RCM’s - engineering and maintenance), and a hybrid version of the MIT - Shift Initiative Teams.

The chronology of these initiatives can be traced back to a gene pool of TQM-based Corrective Action Teams (CAT’s - reactive task forces, brought together in direct response to an identified problem); diminishing returns from technical and hardware advancements in the production process; a growing realisation of the need to invest in skills development for the primarily blue collar workforce; the renewed topicality of employee involvement; and Senior Management pressure from Corporate HQ in the form of the nefarious Involvement Index.

Examples of these team-based projects (and their subsequent high-profile successes) include:

- A nine-strong manufacturing improvement team in a solvent blending and packing plant designed and introduced a just-in-time delivery system in a six month period which saved over £300,000 in working capital and £170,000 in operating costs, saving the plant from closure.
- An RCM team investigated the training validation process for ‘joint makers’, resulting in only 2 leaks out of 2400 joints in a plant shutdown, compared with 1,000 leaks out of 5,000 joints three years earlier.
• An RCM team looked at an improved maintenance schedule, better procedures, and a new regimen for autoclave maintenance at a ChemCo plant, resulting in a cost saving of £2 million per year.

• An MIT was assigned to investigate the number of lubricants used in one plant and succeeded in reducing the number from over 800 to just 7 to meet normal operating requirements.

The logic behind the MIT and its successors appeared to be well thought through. With such a firmly embedded Industrial Relations (IR) culture, the introduction of any radical change mechanisms could only be achieved on the basis of tangible evidence (i.e. improved production in tonnes or cost savings in pounds sterling), and an aggressive Public Relations programme to broadcast that success company-wide. Only by broadcasting the message loudly and widely could the anticipated responses of ‘just another flavour-of-the-month programme’ be undermined.

However, whilst the operational logic of the MIT concept may have been clear, the operational practicalities of the initiative were inherently problematic on four counts. Firstly, as a project-based initiative requiring a typical commitment of several weeks or months, involvement in an MIT required time off the job which, in turn, demanded that a front-line manager (FLM) find a replacement for that individual during his time on the MIT. Finding that replacement within an operational environment of drastically reduced overtime was to prove so difficult that many FLM’s were unable to look beyond the budgetary and paperwork headaches to see any long-term benefit to the MIT’s, which in turn reduced any initial enthusiasm for the projects considerably.
Secondly, the near-parallel introduction of the 1991 Labour Agreement, with its emphasis on flexible working practices, unfairly targeted the MIT as a management vehicle for the introduction of broadened job descriptions 'by the back door'. This immediately placed the majority of the hard-line union members on the defensive, and created such peer pressure within shift teams that many of the younger, more proactive employees who recognised the opportunities of the MIT for their long-term career development with the company, chose not to participate. To quote one plant technician, who we’ll refer to as Dave:

“For a while, being on the MIT was great - I got to try new ideas, work with new people and really be creative for a change - and when the project was successful, we all got our picture in the company paper, and a nice little bonus too - for the cost savings - not a bad deal. But when I got back to my regular job full-time, everything had fallen behind - maintenance logs, reports, and my work area looked like a bomb site. When I asked the lads who were supposed to cover my work while I was on the MIT, they said they had their own work to do and weren’t going to do mine just so I could look good to (management). Now the atmosphere here is really bad - I wish I’d never joined the team in the first place.

Such peer pressure appeared to have the desired effect. To quote another technician on the same shift crew:

“I saw what happened to (Dave). He had a good time for a while - I used to see him in the canteen and he was always full of new ideas on how the team was going to fix and change things - all with management’s approval too. But when the MIT finished, the lads on the plant gave him a real hard time - really sent him to Coventry - like he was a traitor or something - I don’t want any part of that, so when the chance came for me to join an MIT, I said no.”
Thirdly, the cost savings and productivity gains of the earliest MIT’s created a situation in which the MIT concept became a victim of its own success. Such was the Corporate endorsement of these initiatives that FLM’s quickly became aware of the “unofficial brownie points” to be gained in having an MIT running in your department, and of the perceived pressure being placed upon them to create one - later expressed more explicitly in the ‘Involvement Index’, and the increased emphasis on evidence of employee involvement in the FLM performance reviews. To quote one frustrated FLM:

“It’s funny how quickly priorities can change as soon as one of these programmes is launched by corporate. My Plant Manager has made it very clear that my top priority should be getting as much powder (ChemCo’s product is delivered in powder form) out the door as possible, with minimal interruptions in production. Now that MIT’s are suddenly the greatest thing since sliced bread, everybody has to have one going on or else - and if everything’s running smoothly as it is, you’re supposed to find a reason for one. I’m trying to keep everything on an even keel and now I’m supposed to ask the lads to take on extra work and to do it all with no overtime too - it’s nuts.”

Fourthly, many of the cost savings and productivity gains achieved during the life of an individual MIT were undermined once the team disbanded by apathetic shift members who felt no perceived ownership of the procedural and/or operational changes instituted by their colleagues on the MIT, and hence failed to follow through on their responsibilities in seeing that the cost savings and productivity gains were maintained. One Plant Manager gave a specific example of this:
"We put together an MIT to look at a problem we were having with seals on one of our pumps. They cost several hundred quid each, these seals, and we weren't getting anywhere near the life expectancy out of them that we should have. The team worked on it for a couple of weeks and found that there were pressure flow irregularities coming from another piece of equipment that fed the pump, and this was damaging the seal. So they fixed it and set up a monitoring schedule to watch the pressure flow on the pump - it took maybe 5 or 10 seconds to check the pressure gauge and record it on the sheet once an hour.

Unfortunately, none of the lads who now had to do this had been part of the team, and they just saw it as extra work and, of course, forgot to do it on a regular basis. One of the Inspectors over at Quality Control gave me a word for it - 'shift tribalism' he called it - they weren't a part of it so they saw no reason to be involved in it."

It was evidence of this "shift tribalism" which prompted several FLM's to make the teams shift-specific - i.e. comprised of team members from the same shift - and to create Shift Initiatives as a hybrid of the MIT in order to achieve a more generally accepted level of ownership amongst shift team members. As the Plant Manager continued:

"Once the team took the time to explain how they had arrived at the solution, and how critical the measurement was to pump maintenance, avoiding pump breakdowns, and saving money on seals, the lads were fine and haven't missed a check since."
Thus, whilst considerable advances were made in relation to the respective projects of each MIT, the longer-term potential of the initiative in terms of broadening employee horizons and providing tangible evidence of the gains to be made from direct employee involvement appeared to have been undermined by the external influence of IR issues and corporate agendas. The fact that the term ‘MIT’ became the generic term for any team involvement initiative - whether it be a true MIT, an RCM team, or a Shift Initiative - suggested a considerable lack of clarity as to the original purpose and function of the MIT. Continued pressure to provide evidence of employee involvement in performance reviews, and the continued existence of the Involvement Index, could only serve to further cloud the issue.

As for the role of an MIT as evidence of empowerment at ChemCo, it may be argued that if shift members felt truly empowered, and perceived that they were granted the necessary autonomy by their FLM to pursue performance enhancement initiatives, the teams would have been able to form and disband quickly, efficiently and informally in relation to each particular problem or project. The key issue here is that the team/shift members themselves would have been able to identify those problems or projects and act accordingly.

MIT’s were created with pre-determined agendas that were selected by management - specific topics or problems which the teams were then instructed to fix, solve or cure. This neither suggested autonomy nor engendered ownership of the problem within the team framework. Further, when the teams disbanded upon completion of the project, Senior Management’s wish appeared to be that the individual team members would then play the role of advocate of employee involvement in their old work environment. To quote one Plant Manager:

“We counted on them to go back and spread the word to their fellow shift members - thus sowing the seeds of involvement throughout the site rather than tackling it head-on as a major project and receiving an immediate challenge from the unions.”
The reality was very different. The perceived elitism of the MIT, and the peer pressure from fellow shift members often produced an isolation which undermined any motivation and enthusiasm which any MIT member might have had on returning to his regular job. As one former MIT member commented:

"They open the door for you on all the possibilities and potential of getting things done through co-operation and real teamwork, and then they slam the door in your face by sending you back to your own job where nothing has changed and nobody cares about the success you had with your project. It's so frustrating. I wish I'd never bloody heard of an MIT."

3.2.2 THE CORE/TASK/PEI SPLIT

Another example of operational logic being undermined by employee perceptions of reality was the functional division of plant engineering services between Core and Task teams and high level maintenance work (referred to as Level 3, which typically involved plan shutdowns) outsourced to an independent company, which we'll call Professional Engineers Inc. (PEI).

From an operational standpoint, handing over Level 3 maintenance work to a third party contractor enabled the scheduling of plant shutdowns when it suited ChemCo, rather than scheduling them in rotation in order to keep the engineering crews occupied. In addition, with significant cost savings and contractual obligations of priority over ChemCo's co-tenants on the site and 9 out of 10 engineers being dispatched by PEI being ex-ChemCo, the upside for the PEI outsourcing agreement appeared to be considerable.
In practice, the surviving Task engineers, who were responsible for both Level 1 work (daily plant maintenance) and Level 2 work (equipment failure/plant breakdowns), remained demoralised as a result of a perceived loss of prestige and a new identity as ‘second-class citizens’, despite SMT affirmations as to their continued value to the organisation. The reasons for this are three-fold. Firstly, they were convinced that it would only be a matter of time before the Level 2 work - “their work” - would be handed over to PEI as well. These suspicions were gladly confirmed by the PEI engineers themselves, who were no doubt given the information as a ‘job security motivator’ for good performance by their own management. In addition, PEI’s apparent failure to honour the ‘9 out of 10 ex-ChemCo’ contractual obligation had resulted in PEI engineers with no experience of ChemCo equipment (referred to as “kit”) or procedures needing to be “spoon-fed” or “hand-held” by ChemCo Task engineers - work for which they perceived no recognition or appreciation from their FLM or the SMT.

To quote one disgruntled electrician:

“Where are the cost savings when I have to take my time to walk through a rewiring project with a (PEI) electrician who obviously doesn’t know the first thing about our kit? I thought ‘outsourcing’ meant they could do it as good as us but cheaper - and what happened to 9 out of 10 of them being (ex-ChemCo) - I haven’t seen a (ChemCo) lad on the last four calls and we’re scheduled for a shutdown next month - if (PEI) doesn’t come up with a crew that knows their way around our kit, it’ll take 4 weeks instead of 4 days - so much for improved efficiency. And the lads they do send have the (nerve) to tell us that (PEI) is already in negotiations to take on some of our Level 2 stuff - if this keeps up the Union will call a strike and all hell will break loose.”
Secondly, both the flexible working practices expected under the 1991 Labour Agreement, and the growing pressure for evidence of employee involvement, appeared to increase the likelihood of Level 1 work being passed over to ‘the process side’ - i.e. the shift team members. Thus, the Task engineers faced a perceived erosion of their performance responsibility from both sides.

Thirdly, the functional division of MEI engineers - Maintenance, Electrical, and Instrument Artificers (traditionally referred to as ‘Fifties’) - into ‘Core’ and ‘Task’ teams had created a situation in which the ‘Core’ engineers were perceived to be the ‘cream of the crop’ who “got to pick and choose the nice Level 2 work”, leaving the ‘Task’ engineers with the “grotty work”. The key issue here is that attempts to clarify the roles of the Core and Task teams on the basis of a commitment to Total Productive maintenance (TPM) had been initiated via the Core issues alone - i.e. from the task viewpoint, the Core engineers had been given the freedom to choose what their job description should entail, with no direct input from the Task engineers whose own job descriptions would be changed as a result.

In practice the initiative had been financially driven. The ‘core’ work of equipment failure and plant breakdowns had the potential for the greatest financial impact in terms of lost production. As such, it was felt that the most experienced (and hence most expensive) resources should be focused on such problems, and that their experience should be utilised in determining where that focus should be placed. This left the remaining ‘task’ engineers with Level 1 work and non-essential (i.e. having no production capability impact) Level 2 work, which they saw as “grotty work”. Add this to the rumours of Level 1 work being transferred to the production side and it could be argued that this could only serve to further entrench the elitism and animosity which existed between the Core and Task engineers. As one veteran ‘tiffy’ commented:
"I can see management's point in making the best use of resources - some of the 20 year lads know their plants better than the folks who built them - but some of the other lads see themselves as getting squeezed out, and pretty soon they're going to see their only way out as filing a grievance with the union - then where will we be?"

Thus, it would appear that the functional divisions which made perfect operational and financial sense on the drawing board had succeeded in delivering a bonus of animosity, frustration, and confusion, which are not the most ideal precursors to empowerment. For employee involvement initiatives to succeed as the groundwork for future empowerment, a strong sense of identity and future direction are essential - the task engineers appeared to have neither of these.

3.3 THE POTENTIAL FOR EMPOWERMENT - A New Plant

Given the problems of endeavouring to empower a workforce in the embedded culture of a heavily unionised 'brownfield' environment, the prospect of a new plant being built at the ChemCo site was seen by a few members of the SMT (the plant manager designate (PMD) in particular) as offering the 'last great hope' for empowerment at ChemCo. To quote the PMD:

"The issues of employee involvement and empowerment make perfect sense to everyone, but they've had to take a back seat to the 1991 Agreement and the need to maximise production output. This new plant will operate with 'bankable hours' already in place, so with that obstacle behind us, I'm hoping we'll be given the freedom to explore our operating policies in a little more detail."

124
As the first major capital investment in production capability at the site since 1981, delivering a lower profit margin ‘upstream’ product (i.e. one of the key raw materials of ChemCo’s final, and more lucrative, end product), there was considerable pressure to follow a safe route with the new plant and simply overlay existing operating policies and procedures. The new plant was never designed to be an experiment in managerial philosophy, only a means of increasing the production capability of what was currently a very profitable product for ChemCo’s parent company. Any exterior or political motives were reserved for a ‘carrot on a stick’ scenario where authorisation for the plant could have gone to Europe, the Far East, or to ChemCo - still more pressure not to ‘rock the boat’ over any labour issues (and hence run the risk of stopping production).

Nonetheless, the new plant represented a tremendous opportunity to introduce a new working model, in isolation (or as near isolation as would be possible within the ChemCo site), and to truly follow through on the ideals which many of the current initiatives appeared to commit themselves. The PMD spoke of utilising a “less oppressive management structure” with the prospect of ‘self-empowered’ teams, with minimal direct supervision, and the creation of proactive Work Groups. This could, on paper at least, enable the plant to overcome the peer pressure which appeared to be impeding the success of employee involvement initiatives elsewhere on the site.

However, during the field research, a compromise was announced, and the decision was made to set up and run the plant along traditional management lines for the first 12 months, leaving an option open to explore alternatives at that time. While this decision did appear to help ease the very prevalent pressure for risk avoidance, it was hoped that the eventual loss of the direct involvement of the FLM’s (two of which were designed to remain as production supervisors) would mark a sufficiently dramatic change to achieve the paradigm shift of perceptions which the current policy of ‘seeding’ via MIT’s, RCM’s and Shift Initiatives had failed to do.
With the new plant scheduled to produce around 50% of ChemCo’s total raw material output once up and running, the project should be sufficiently noteworthy to warrant close attention from other areas of the site and the Company as a whole, to hopefully move the commitment to employee involvement up to another level. The initial commitment from the new plant’s Working Party to recruit across the board, rather than “skimming the cream” from other plants on site, should go a long way towards establishing the credibility of the new plant as a proven and viable experiment which others on the site can learn from.

3.4 CONCLUSIONS

For an organisation which was making such a public and pronounced commitment to a rapid transition from a bureaucratic, highly unionised culture to a more responsive and proactive culture, the need for a clear vision for the ChemCo site would appear to be vital. Employees at every level had to be able to understand and buy-in to the goals and values of this new culture as easily and as quickly as possible in order to optimise their contribution to the organisation. As such, the responsibility rested with Senior Management in providing not just a Leadership Charter or a Mission Statement, but a detailed plan of action, and a clear outline of the role to be played by the employees in that plan. Unfortunately for ChemCo, too much emphasis appeared to have been placed on the creation of a suitably enthusiastic manifesto, with little if anything left over for the more pragmatic issues of actual implementation.
Corporate policies of "Autonomy, Accountability and Achievement" and template-based programmes such as PITP appeared to contain all the right words and phrases to support the rhetoric of increased employee involvement and, ultimately, empowerment, but there was no real evidence of a plan to bring this vision into reality. Without a clear leadership message as to the role to be played by employees in the achievement of what will undoubtedly be ambitious change objectives, it seemed likely that the workforce would continue to maintain their current myopic focus on overtime versus benefit hours, and the bigger pictures of corporate transformation and the opportunities for personal career development would be lost.

For the Company, and the ChemCo site in particular, the stumbling blocks to such a transformation appeared to be considerable. There was no evidence of trust between workers and management, with the apparent result that the broad acceptance of low-level change mechanisms such as MIT's was heavily impeded by paranoia on both sides over issues such as hidden agendas and vested interests. Indeed, many of the FLM's interviewed spoke of a reticence to increase the autonomy of their people for fear of management "coming down on me like a ton of bricks" if the exercise should falter or fail.

With SMT members speaking of 2 or 3 year time lines needed in order to prove their honesty and commitment to the promises being made on the issue of bankable benefit hours within the 1991 Labour Agreement, the extent of this mistrust appeared to be considerable. Even the Union Negotiators, who appeared to endorse the multiskilling and cross-training programmes which would be an integral part of the employee development initiatives, remained convinced that there was a 'catch' or 'a hidden agenda', and approached the situation accordingly.
Any attempt to apportion blame for this current situation on the basis of past actions and contract negotiations would serve no purpose. What can be said is that a series of endeavours to address the incredibly high levels of mistrust, and near sclerotic bureaucracy must inevitably preclude any commitment to low-level initiatives such as MIT’s. Attempting to ‘seed’ the organisation in order to achieve gradual change simply underestimated the extent of the peer pressure at work in ChemCo. Such initiatives could not bring about dramatic change over the long-term.

ChemCo did not appear to have an empowered work environment, nor was there any concrete evidence of a strong commitment to putting empowerment into practice at the ChemCo site. Whilst this may have come as no surprise to the Senior Management Team, who were more pre-occupied with putting the 1991 Labour Agreement negotiations behind them, the longer-term implications of this lack of empowerment for the SMT’s stated goals and objectives are considerable.

With a history of ‘flavour of the month’ programmes, and a proven tendency to ‘jump on the bandwagon’ of any new managerial concepts or theories, any initiatives which broach such a ‘buzzword’ as empowerment must inevitably face resistance and disdain. Fortunately, there was no evidence that the employees of the ChemCo site were directly opposed to empowerment, as the apparent success of each stand-alone team initiative demonstrated. Indeed, everyone interviewed would welcome increased autonomy and responsibility, and the opportunity to make a positive contribution to the success of the organisation. However, they were, at the time, too wrapped up in the myopia of overtime hours versus bankable benefit hours under the 1991 Labour Agreement to be able to act upon that commitment.
4.0 CASE STUDY #2 - TELCO:

4.1 BACKGROUND

"TelCo." is the South Wales manufacturing facility of a Global Telecommunications Company. The parent company is the world’s 4th largest supplier of telecommunications equipment, employing 60,000 people in 140 countries around the world.

The site started life before the Second World War as a factory for a lead toy manufacturer. In 1946, it was acquired by the General Post Office (GPO) as a Repair & Refurbishment facility for telephone handsets. The privatisation of the GPOs telephone operations as ‘British Telecom’ (BT) in 1984 brought the TelCo site into the Factories Division of BT. The manufacture of telephones and, later, printed circuit boards (PCBs) was then introduced alongside repair and refurbishment as the site became part of British Telecom Consumer Electronics (BTCE).

The Plant Director had been in situa for the last ten years, during which time the plant had been through a move from national to local collective bargaining, significant redundancies, and, most recently, multiple ownership changes - BT’s decision to “get out of manufacturing” led to the sale of the site in October 1990 to another telecommunications company which, within the space of five months, was itself taken over by TelCo’s parent company.

With over half a century of operational history, the TelCo site was actively involved in the local South Wales community. The community relied heavily upon the employment that TelCo provided (60% of the workforce lived within a 5 mile radius of the plant), but with growing competition for that workforce (Sony, Panasonic and Aiwa now have manufacturing plants in the area), TelCo was becoming increasingly aware of the need to maintain a stable employee base. Labour turnover was minimal.
Past redundancy programmes, characterised by early retirement packages, had produced a workforce with an average age of 37 and an average length of service of only 9 years. 74% of the workforce was female.

The plant had yet to turn a profit. It had survived primarily on the basis of strong operational efficiency (i.e. it hadn’t lost a lot of money either) in the manufacture of "bread and butter” equipment with “zero profit margin” for one major customer - BT - rather than profit generation via a mixed product line for multiple customers. The plant’s Senior Management Team (SMT) was endeavouring to broaden TelCo’s product range in order to both introduce higher margin items and to transform their customer base from a situation in which BT, which had, until recently, accounted for 85% of their sales, would only account for 15% in the 1996 fiscal year. This corporate commitment to a movement from being a one-product/one-customer supplier to a multi-product/multi-customer supplier, based on Just-In-Time (JIT) performance contracts, now placed TelCo in a situation where customers could change their orders from anything from 4,000 to 100,000 units at very short notice.

This commitment to JIT had produced a dramatic movement in hiring policies away from, to quote the Human Resources Director (HRD):

"The 'civil service mentality' of 'jobs for life' towards a more pragmatic adherence to fixed-term and 'permanent part-time' employment contracts in order to give (TelCo) the operational flexibility to respond to such wide swings in demand levels."

In doing so, Senior Management believed themselves to be treating their employees with greater honesty. To quote the Plant Director (PD):

"We are only able to offer them employment for the period of work on our books, but the incentive is there that a quality product will win more orders and longer employment contracts".

One further incentive was that fixed-term employment contracts would not generate a redundancy situation in a period of further “downsizing".
The employees traditionally belonged to two unions - the NCU (National Communications Union) for clerical, technical and production employees; and the STE (Society for Telecommunications Executives) for management and professional employees. Both were essentially BT-specific unions.

TelCo initially “de-recognised” both unions as they were thought to be too steeped in a public service tradition to be able to work effectively on the management of change. The STE had remained de-recognised, even with a reduction of indirect staff of over one third. The NCU (now merged with the Post Office unions to become the CWU - Communications Workers Union) signed a Procedure Agreement with TelCo expressing their mutual commitment to operational flexibility in the management of change. There had been no industrial action since the agreement was signed.

4.2 THE TELCO APPROACH TO EMPOWERMENT

As one of many manufacturing sites within the parent company’s global operation, the Senior Management Team (SMT) of TelCo saw themselves in the role of fighting for business which could easily be allocated to production capacity in North or South America, Ireland, or elsewhere in Europe. With no direct interference from Head Office as yet, they saw themselves as being, in the words of the Plant Director: “on our own as long as we continue to produce the goods”. As such, change initiatives within the TelCo plant had, to date, been directed at site level with the encouragement and support of the SMT and benign non-interference from the organisation at corporate level.
The stated objective behind TelCo’s approach to the concept of empowerment was, in the words of the Development & Training Manager: “To marry together the aspirations and needs of the employee to the requirements of the business in a tough marketplace.” In practice, the empowerment programme appeared to be driven by a more pragmatic business imperative of greater productivity with no increase in administrative overhead. There was no sense of ‘jumping on the bandwagon’ - indeed, the SMT appeared to be very proud of the fact that the TelCo site was a “buzzword-free zone”. The PD’s stated intention was to utilise what the SMT perceived to be the ‘basic values’ of empowerment (i.e. greater employee involvement, autonomy and creativity) as a means to a specific end - asset optimisation - in order to challenge the perceived aggression of Far East competition.

Capital investment in Printed Circuit Board (PCB) assembly machinery had both increased production capacity and brought about a clear division between Engineering/Maintenance and Production/Assembly on the shop floor. This, combined with a marketing strategy which demanded lower order volumes, rapid production turn-arounds, and short order windows, had brought further emphasis on the Assembly area of the shop floor as the prime focus of the empowerment initiative in the early stages. Without a workforce capable of manufacturing equipment of the highest quality at consistent levels of production (as measured by ‘Standard Minute Values’ (SMVs) ), TelCo would be unable to deliver on the promises which it was making to the marketplace.

However, consensus as to the exact nature of the basic values of empowerment proved to be hard to find. Opinions centred on, to quote the Plant Director: “overcoming traditional management arrogance..(and)...realising the extent of the expertise and brainpower we have out there on the shop floor”. Requests for greater clarity prompted reversions to a condemnation of “the old civil service mentality” (PD) and a re-affirmation that “staff are our most important asset” (PD).
The maxim that "staff are our most important asset" was by no means revolutionary at TelCo. Previous involvement with employee participation and job enrichment can be traced back to BT's focus on their external customers via Total Quality Management (TQM) initiatives - many of the examples of the "classic Civil Service mentality", such as assigned parking spaces and segregated dining areas, were resolved during this period – primarily as a result of employee suggestions, team-based projects, and directives from the Senior Management Team.

TelCo then broadened the initiative to include internal customer relationships and introduced their own company-wide TQM programme ("Excellence!") which focused on both inter and intra-departmental Continuous Improvement Teams (CITs). Perceived as a means of "testing the waters" of employee participation, the CITs were created on a voluntary involvement basis as 'working parties' or 'task forces' in response to problems/issues identified through suggestion boxes and direct employee feedback. Between 1993 and 1995, over 140 teams were created on numerous site-wide issues such as 'Communications', 'Safety', 'Career Paths', and 'Community Involvement'. In each case, participation was on an 'extra-curricular' basis - i.e. team projects were undertaken on breaks, lunch hours and after hours. Little, if any, paid work time was made available.

One example of the mechanics of the CIT process was the 'Communications' Team. Initially created as a cross-functional/cross-pay grade team of 8 members, the Team decided after only 3 meetings that, in the words of one team member: "there was absolutely no way (we) could make any impact on site-wide Communications issues". The team then decided to keep the original 8 members as a Steering Group, and to then begin "Phase One" by forming 5 sub-teams to focus on more specific areas and, in the words of the same team member: "to at least identify improvement opportunities much quicker and perhaps get a few successes under our belts".
The 5 sub-teams were: `Site Briefing` - looking at “plant-wide feedback meetings with Senior Management”; `Written Communication` - looking at better utilisation of internal Noticeboards; `Electronic Communication` - exploring the potential of the telephone voice mail and eMail systems; `External Communication` - surveying external customers and suppliers to “see how effective their interface with the customer was”; and `Newsletter` - “developing a vehicle for regular and frequent communication of internal news and information within the plant”.

By “Phase Two”, the `Site Briefing` and `Newsletter` sub-teams had dissolved as the initiatives they had created had become self-administered. The `Electronic Communication` sub-team had expanded their area of responsibility to include the introduction of television monitors site-wide to relay up-to-date plant information. Initially the information comprised employee absence statistics, weather forecasts, birthdays, and information on the site playschool. There were plans to expand the range of ‘news’ to include site visitors, new orders, service awards and production performance data.

### 4.2.1 CELL MANUFACTURING

The reason for the identification of empowerment as “the next logical step” (PD) in the development of the TelCo workforce, was that the apparent success of the CITs and their primarily extra-curricular initiatives provided what the SMT saw as evidence of an as-yet untapped resource of employee creativity.

The first major test of this resource came with the introduction of a “cell manufacturing” assembly process for telephone handsets to replace the original flow-line assembly process.
The corporate objective of operational flexibility required improved productivity and swifter product change capabilities than the flow-line assembly process, using up to 26 people on one line, could produce. To quote the Plant Director:

"We were getting flexibility in the machine shop through investment in capital equipment, but at the same time we didn’t have the necessary flexibility in assembly, and we desperately needed to rethink that."

The introduction of cell manufacturing on the basis of the principles of “lean production” (Womack, J.P., Jones, D.T., & Roos, D., 1990) achieved a 17% productivity improvement and enabled a change-over time of only 34 minutes from one product set-up to another, using three person cells who were each responsible for the assembly, testing and packing of telephone handsets.

The cell concept was introduced as a “skunkworks” (Peters & Waterman) experiment in which a Line Manager, a Team Leader and, later, a cross-functional team of operators of mixed skill levels were allocated used equipment and a test area in a vacant building on the site in order to practice with various cell design layouts. Whilst no attempt was made to publicise the activities of this ‘skunkworks’, they received the enthusiastic support of the SMT and all the design and engineering facilities of the plant were made available to them.

After selecting a fully-tested design, the cell layout was introduced into a corner of the main assembly area, again with minimal fuss and attention. A time frame for a general roll-out of the cell process was left undetermined in order to gauge the level of response from the “curious” co-workers who were still producing handsets on the traditional flow-lines.
In this respect the SMT hoped that the cells could be introduced plant-wide on the basis of a ground-up demand for direct involvement rather than a top-down imposition of senior management policy. This was achieved in April 1994, and the cell-based operators continued to express a strong sense of perceived ownership of the cell manufacturing process. To quote the Human Resources Director:

“When we put the new layout in place, the staff that had been working on the flow lines were eager to get on to the cells. Now if we had tried to put that through as an engineering change, as we would have done in the past, I have no doubt that we would have created a major industrial relations issue, because people would have been unwilling to participate in that change.”

Despite the fact that the original idea for the cell came from an off-site management course attended by a Line Manager, many of the operators interviewed spoke of “our ideas” and “our process”. The fact that many of them were involved in the initial testing gave rise to comments such as: “We came up with this idea, not the supervisors”; “We told the supervisors those single (flow) lines weren’t working...and we found them a better way”; “We tried out the basic idea of the cell on some really old equipment, but we proved it would improve productivity”; “This is our area and we are all responsible for the volume we produce - all three of us...on the single (flow) line, if one person slacked-off it dragged the whole line down...now the three of us work together as a team to get the work done...we move around from station to station to relieve the boredom...but nobody gets away with slacking-off any more!”.
4.2.2 PRODUCTION CAREER STRUCTURE (PCS)

The introduction of the cell manufacturing process was looked upon only as a foundation to a longer-term change initiative. The SMT felt that simply changing the way people worked would not produce lasting change in the business - to quote the Human Resources Director: "Our employees had to feel that there was something in it for them as well as the Company".

This bargain of 'something in it for them' was presented through the introduction of a clearly-defined, competency-based 'Production Career Structure' (PCS - see Appendix One).

The previous grade structure inherited from BT was based on the assignment of jobs to pre-determined pay levels rather than specific performance competencies, and there was no clear process in place by which people could get promoted from one grade to another. Advancement was achieved on the basis of perceived favouritism from the Supervisor (now 'Team Leader') or Line Manager through the so-called "Blue-Eyed Boy System" (which is still referred to by many disgruntled shop floor operators today).

The PCS was introduced for the shop-floor in order to provide a career development path and a reward and recognition process for shop floor operators which could parallel the structure already in place for the management and professional staff.
In order to assure employee acceptance of the PCS, a period of 18 months was assigned to a joint approach towards the evolution of the programme. A Steering Group of National Union officials, Plant Director, Manufacturing Manager and Human Resources (HR) Director, oversaw a cross-functional working team comprising a mix of operators, line management, training and HR professionals. Between them, they were assigned full responsibility both for the development of the PCS framework, and for the creation of a promotion and performance review process to mirror the “Managing For Achievement” (MFA) appraisal scheme which was already in place in TelCo for the management and professional staff. Every employee affected by the PCS was briefed directly by the development team, thus precluding the need for a formal vote or ballot.

MFA was structured, in the words of the programme handbook: “to engender the development of a goal-oriented career path within the (TelCo) organisation for management and professional staff”. Performance appraisals took place at quarterly, biannual or annual intervals with the employee’s immediate supervisor. Career goals agreed to in the previous appraisal were reviewed, and new goals were set to be achieved before the next appraisal. In this way, the SMT believed, employees looked upon the performance appraisals as an opportunity for an assessment of progress made towards a longer-term goal, rather than as a criticism of historical work performed. Equally, the MFA programme attempted to create an expectancy of advancement in direct relation to performance rather than “winning favour”, deserved or otherwise, with a supervisor.
The PCS represented the first time that shop floor staff had been able to have their performance formally reviewed. Of equal importance, was the opportunity for joint discussion between manager and employee on his/her development needs and the translation of this into an “action plan” of skills training (or in some cases re-training), either through internal competency-based programmes or more formal external programmes, including the use of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ’s). These action plans were essential to progression through the career structure - by acquiring predetermined skills/competencies at each level - from ‘Process’ (functional task performance) to ‘Technical’ (high quality task performance with some demonstrated problem solving) to ‘Diagnostic’ (high quality task performance and demonstrated high level problem solving) - shop floor employees would now be able to envisage a clear career path within the organisation.

In addition, the PCS was designed to enhance the perceived “employability” of the TelCo workforce. With the perception that current market constraints precluded the same level of job security that BT had offered, the use of NVQ’s and competency-based training was designed to serve a dual purpose of both increasing their long-term value to the company (on the basis of training time and money invested in them), whilst adding further weight to their “attractiveness” on the local job market.

The success of the PCS is now measured in terms of the shift from a perceived scepticism to a clear demand for involvement and assessment. To quote one Trainer & Assessor:

“The pressure is actually coming up from the shop floor to the Team Leaders and Line Managers to get assessed, so that they can start to move within the PCS, eventhough the pay differential will only be 20p an hour per category.”
4.2.3 INVESTING IN EXCELLENCE

In parallel to the competency-based career development of the PCS, the SMT started to introduce a plant-wide personal development programme under the title of “Investing In Excellence” (IIE). Purchased from, and administered by an American consulting company (Pacific Institute), the course was designed to focus on the “softer, intangible” (HRD) career development issues such as self-esteem, positive thinking and “self-enlightenment” (HRD) (see Appendix Two), which the SMT believed the shop floor employees would need in order to “step-out of the functional boxes of the PCS and really become empowered” (HRD). As such, it was seen to represent both a pre-emptive strike against the “yes...but” response scenario to future change initiatives by encouraging employees to look at the positive side of change rather than automatically looking for reasons why it wouldn’t work; and also as a catalytic pump-priming exercise to aid future direct employee involvement by getting employees to think about their own roles in the organisation and their personal plans for career development within TelCo.

The content of the weekend-retreat course was based around 25 separate units including such titles as: ‘The Search for the Truth’, ‘Assimilating Reality’, ‘Captain of the World’, ‘End Result Thinking’, and ‘The Challenge is Yours’. The objective of participation in the course was that employees would, in the words of the Development & Training Manager: “develop a clear understanding of where they are (and) what their strengths and weaknesses are....it’s about getting people to believe in themselves and, where there’s a problem, to set about finding an answer instead of putting-up ‘yes-but’ responses”.

The course was specifically non-work related in the sense that no team-building or team-management skills were introduced. Instead, the more ethereal issues of self-enlightenment, identification and motivation were supposedly explored in detail.

The long-term objective here is that employees would, in the words of the Human Resources Director:
"Become comfortable with the notions of ownership and responsibility for their personal career development within the organisation, and hence find stability and security in an alignment with a perceived (TelCo) culture rather than a specific organisational division".

In practice, the SMT would have liked their employees to become more comfortable with and responsive to change. In this way, the SMT believed, the empowerment programme, which they regarded as being essentially a top-down exercise at present, would become a ground-up initiative as increased direct employee involvement continued to build momentum.

The selection of the IIE package was based on previous successful utilisation elsewhere in the TelCo global network - a sister plant in Ireland had used the material to “help employees cope with a major redundancy” (HRD) by enabling those employees directly affected by the redundancy to “feel better about themselves, focus on their marketable skills and expertise, and to take a proactive stance towards future employment” (HRD). Unfortunately, this link with redundancy gave the IIE package a less-than-favourable reputation, to the extent that when the pilot course was run at TelCo, again on a small-scale, low-key basis, there were accusations of attempted “brainwashing” (in response to the ‘soft skills’ nature of the material) on the part of the SMT from a few of the early participants.

The fact that IIE was the only ‘off-the-shelf’ package used to facilitate the introduction of a concept which is prone to many of such packages, was a testament to the conviction of the SMT in making the TelCo empowerment programme as individual and site-specific as possible. However, the initial misunderstandings and accusations of “brainwashing” not withstanding, opinions on and responses to future involvement in IIE appeared to take on a life of their own, even before the programme was rolled-out to the plant as a whole.
Those employees who had taken the course regarded it as a very positive experience, describing it with such phrases as: “I learned a lot about myself as a person” (Team Leader); “The course really makes you examine your fears and beliefs” (Assembly Worker); and “It teaches you a lot about personal goal setting” (Engineer). However those who had only heard rumours about it on the ‘grapevine’, perceived IIE as being something between a secret Masonic society and the Moonies.

In this context, the SMT’s apparent predilection for a low-key approach had created a void of information which the internal rumour mill appeared to be only too willing to fill. After three pilot sessions had been completed, it was hoped that internal trainers would be recruited to bring the IIE package in-house, so that every member of staff could participate in the programme.

4.2.4 ENLIGHTENED LEADERS PROGRAMME (ELP)

In another attempt to pre-empt anticipated problems in the implementation of their empowerment programme, the SMT had identified the first line supervisors - Team Leaders - as the group of people that would feel most threatened by a programme of empowerment. The primary objective here was to recognise the proposed irrelevancy of many of the features of the traditional Supervisor role - “hands-on supervision, discipline, acting as the sole point of contact between their team and other departments and managers” (HRD) - and to replace them with a new role delineation of “coach, facilitator, motivator” (HRD).

The key to the adoption of this new role was seen to be the Enlightened Leaders Programme (ELP), which consisted of three elements:

1. Guided self-exploration by each individual of how they work and interact with people, what their goals and aspirations are, etc.
2. Intensive skills development in the new role, to include role-playing exercises to help them develop as a “coach, facilitator, motivator”.
3. Practical experience in order to develop their confidence in this new role.
In this context, the SMT anticipated that the objectives of the ELP would be achieved by participation in the IIE programme, followed by direct support and supervision from Line Management and Senior Management (where necessary).

However, with the apparent success of cell manufacturing leading to expectations of future change on the shop floor, and Senior Management raising their expectations of future change initiatives, the Team Leaders saw themselves as being “squeezed from both sides”. The SMT hoped that the ELP would begin to defuse that pressure by both allaying the fears expressed by the Team Leaders as to the future of their role within the organisation, and by providing some clarity of direction for their longer-term career development. This would then allow the “initial momentum” of the empowerment programme, which the SMT felt that the success of cell manufacturing had created, to continue to develop without coming up against the “stumbling block of a middle management siege mentality” (HRD).

4.3 EMPOWERMENT IN PRACTICE

4.3.1 TRAINERS & ASSESSORS

The introduction of the Production Career Structure (PCS) created a need for an objective assessment of every shop floor operator in order to determine his/her place within the PCS. At the outset, the percentage breakdown of the three categories of Operator - Process/Technical/Diagnostic - was determined to be 80/10/10, with a long-term goal of a 50/25/25 breakdown, in line with the dual objectives of skills base development and “employability” enhancement.
Rather than bringing in specialist Trainers and Assessors (TAs) on a contract basis to make an objective assessment of the 350+ shop floor employees, the SMT's approach was to initially take staff from the shop floor, put them through NVQ courses for Training & Assessment, and then to create a "virtual" TA department within the Development & Training Division of Human Resources. Once every member of the shop floor had been assessed and their respective position within the PCS determined, this "virtual" department would then dissolve, and the position of TA for each of the three levels of the PCS would be achieved through a natural progression from 'Training' to 'Competent' to 'Advanced' and then to 'Trainer/Assessor'. In this context, the current TAs would ultimately return to the shop floor to be called upon as and when needed to train new recruits or to undertake project-based tasks.

Selecting staff from the shop floor to undertake an entirely new role which would require them to make objective assessments of their colleagues' work could have presented problems in terms of strong resentment from the shop floor as the TA role could easily be perceived as that of 'unofficial policeman' of the new PCS.

In practice, the TAs appeared to be comfortable in their new role and saw themselves as "pioneers" rather than policemen. The investment in training and NVQ qualifications had underpinned their self-esteem and given them credibility, and they felt confident in the support of the Development & Training Manager as they endeavoured to establish the boundaries of the role of Trainer & Assessor within the PCS framework - "laying the foundations" as they called it.
However, whilst the initial role of the TA was designated as short-term from the outset, the first incumbents of the role were very aware of the attention being placed on the TA position, and of the Senior Management endorsement of that position in relation to the PCS, and they therefore saw their successful performance within that role as the key to future progress within the organisation. Having been granted considerable autonomy (i.e. in the scheduling and performance of assessments) and the opportunity to become involved in the development of a completely new role within the organisation, to then see that role dismantled and absorbed back into the PCS framework would be perceived as a demotion. This could prove to be counterproductive to their future career development, and detrimental to the TA role itself.

4.3.2 THE ARIES TEAM

After making the transition from single flow-line to cell-based assembly, the SMT perceived the next logical step to be the direct expansion of a three-person cell-team into a multi-functional team to be totally responsible for the manufacture of a product from production schedule to shipped product. Their approach to this concept has endeavoured to directly re-create the perceived success of the ‘skunkworks’ approach on a completely new product model, code-named ‘Aries’.

Having “proven” that the employees in the cells would “readily” accept full responsibility for the three-stage assembly of telephone handsets, and could co-ordinate their own work within that cell, the SMT felt confident that such a readiness would extend to a larger area of responsibility - i.e. from the creation of the Production Schedule (deciding when and how many phones would be assembled) to the assembly of the Printed Circuit Boards (PCB’s) through to the final assembly and packing of the telephones. In this context, there would be even greater “perceived ownership” (PD), since the employees would be “directly involved in every stage of the assembly process, from start to finish” (PD).
The SMT hoped that a small-scale introduction, using a self-directed team with senior management support available only if needed, would generate curiosity, positive interest, and, ultimately, direct requests for the same autonomy and responsibility as the Aries Team members appeared to have been granted. As such, the employees would again ask to participate in the success of a “proven” model (as they had done with cell manufacture) rather than having that model imposed upon them as a Senior Management policy directive. To quote the Plant Director:

“One of the environments I’m trying to create (and I hope the Aries Team will do it for me) is a condition where the group knows what they have to do and the support they will need to do it, and in turn that the peripheral elements will be there to support them - it’s a real change in the role relationship.”

In practice, however, the Aries Team did not appear to be perceived in the same favourable light as the cell manufacture process. Opinions about the Team ranged from “elitist”, to the ever-present “blue-eyed boy system”, to the more pragmatic “that won’t work here because......”. Obviously some element of that negative reaction could be attributed to sour grapes at not being selected to participate in the first team, but there were specific issues involved:

Firstly, the Aries Team consisted of, in the judgement of the SMT and Line Managers, “star performers” (a conscious decision to ensure the success of the project from the outset) rather than the “motley crew” of operators of mixed skills levels which had worked on cell manufacturing. This, in turn, provided grist to the rumour mill about unit performance levels (set by Standard Minute Values (SMVs) of unit production) being set at unattainable levels for the new product (“elitism”).
Secondly problems and delays in the receipt of the necessary blueprints for the telephone from a sister plant put the Team behind schedule and dramatically changed their original remit to the point where they became involved in the recreation of the blueprints from scratch with the Engineering Department on site. With no information to the contrary, the Team was perceived as “failing miserably” by many of their shop floor colleagues.

The transfer to cell-based manufacturing involved breaking-up lines of 20 or more people into smaller sub-units. The work remained basically the same, with the opportunity for some job rotation to break-up the monotony of de-skilled task performance. From the employees’ perspective, that change was easy to assimilate - they still had the same Team Leader and Line Manager, and they were still answerable to “the almighty SMV”.

Their perception of the Aries Team, however, appeared to be one of confusion - due in part to the movement outside of the heavily-endorsed and clearly-defined PCS into the new “grey area” of self-directed teams. Having been assessed in detail in order to determine their respective positions in the PCS, which was, in itself, presented as the “vision of the future”, employees were now being presented with yet another model, in which the traditional chain of command between Line Managers, Team Leaders and Operators was less clearly defined. Rather than working towards daily and hourly production goals on the basis of pre-determined SMV’s, rumours were now circulating about being given only a monthly production target and being able to decide for themselves how that volume would be produced - “without Line Managers telling you how to do it” (Team Member).

Unfortunately, with the commitment to a small-scale, low-profile trial of this new model, there were few, if any, specifics to refute or confirm these rumours, which only served to add to the confusion and further cloud the real issue that the SMT was attempting to, as they saw it, bring about dramatic culture change on a very gradual scale.
All of the shop floor employees interviewed appeared to be comfortable with the idea of each “box” of the PCS requiring a proven functional skill level before being “signed off by the TA” in order to advance on to the next level. However, when questioned as to the operating style of the Aries team, most responded in very general terms, such as: “I’ve heard that they are ‘self-directed’ which means, I suppose, that they will get to decide the who, what, why, when and where of that product model - but then I’ve also heard that they’ve run into some trouble too.” (Team Member)

The SMT were equally general in their comments, with notions of team members “finding their own best way to get the job done” (PD), and of “exploring completely new territory” (HRD). Whilst the commitment to guidance and support (if needed) was clearly stated, the SMT’s decision not to impose a prefabricated model upon the team appeared to generate sufficient confusion to overshadow the clarity of that commitment - i.e. the SMT’s belief in the simplicity of the approach appeared to be lost on their employees.

Aries represented one of what will undoubtedly be a large portfolio of products, but the employees seemed unsure as to whether the Aries Team approach represented the model for the future or whether it was merely a model-specific structure. For the team members themselves, initial “teething troubles” aside, the Aries appeared to be perceived as offering a tremendous opportunity to expand their role within the organisation, and to take on new skills beyond the competency-based PCS. Whether the overall empowerment programme will have advanced sufficiently to allow them to move on to equal or greater challenges once the team has dissolved, remains to be seen.
4.3.3 THE PEOPLE CONTRACT

The SMT acknowledged that the TelCo site was still in the very early stages of their journey towards the creation of an empowered work environment. They saw the progress achieved so far as a valuable investment in strategy development and understanding, in spite of the absence of any clear gains in financial performance.

The People Contract (see Appendix Three) represented the operational handbook for this new work environment. It was designed to be both a value statement for the site as a whole, and a role clarification for all parties involved. For senior management ("the organisation"), the contract emphasised their position as role models by establishing a clear code of conduct for the 'new' TelCo - key words in the contract included: 'communicate'; 'consult'; 'enable'; 'empower'; 'invest'; 'recognise'; and 'respect'.

For plant employees, the contract emphasised the degree of change from the old, stable public service work environment to a new era of insecurity and uncertainty. Key words and phrases included: 'responsibility'; 'actively participate'; 'improve effectiveness'; and 'contribute fully'.

As such, the contract appeared to represent more of a manifesto than a detailed plan of action. As the Human Resources Director freely admitted: "Although the general way forward was in the heads of a few of us, this was only clearly articulated into a strategic intent at the beginning of 1994 - so a lot of the steps have been opportunistic and non-sequential against a broad vision".
4.4 CONCLUSIONS

From the outset, the SMT appeared to take great pride in the fact that TelCo, as they saw it, was a “buzzword-free” work environment. Words such as ‘Empowerment’, ‘Re-engineering’, and ‘Benchmarking’ were used “only with the greatest reticence” (PD). This commitment to “normality” was based on a conscious avoidance of a perceived “plethora of clichés and platitudes surrounding empowerment” (PD) which the SMT felt would only serve to bury the broader message of a need for dramatic change in the way TelCo operates.

However, if the SMT saw the development of the “innate potential” of the TelCo workforce as the key to the achievement of this dramatic change, they appeared to have chosen to rest a little too heavily on the laurels of the success of cell-manufacturing, without offering any guidance as to what may or may not lie ahead for the TelCo workforce, and what will be expected of them.

Endeavouring to simplify the change message through the avoidance of “buzzwords” makes sense, but the SMT appeared to have lapsed into equally non-specific and taciturn terminology, as expressed in the “People Contract”. Sincere exhortations to ‘communicate’, ‘consult’, ‘enable’, ‘invest’, ‘recognise’ and ‘respect’ offer as little information or guidance as the “buzzwords” they are intended to replace.

In particular, the expectation that managers and supervisors must become coaches and, more importantly, facilitators (implying leadership and support rather than control) echoes much of the general ‘we’re all in this together’ rhetoric of empowerment, whilst remaining dangerously light on specifics. Allowing staff to “find their own way” to the cell-manufacturing structure certainly engendered acceptance and ownership, but to then extrapolate from that point that managers and supervisors would “find their own way” to “facilitate” in this new environment and, further, that employees site-wide would be able to establish working norms as informally as the three-member cell teams had done, overlooks the need for a clear support structure for any change initiative.
If the driving force of the initiative is to be the “innate potential” of the workforce, then it should be considered that such potential could manifest itself in varying degrees. As such, an expectation is placed upon management to offer both a clear objective for those “star performers” who are eager to accept the challenge of increased autonomy and responsibility, as well as a stable support framework for those employees less eager to venture into this “uncharted territory”.

For the SMT, the apparent success of the cell-manufacturing initiative suggested that the correct approach was not to focus on the possibility of a mixed response to raised expectations of employee performance in an ‘empowered’ work environment, but rather to assume that the majority of the shop floor employees would not have a clear understanding of what ‘empowerment’ means. As such, their introduction of the “People’s Contract” can be seen as an attempt to “de-mystify” empowerment through the “K.I.S.S.” ("Keep It Simple Stupid") process.

In actuality, every employee interviewed, both formally and informally, seemed to have a very clear sense of what empowerment meant for them in terms of how their role could be changed and how their performance could be enhanced through increased autonomy – primarily through the reduction and/or removal of “bureaucratic” policies and procedures. In addition, they all seemed to be very aware of TelCo’s growing interest in empowering their workforce. There appeared to be a general awareness that Senior Management was “doing something” with empowerment, and Aries and cell manufacturing were perceived as the first stages of that, but any notion of an ongoing empowerment programme was perceived as having “stalled” with no clear evidence of a future direction.
To quote one frustrated employee: "If they are going to empower us, and many of us still aren't sure what they are doing, it's been a long time coming. I know we've got a lot of young people here - the retirement packages were too good for some of the other lads to pass up - but we know how to do our jobs, and we all have ideas for improvement. We don't need supervisors or managers to tell us how to do our jobs - we want them to help us try new ideas and to improve the quality of the work we do".

This sentiment was echoed by one Production Line Manager:

"We don't have a clear understanding of what this movement towards empowerment is going to mean for each of us - if we had that, we would know where we want to be, what steps we would need to take to get there, and what the T&D (training and development) requirement will be to make those steps. For instance, we've no evidence yet of whether Management is prepared to absorb any impact on SMV's if operators take on non-productive soft issues which relate directly to their perceived ownership of their jobs. At the moment there's no evidence that taking on additional responsibility will provide advancement - they already know there's very little extra pay involved in the PCS, and since it's competency based, I think they are going to wonder 'what's in it for me?'."

The rumour mill, with its earnest willingness to fill in gaps, combined with a predominant focus on job security, appeared to focus on a perceived reticence on the part of Senior Management to publicly announce the future plans for the empowerment programme. Without any substantial evidence of forward movement, many of the employees were beginning to look upon empowerment as something of a Trojan Horse which contained more sinister motives (i.e. an omen of further redundancies) than the positive ideas of job enhancement that they had been hearing about. To quote one PCB Assembly Worker:
"If we're all going to do more, they won't need so many of us will they? ...why else is management being so cagey about it?".

As such, the employees seemed unaware of the SMT’s decision to let the empowerment programme develop gradually under its own momentum, rather than seeking to impose it from above, and whilst a gradual momentum may well strengthen employee acceptance over the long-term, there appeared to be a greater immediate need for clarity of focus.

With no specific time frame in place, and an open admission from the SMT that there was no clear end-goal in site (other than a broadly defined operational credo), the TelCo empowerment initiative appeared to be falling victim to a myriad of opinions on and definitions of the concept, across the entire spectrum of autonomy and participation - expectations of increased autonomy and responsibility ranged from 3 months to 5 years.

Senior Management’s belief in a gradual approach had been vindicated by reports of a “failed” empowerment initiative at one of their sister plants in Devon. The site management had apparently endeavoured to empower their workforce overnight by completely dismantling the corporate command structure and enabling the shop floor employees to take a vocal and active role in every aspect of plant operations. With no clear operational framework or support structure in place, the result was widely accepted to be “pandemonium” (HRD). As a result, the whole project was scrapped, and the original bureaucratic structure replaced.

However, even with a gradual approach to empowerment, the TelCo employees appeared to be equally in need of a clear operational framework and support structure. One manager compared the exercise to “completing a jigsaw puzzle without the picture on the box”.

There appeared to be considerable anticipation and enthusiasm for this new era of direct employee involvement, but there was no consensus as to how the transition would be achieved - shop floor employees wanted to know when it was going to happen, and Team Leaders and Line Managers wanted to know how they were supposed to find the time for coaching and facilitation when they were already stretched to the limit from past redundancies. To quote one of the PCB Production Line Managers:

"What the SMT is doing is steaming ahead for all sorts of political reasons, but they are not giving us back-up as they go along. It's like mining - you can only push the tunnel so far without putting in supports before the tunnel will collapse down on top of you - so no matter how much progress you may think you have made, you really end up making none at all and you've cut yourself off from a way out of it.

What we need to do is move forward with empowerment, or delegation or whatever we are calling it, at a steady controlled pace, and don't leave everything for the managers and team leaders to sort out behind you - they're too busy on the shop floor as it is without being expected to coach and patch things up all the time - they're not supporting us as we move forward - we seem to be doing nothing but leaving wreckage in our wake."

With no firm strategy or direction forthcoming from the SMT, the only clear issue in the TelCo approach to empowerment seemed to be that the innate potential of the workforce as a whole was being held back until they "got some answers", and with all parties adopting a 'wait and see' stance, the TelCo empowerment initiative did indeed appear to be in danger of "stalling".
5.0 CASE STUDY #3 - FUNWORLD

5.1 THE ROAD TO EMPOWERMENT

Originally developed in 1979 as a small-scale attraction around a stately home - “a little park in the middle of the countryside with some rowing boats and a chuffer train” - “Funworld” now encompasses over 125 rides and attractions, and over 200 acres of landscaped gardens. The park has traditionally operated on a seasonal basis, from March to November, employing around 250 full-time employees and up to 1250 additional seasonal employees at the peak of the season in July/August.

In its first eleven years of life, Funworld was operated as a privately held entrepreneurial venture, with the owner establishing a very personal and autocratic management style over the park. However, financial difficulties in relation to another theme park venture forced the sale of Funworld in 1990 to an international attractions and entertainment company (itself a division of a multi-national publishing, banking and media communications conglomerate), with a subsequent change to a more traditional and bureaucratic management structure.

In the next five years, over £25 million (with a further £17 million targeted for 1996 & 1997) was invested in upgrading the park’s infrastructure and developing several new “signature” rides to attract both new and returning customers year-on-year. In doing so, Funworld’s Senior Management has endeavoured to transform both the image of the park and the demographics of its customer base.

In the late 1980’s, the park was essentially a “teenager’s paradise”, with a product mix dominated by roller coasters and other “scary” rides which targeted the 15-24 year-old age group. Whilst the park was “great for teenagers”, the image was not so alluring for the higher-average-spend young families, which Senior Management saw as an increasingly important part of the future market. A large portion of the £25 million, therefore, was targeted towards broadening the product mix in favour of young families, with the objective of offering a total “experience” at the park, rather than a series of ride alternatives.
The heavy capital investment had produced dramatic improvements in revenue and attendance year-on-year. In 1994, visitor numbers were up more than 25% on 1993, breaking the 3 million barrier for the first time at a total of 3.25 million. Overall revenue increased by 30% over the same period.

5.1.1 EXTERNAL ISSUES

For the Funworld management team, such dramatic success had brought with it a realisation, as they saw it, that the future growth of the park could not be sustained on the capital-intensive provision of bigger and better rides every year. Whilst the visitor numbers justified the £12 million investment in rides and attractions in the 1994 season alone, the operational logistics of the park were beginning to reveal areas of weakness - particularly in the areas of customer-employee interaction, and the handling of customer complaints.

An aggressive, coupon-based, nation-wide marketing programme in advance of the 1994 season, had produced “swamped volume” scenarios in which, for example, 30,000 people arrived on a day when the park was only staffed for 15,000 people. (Marketing plans for the 1995 season were subsequently “repositioned” to avoid any recurrence of such “extreme understaffing”).

Thus, the high attendance and revenue figures appeared to be masking disappointingly poor levels of customer service. Of those members of staff interviewed, from General Manager to seasonal employee, all admitted to incidents of poor customer service as a result of the sheer volume of customers in the park, in excess of anticipated and pre-staffed levels. Such incidents included:
• 45-60 minute waiting periods for service in food and retail units.
• Empty vending machines and unattended food service carts.
• Overflowing litter bins.
• Complaints of staff being “too busy” to offer help and/or give directions.
• Complaints of staff being “rude”, “abrupt” and “short-tempered” in dealing with customers.
• Complaints of being “bounced around” from one employee to the next in getting problems/complaints resolved by supervisors and/or managers.

These incidents stood in stark contrast to Funworld’s internal Mission Statement, which proudly declared:

“*We the staff will make (Funworld) Britain’s most exciting and unique family leisure experience with the highest standards of cleanliness, customer service and safety.*”

The perceived failure of the customer service component of the Funworld ‘product’ served to focus attention on the park employees as a key element in the delivery of a “magical experience” at the park. In this context, the concept of ‘Empowerment’ was brought into consideration as an integral part of a broader Total Quality Management (TQM) initiative from Funworld’s parent company.

As the only division with an identified Quality Manager, Funworld’s Senior Management had already participated in the corporate TQM programme (developed primarily as a package of ‘boiler plate’ exercises (i.e. more generic in nature in order to facilitate usage across all the divisions of the organisation) by Senior Corporate Executives to centre on specific topics, such as Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) and the ‘Tools of Quality’ - flow charting, pareto analysis, and statistical process control), but their participation had been on the basis of a conscious avoidance of the “buzzwords” associated with TQM in the belief that they carried too much of a history of other companies pursuing “flavour-of-the-month” programmes and failing in that pursuit.
The exact nature of Funworld’s initial involvement in the corporate TQM programme was somewhat less scientific. To quote the Quality Manager:

“My predecessor, who had been with the Company for a number of years prior to his appointment to the position, addressed the role of QM from the angle of being out there on the Park every day, monitoring operational activities, supporting, encouraging, patting people on the back - it was quite a classical interpretation, and no disrespect to the guy, he put in a very good year and we had a very good season - complaints were the lowest we’d ever had and our guest volumes were the highest we’d ever had.

This past season, however, we’ve spent more time fighting fires, in a crisis situation - particularly on the days when we were literally swamped by volume. In my opinion, a lot of that has been due to the fact that we don’t let people get involved enough and make decisions on what they are doing today and what they could change to make their lives easier and the guest’s experience at the Park better.”

As a consequence of this perspective, the concept of empowerment, which was initially regarded as being aligned to the general TQM initiatives, became linked instead to the word “magic” in recognition of Funworld’s commitment to providing a “magical” experience for their customers. The primary objective for the Senior Management Team (SMT) then became, in the words of the Operations Director:

“To enhance the perceived responsibility and autonomy of the park employees in relation to both customer-employee interactions and, more importantly, the handling of customer complaints.”

In practical terms, the employees would, it was hoped, “become more aware of the importance of their role in delivering a quality Funworld ‘product’, and be willing to be more active and responsive in dealing with any problems that might arise in that delivery”. Examples of this heightened awareness and responsibility would, in theory at least, included such ideas as:
- Taking ownership of a customer complaint and following through to resolution of the problem with a supervisor rather than simply passing the complaint along.
- Having sufficient knowledge of park operations and layout to be able to answer all customer requests for information and/or directions.
- Being "proactive" in identifying customer service problems and issues and providing possible solutions for them.
- Taking "pride" in both personal appearance (i.e. a clean uniform and good personal hygiene) and the appearance of the park (picking-up litter where appropriate).

In creating these expectations, the SMT were endeavouring to adopt Jan Carlzon's "Moment of Truth" philosophy in which the employee represents the entire organisation at the moment of interaction with the customer, and hence has the potential to enhance or destroy that customer's "experience". In addition, they were anticipating that a public commitment to 'empowering' the workforce, and hence raising the employees' perceived status within the organisation would, in turn, raise the "self-esteem, commitment and motivation" of the park employees, and hence generate "higher and more consistent levels of customer service" within the park.

5.1.2 INTERNAL ISSUES

As a seasonal park in a relatively remote location, the operational logistics of Funworld had proven to be extremely problematic in this new commitment to customer service. As the Quality Manager pointed out:

"In recent years, particularly since the massive cash infusions by our parent company, we have become a major international competitor in the Theme Park industry, but we are still drawing on the same catchment area for our staffing every season."
Of the 1250 seasonal staff hired each year, only about 60% return for a second season or more. The consequent headaches involved in hiring 40% of their staffing base each year prompted some very distinct opinions on Funworld’s “seasonal problem” (though each opinion does address the issue solely from within their own operational remit):

a) “Because you can only offer 8 or 9 months of work, you end up with people who couldn’t find full-time work, people who don’t want full-time work, or students. We should be finding ways to extend the park’s operation to as near year-round as possible - Christmas Festivals, Ice Shows, Pantomimes, Conference Business, etc. You would then be able to hire permanent staff.” (Marketing Manager)

b) “Funworld has always been and will always be a seasonal park. Methods should therefore be found to hire the best possible seasonal staff to improve customer service levels. These could include more profiling and psychometric testing at the interview stage, widening the catchment area, arranging for more out-of-season work, and perhaps even on-site accommodation”. (Personnel Manager)

c) “Funworld already has the best seasonal staff, we’re just not taking care of them. They are offered poor working conditions, average pay, and poor career prospects - they are basically unappreciated”. (Operations Director)
Whether Funworld was hiring the wrong people or simply not appreciating the ones they had was a difficult question to answer, but in response to the harsh reality of seasonal workers leaving for lower-paying full-time jobs, Senior Management’s response had been to adopt a style of benevolent paternalism in the hope that the promise of ‘stick with us and we’ll take care of you’ would help to minimise the 40% annual staffing replacement. Demonstrations of this paternalism included finding out-of-season work for employees (relatively easy for the retail staff), introducing a ‘retainer contract’ which offered half-pay out-of-season for team leaders, and investing capital to upgrade employee facilities - changing rooms, transportation, uniforms etc.

5.2 DELIVERING THE MAGIC

In recognition of the intangible nature of many of the guests’ experiences at Funworld, the term ‘magic’ was used to denote the series of good memories that customers were supposed to gain from the moment they drove through the gates to the moment they left the park. The concept had been further developed to introduce the idea of both internal and external customers receiving good memories when the ‘magic’ was delivered. Consequently, the role of park employees was re-formulated as “Delivering The Magic” (DTM) in preference to simple task performance on the basis of a pre-determined job description.

No attempt was made to mimic Disney’s references to employees as “cast members” being “on stage” for their “guests”, but the positioning of DTM was designed to create a sense of “common involvement”. To quote the Quality Manager:

“DTM offers us the opportunity to align our workforce behind a common vision, with a common set of values, and for them to develop a sense of real ownership and pride out there on the Park - and if they are enjoying what they are doing, then the service they deliver will be a lot better.”
At first, the phrase ‘delivering the magic’ was perceived by staff as nothing more than “marketing jargon”, but by introducing the idea of good memories being delivered at the point of service - the ‘moment of truth’ - the management team were endeavouring to put the message across that every employee was capable of making a contribution to adding ‘magic’ to the end product by being involved in the creation of good memories for their customers.

The message of DTM was introduced in the form of a modular training programme, designed, in theory, to serve a dual function in offering both an intensive orientation/induction for new staff, and a comprehensive refresher/re-orientation for returning seasonal and full-time staff.

Module content included both key definitions - What is Quality and why is it important?, What is Customer Service and what does it mean to you? - and a series of games and role-playing exercises to introduce team-building skills and brainstorming as a tool for finding solutions to problems.

With a workforce of around 250 full-time employees and up to 1250 additional seasonal employees at peak season, getting the DTM message across was regarded by Senior Management as “a daunting and complex task”. With a “public launch” scheduled for the end of the 1994 season, Funworld’s Quality Manager spent over six months of research and analysis in benchmarking the “quality programmes” and “management philosophies” of a wide range of companies from Rolls Royce and JCB Equipment to Funworld’s direct market sector competition in order to identify the “components we needed to include in the DTM modules”.

162
However, as a recognised market leader, the Funworld management team considered themselves to be in something of a unique situation when it came to benchmarking ideas from other organisations - they were of the opinion that no other organisation offered the same product mix as they did, and they did not want to pursue a policy of "doing what everyone else is doing". In this respect, they took what they considered to be the best elements of other initiatives - in particular the aforementioned 'tools' of quality - and aligned those elements to their own programme.

At the end of the 1994 season, the DTM presentation consisted of "nothing more than half-a-dozen bullet points", qualifying exactly what DTM would mean for Funworld. Phrases and concepts such as 'TQM' and 'Empowerment' were consciously avoided in favour of a stronger and clearer emphasis on the notion of a customer "experience" at Funworld.

A basic refresher article was published in the 'Funworld News' in January 1995, and the training sessions began in earnest in February, prior to the 1995 season opening. Introduced as a compulsory component of employee orientation, the training modules lasted between 1 and 3 days, depending on the employee's role within the organisation, and the extent of their level of customer contact.

The corps of trainers for these sessions was developed from a pool of volunteer full-time park staff rather than using "an outside company". Expense and time savings notwithstanding, the SMT hoped that the use of "familiar faces" (at least to the "returners") and their anticipated enthusiasm for the DTM programme would help to stress the message that "DTM was markedly different from other customer service packages that had been presented in the past".

163
The trainers were introduced to DTM on intensive 3-day “retreats” organised prior to the “public launch”, during which time they were expected to learn the modules “as quickly as possible”. Because of the compressed time frame, no opportunity was given to offer their own ideas as to the content and method of delivery. It was anticipated by the Quality Manager that those ideas would be of greater use after the first sessions had been run and everyone involved would be brought together for a “detailed debriefing”.

5.2.1 DTM IN PRACTICE

Given a past history of customer service initiatives which have “faltered through lack of focus and/or resource support” (Quality Manager), the comments recorded from the returning seasonal staff in response to the DTM programme appeared to come as no surprise to the Quality Manager. Such comments as “We’ve heard all this before”, “The same stuff as last year”, and “Are they going to make us go through this every year?”, were recognised as being “indicative of the obstacles facing us in bringing this new culture into existence”.

However, with each class containing a mixture of both new and returning seasonal staff, the new employees who may perhaps have been more open to the ideas of DTM, appeared to respond to the negative peer pressure of their more ‘experienced’ colleagues, and began to behave in an equally indifferent manner, adding such comments as “Are we supposed to say ‘Have a nice day’ too?” and “Is this Funworld or McDonald’s?”. 
In addition, the training took place at a time when every full-time member of staff and returning seasonal staff appeared to be acutely aware of work that had to be done on their section of the park. Despite the fact that the training sessions were scheduled as additional paid time to the normal “preparation time”, such that the staff were not losing any “hands-on working time” in attending the DTM sessions, many employees admitted to extreme frustration and a pre-occupation with how this ‘time’ would be made-up, rather than paying attention to the content of the DTM programme itself. One supervisor expressed his concern over the priority being given to DTM:

“This stuff is all well and good but it won’t mean much if I don’t have the time to teach these new kids how to do the basics of the job”.

Thus, whilst Senior Management’s decision to stage the training at such an important time was indicative of the importance they placed on the programme, it would appear that the message was lost in the individual pre-occupations with all the work the staff could be doing instead of sitting in a conference room for two days. To quote one Retail Area Manager:

“It didn’t teach me anything at all - but then I probably didn’t concentrate as well as I should have - I was too busy thinking about how much work there was to be done in getting the shops open and bringing in the stock.”

The “new kids” in particular, following the lead of their new “seasoned” colleagues, appeared to be more interested in the functional specifics of their new jobs than the general message of DTM. To quote one participant:

“I need to know where and when to show up for work, where to get my uniform, how to operate the cash register, how to call a supervisor, all that kind of stuff.....otherwise I won’t have this job for long. I’ll worry about the ‘magic’ part when I know a little bit more about what I’m supposed to do”.

165
5.2.2 COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

The volunteer trainers were inevitably extremely nervous in their delivery of the DTM modules for the first time. Comments of being “scared stiff” and of having “second thoughts about volunteering for this” were frequent, as were wishes that “we’d had more time for training on this stuff...those retreats went too quickly”.

As a result, the full potential of many of the exercises was lost in their concern to “remember the script”, “don’t forget anything”, and to “get it right”.

After the first two-day session, the Quality Manager decided that the DTM course for the 1996 season would be redesigned in order to separate the returning staff from the “newcomers”. As such, the DTM programme would be presented in two distinct formats - as an abridged “refresher course” for the “returners”, and “a more intensive induction” for the “newcomers”.

5.3 EVIDENCE OF EMPOWERMENT

5.3.1 DEFINITION & LEADERSHIP

Senior Managements’ commitment to the concept of empowerment appeared to focus very much on the prevention of customer service errors and poor service encounters from further undermining their extensive capital investment in park infrastructure and tangible product (i.e. rides). There was no sense of any belief in a ‘latent potential’ in their workforce, nor any commitment to the ‘optimisation of valuable resources’. Indeed, much of the terminology of the DTM programme was designed more to steer away from standard TQM phraseology than to underscore the importance of the role of the human element in the service encounter. Many of the definitions of empowerment given tended to remain peripheral and vague in content. To quote the Operations Director:
“I see empowerment as being more about how people can genuinely sit down within their own functions and their own tasks and actually say that ‘I firmly believe that this needs to be done, why can't I just go out and do it?’ rather than having to constantly refer to other people. To me it is allowing individuals at all levels within the structure the ability to make decisions that are appropriate to the area of the business for which they are responsible.”

Several employees spoke of individual examples of supervisors allowing them considerable autonomy in their work performance, and of how willing they were to respond to that opportunity, but since this autonomy was typically granted out of operational necessity (being short-staffed) rather than as a result of a clearly-defined employee development plan, this type of autonomy should be seen as evidence of department-specific delegation rather than as proof of the existence of an empowered work environment.

There were just as many examples of autocratic, unilateral management decisions, failure to respond to employee-led ideas and initiatives, and a perceived failure to ‘walk the talk’ by Senior Management. To quote a Retail Area Manager:

“The words in DTM stress how important the employees are to the success of the organisation (a lot of which we’ve heard before) but it’s as if they are putting us on a pedestal - and when they don’t follow through on their promises of support and willingness to listen to ideas, they are just knocking that pedestal away - and they wonder why people don’t get enthusiastic over the newest programme.”
5.3.2 POLICIES & PROCEDURES

Other than making attendance at the DTM workshops compulsory (for 1-3 days depending on your level of customer contact), Park policies and procedures centred on task-based and health & safety issues. Fervent exhortations to make the customer’s experience at Funworld a ‘magical’ one were not underpinned by any procedural guidelines such as spending authority for complaint resolution or even a stated expectation of ownership of customer complaints through to resolution. Without this operational framework, much of the content of DTM was dismissed by both ‘newcomers’ and returning seasonal staff as “touchy feely stuff”. As one seasonal worker commented:

“All this is really about is being friendly to the customer, which is great, but when you have twenty people in line for a Coke, they’re not interested in ‘friendly’, they just want their Coke so they can drink it and get on to the next ride.”

5.3.3 JOB REDESIGN

Only one clear example of a claimed job redesign was identified - the replacement of a more ‘regional’ Area Controller function with that of an Area Manager function, in line with a re-design of the Park’s operational divisions into smaller, more manageable, geographically based, business areas. To quote the Operations Director:

“I wanted these people to ‘manage’ their areas, not to ‘control’ them, so we developed new job descriptions, interviewed new people for the role, went through a complete job selection process, and ultimately made the role much bigger and rounder than the previous version - we basically made these people totally responsible for everything that goes on in their areas, and then asked them to get out there and identify everything that gets in their way and stops them from running their area the way they would like to see it run.”
Unfortunately, it was the perceived failure to follow through on this expectation - i.e. that Senior Management would address those issues identified - that did the most damage to the credibility of the DTM initiative, and classified it as “lip service” and “more of the same” from the employees’ perspective. As one of the ‘new’ Area Managers commented:

“All this has really done is changed the title of the job. I’m responsible for the same things as the old Area Controllers, and up to now, not one of my ideas, suggestions or even requests for such basic things as telephones has been responded to. They talk a good line, but the Board is starting to act like a Black Hole, and I hardly ever see my boss on the Park - he just knows that I’m the person to call if there’s ever a problem I suppose.”

This, in turn, underscored a corresponding absence of job redesign for Funworld’s managers in preparation for this claimed commitment to an empowered work environment. The domain of the management team appeared to have remained unchanged in the sense that the SMT anticipated an improved level of customer service through a redirection of the priorities of the front-line staff rather than from any need for dramatic change in the overall management philosophies of the organisation - ‘if we could only get the employees to recognise the importance of good customer service, all these complaints would be resolved’.
5.3.4 SKILLS TRAINING

In recognising the importance of the service encounter as an integral element of the customer’s overall experience at Funworld and also, by definition, the danger of the extensive capital improvement programmes being undermined by poor service encounters, it would seem likely that a commitment would be made to extensive skills training in and around employee behaviour within that service encounter. In practice, the content of the DTM initiative appeared to focus more on generating agreement on key common principles (e.g. the importance of good customer service, and the notion that quality is ultimately determined by the customer), rather than on more practical interpersonal or problem-solving skills.

Discussing the idea of brainstorming as a problem resolution tool did succeed in generating a fun atmosphere for the programme - the group ‘brainstormed’ a solution for the Park’s litter problem as being to shoot all the squirrels! - but any sense of responsibility or ownership of any problems which might impact the customer’s experience at Funworld was not present.

Here again, there was an element of ‘lip service’ to the importance of the human element in the service encounter, without the corresponding commitment to the adequate preparation of that element through the appropriate interpersonal skills training.

5.3.5 PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT SYSTEMS

Since the DTM initiative was primarily prompted by falling customer satisfaction levels, it was not surprising that those levels remained as the only measurement index for DTM. The “daunting task” of getting 1200 seasonal employees through the program appeared to supersede any question of monitoring and/or measuring the success of the initiative once that extensive throughput had been achieved. Commitments to modifications of the programme for the forthcoming season - i.e. to separate out a ‘refresher’ course for returning employees, and an intensive ‘induction’ course for new employees - were based solely on verbal feedback and observations of audience participation rather than specific measurement techniques.
Equally, measurement of the subsequent behaviour of the employees on the park, having been introduced to the importance of a ‘magical’ customer experience, would also be based on verbal feedback and observations. Any sense of developing core competencies, either in the induction programme, or even in the initial recruitment process, and then monitoring performance in those competencies, was not present.

5.3.6 REWARD & RECOGNITION SYSTEMS

Given the short-term nature of the employment contract for the seasonal staff, the reward and recognition systems within the Park focused primarily on the incentive of stability rather than on motivation towards improved performance. With a 40% turnover each season, and large numbers leaving for lower-paying full-time jobs, the rewards appeared to have become directly linked to the benevolent paternalism of the Senior Management Team - and more by inference than by explicit policy - i.e. good work performance equated to extra help from the Company in finding you an out-of-season job.

Advancement within the organisation was also linked to the issue of stability - good work performance could bring a promotion to Team Leader and a Retainer Contract with half-pay out of season - and, of course, the ultimate incentive was one of the rare full-time positions.

The claimed rewards of the DTM programme were equally distant from any sense of employee initiative. The emphasis on the high stress of ‘fire fighting’ situations, and the consequent refreshment of painful memories of the “swamped volume” days of the previous season, served to position the stress reduction potential of DTM as a reward in itself, without any positive sense of personal fulfilment or enrichment in improved work performance.
5.4 CONCLUSIONS

The strong financial commitment to Funworld, and the consequent increase in throughput figures from 1 million to 3.25 million, had done much to raise the profile of the Senior Management Team within this organisation. However, despite having the most successful season ever, no-one appeared genuinely pleased with the Park's performance - Marketeers admitted to getting their forecasts wrong, and both Operators and Retailers admitted to poor service delivery as a result of understaffing.

In this environment, the efforts to consolidate a market leadership position by giving equal attention to both product and service quality were quite logical, but there was also evidence of a lack of awareness of the intangible nature of many of the issues being raised. In particular, past criticism for paying "lip service" to customer service initiatives only served to place additional pressure on the success of the DTM programme. Given the apparent perception that Senior Management had done nothing to support the staff in 'Delivering The Magic' to their customers, the notion of any sense of an empowered work environment, let alone a clear understanding of the concept itself, appeared problematic.
6.0 CASE STUDY #4 - CITYCORP

6.1 BACKGROUND

"Citycorp" is the municipal engineering division of a Local Authority. The Citycorp Department has wide-ranging responsibilities, from the Traffic Control Systems Unit (TCSU) which manages, installs and maintains all the traffic light systems throughout the borough, through responsibilities for traffic, transportation, structures, drainage, building maintenance, energy management, highways design, construction management and maintenance, to District Surveyors responsible for specific buildings and structures within the borough.

In the past, the Department had worked on the basis of undertaking both the client and provider functions within each of the functional disciplines - i.e. Citycorp had ordered the work, prepared the work specifications, the tender documents, and supervised the performance of that work by approved contractors.

The requirement for change in this operational format was introduced in February 1994, when the Department of the Environment (DoE) began a consultation exercise based on Draft Regulations concerning the Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) of white collar professional services.

Legislation on this issue had first appeared in Part III of the 1980 Local Government Planning and Land Act (LGPLA) which endeavoured to rectify an assessed inefficiency and lack of accountability on the part of Direct Labour Organisations (DLO’s). The Act proposed the utilisation of competitive tendering procedures as a means of creating conditions in which the accountability of the Local Authority labour forces could be improved, and in which they could become more comparable with private contractors.
Initially, the Act required compulsory competition in a proportion of non-emergency construction and maintenance work on highways and buildings, on the basis of pre-determined contract price thresholds. (In October 1989, those thresholds were abolished so that all such work became open to competition).

The Local Government Act of 1988 extended the boundaries of CCT by obliging Local Authorities to invite tenders for what was called “functional work”, which included such areas as: collection of refuse, cleaning of buildings, school and welfare catering, ground maintenance, and the repair and maintenance of motor vehicles. The 1988 Act also gave rise to Direct Service Organisations (DSO’s) alongside the DLO’s identified in the 1980 LGPLA. The difference between the two was primarily one of name only, since the title of DSO was applied to all of the new work brought under the CCT umbrella by the 1988 Act.

On November 2nd, 1994, the Local Government Act 1988 (Competition) (Defined Activities) (Construction and Property Services) Order 1994 SI 2888/1994 was approved by Parliament with the expectation that it would (and ultimately did) come into force in January 1995. The Order made Local Authority construction and property related services a defined activity for the purposes of CCT under the 1988 Local Government Act.

With a broad definition of services, including architecture, engineering, and property management, the order directly affected Citycorp (who had, to quote one Assistant City Engineer, “seen the writing on the wall” prior to February 1994), and prompted a series of protracted debates and negotiations with staff and Council representatives, with additional input from professional institutions, including the Institutes of Chartered Engineers and Chartered Surveyors.
At issue was the nature of the "split" between "consultant" and "client" staff - i.e. which percentage of the salary bill should be subject to competition - "consultant" - with the balance being retained as in-house staff - "client". Order No. 2888 defined "client functions" as: "Advice and planning" and "commissioning" work, with the "consultancy work" consisting of the following functions:

- Feasibility Studies
- Investigatory
- Design, Tender Documentation, and Appraisal
- Contract Management
- Project Administration
- Property Management
- Monitoring Work.

The initial split between Consultant and Client personnel was determined to be 90/10, and was required to be achieved by April 1st, 1996. The protracted negotiations between the DoE and Local Authority representatives succeeded in amending this to a 65/35 split, with the deadline remaining in place, and it was this distribution which was ultimately formalised in the statutory order.

For Citycorp, the question now remained as to how to divide up a complex, intermixed municipal bureaucracy into a sufficiently distinct framework of consultant and client functions in order to abide by the requirements of Order No. 2888 before the April 1st deadline.
6.2 THE ROAD TO EMPOWERMENT

6.2.1 THE CONSULTANT/CLIENT SPLIT

The Citycorp Department was organised on functional lines (see Appendix 4) with a City Engineer overseeing a team of six Assistant City Engineers (ACE) - one designated as a Deputy - each responsible for a supposedly clearly-defined set of operating tasks and accountabilities. In practice, an in-depth analysis of departmental operations which pre-dated the Consultant/Client split, revealed that the development of unofficial and informal task performance practices had produced a situation in which many staff thought they had responsibility for the same function, with some functions finding no appropriate 'base' of responsibility. To quote the ACE:

"The level of detail in the job descriptions was appalling - far too many grey areas, and almost labyrinthine to the point where no-one knew who was responsible for what - and because nobody was designated to take formal responsibility, everybody took it informally and jumped in to stir up the waters whenever they felt like it."

It was determined that the most feasible method of meeting the CCT requirements in separating out the client function from the process of service provision was to focus on the Engineering Division, and to divide that into separate 'Client' and 'Consultant' Engineering Services (see Appendix 5).

The District Surveyor and Director TCSU positions remained untouched; 'Co-ordination & Administration' became 'Corporate Services', trading some functions to 'Transportation & Municipal Services', which itself traded functions to Engineering Services in order to become 'Operational Services'.
Once the pieces had been repositioned on the organisational template, the more complex task of assigning personnel to these ‘new’ divisions could begin. With many of the staff being Local Government Officers of 20 and 30 years service or more, the prospect of being forced to leave public service and joining a separate division in the ‘private’ sector was far from appealing. In this context, the allocation of staff ultimately involved the calling-in of several “favours”, and one or two “horse trades”, with an underlying guideline to equip the Consultancy Unit with as representative a sample of skills from across the range of functions as was physically possible. The resulting sense of displacement and disorientation was voiced by one Senior Engineer (SE):

“In my case, I wasn’t even designated to be in this structure - up until 6 months ago I was going to be on the client side, but it was then decided by ‘the powers that be’ that I was surplus to requirements, and I was traded to the ACE on the consulting side.”

It should be noted at this point that the majority of those transferred into the new Consultancy Unit regarded themselves as having “drawn the short straw” (SE), with many of those interviewed admitting to feelings of betrayal and perceived punishment by their “former colleagues on the Client side” (SE) in allowing the transfer to go forward. Indeed, several of the senior “veteran” members of staff spoke of a clear failure on the part of Citycorp’s ‘parent’ body to argue a case for exemption from the CCT legislation altogether on the basis of the borough’s unique history and operational parameters. In the words of one Senior Engineer:

“I really think that we rolled over on this one. The ACE convinced us that with our uniqueness and the prestige of the work that we do, that we would have no shortage of potential suitors - but if we are that special, why weren’t we exempted from the entire process?”
6.2.2 VCT & CCT

The future for this new unit centred on two alternative courses of action. Firstly, following the CCT route to the letter, in which the work of the unit would be put out to direct tender, with the unit members themselves bidding as a group against private contractors.

Alternatively, the unit could seek prospective “host” consultants who would bid for a five year contract for Citycorp’s work, on the condition that the host employ the unit as a whole to undertake that work - referred to as the Voluntary Competitive Tendering (VCT) approach.

From the ACE’s perspective, both options appeared to offer, in the rhetoric of empowerment, “ownership of and active involvement in their career development”, but the CCT approach was perceived to be handicapped for three reasons:

1. With the majority of the unit staff having long public service histories, it was felt that they lacked the necessary private sector experience to compete with outside contractors. Equally, their work experience had traditionally centred around drawing-up tender documents and supervising the performance of the work listed in those documents - few of the unit members had any current experience of submitting bids in response to tender documents - this would have required extensive re-training in advance of the April 1st deadline.

2. Bidding against private contractors would require the unit members to identify the direct operating costs and overheads of the unit as a separate business entity - information that had previously been inseparable from the general operating costs of the Citycorp Department. In addition, given Citycorp’s locale, it was felt that the overhead costs would be sufficiently high to be prohibitive to fair competition with private contractors based in less expensive locations.
3. The prestigious nature of the work performed by Citycorp would, it was felt, attract extremely competitive rates from contractors who would be “very eager” (ACE) to have the Citycorp business on their books.

In contrast, the VCT approach seemed to be blessed with several positive aspects. Firstly, it was felt that the prestigious nature of Citycorp’s business, and the Authority’s reputation for being well-funded and willing to pay for premium workmanship and materials, would be very attractive to potential consultants, and there would therefore be no shortage of bidders for the position of ‘host’ consultant. Also, just as the competitive bids would have more than likely undercut the bids of the unit members themselves, those same competitive rates offered the promise of lower operating costs in the future - i.e. while no money would be exchanged in the ‘hosting’ process, there was an inherent expectation of greater operational and cost efficiency.

Secondly, under this approach, there was a greater likelihood of the unit surviving as a whole under the host’s direction, as opposed to bidding for work under CCT and perhaps winning only half of the work available.

Thirdly, as a ‘hosted’ component, the Consultancy Unit would be outside of the Local Government Structure and could therefore take on work for clients other than its own Authority, which the Local Government Goods and Services Act currently precluded them from undertaking.

Fourthly, under the T.U.P.E. (Transfer of Undertakings, Protection of Employment) legislation, the employees’ current pay and conditions would be maintained or matched under the new host’s benefit programme at the time of transfer, whereas under CCT they faced the prospect of salary cuts in order to compete with the operating costs of outside contractors.
With the benefits of the VCT approach appearing to far outweigh the CCT approach, the Consultancy Unit was therefore committed to the ‘hosting’ process, and the search began for a new host consultant.

In an effort to both capitalise on the prestigious nature of Citycorp’s business, and to pre-empt the actions of other boroughs who could or would be following the same VCT approach, the deadline for the host transfer was set as October 1st, 1995 - six months ahead of the April 1st, 1996 deadline for CCT. This allowed the CCT approach to be kept, at least in theory, as an “escape clause” should the hosting process fail to present a suitable candidate for host consultant.

6.2.3 THE WORKING PARTY

The ACE of the Consultancy Unit now faced the prospect of taking a disparate group of people, the majority of whom did not want to be there, and transforming them into “an efficient, effective and commercial unit” (ACE). The commitment to empowerment as the *modus operandi* for this new unit arose out of a need to both break the traditional mould of municipal engineering services, and to acclimatise the unit members to private sector engineering practices as quickly as possible. The dramatic loss of the “comfort factor” of being “cocooned” in Citycorp’s bureaucracy could only be compensated for, from the ACE’s perspective, by a perceived sense of control over the direction being taken under the VCT approach.

In this context, a representative Working Party from all managerial and supervisory layers was created to provide a theoretical forum for direct involvement in every aspect of the VCT process, from the creation of the tender document, through the selection of candidates on the basis of submissions to that tender document, to the identification and appraisal of the finalists.
In practice, the Working Party was set up in parallel to the ongoing negotiations over the exact nature of the Consultant/Client split, and so it appeared that the forum actually achieved very little in its early stages as the agreement to the 65/35 split was perceived to be drawn up “behind closed doors” (SE). In this respect, the Working Party meetings were perceived as degenerating rapidly into mere information vehicles for Senior Management to provide updates on the progress of the VCT process, without any of the opportunities for direct involvement that had been promised in its creation. In the words of one aggrieved Assistant Engineer:

“We haven’t really had progress meetings or any kind of mechanism to push concerns up the line. I would have appreciated the opportunity for more open consultations rather than simply issuing printed bulletins - all it did was force us to approach the ACE one-on-one with our concerns.”

6.2.4 ‘FINDERS, MINDERS & GRINDERS’

The ACE, in response to what he saw as a very clear commercial imperative, endeavoured to create a new template which would offer dramatic change from the outset, operational feasibility in the interim, and sufficient long-term flexibility to accommodate both the necessary managerial/supervisory changes needed to assimilate the host consultants’ management style, and any operational changes needed to service new client business in the future. He described the creation process in this way:

“I was given a list of people, each with a certain level of seniority, line management and functional responsibilities, all of whom had to recognised and accommodated in constructing an operational template. I recognise that it is still a bit of a ‘mish mash’ at the moment, but I am confident that it has enough flexibility to blend with our host and is, at the same time, different enough from the existing bureaucracy to carry the message that this will not be ‘business as usual’.”
The result was the “Finders, Minders and Grinders” (FMG) model. A comparison of the in-house organisation for the Client side (Appendix 4) with the FMG model (Appendix 6) illustrates the extent to which the ACE was prepared to break the mould of the traditional municipal bureaucracy.

The ACE, as Director of the unit, was to fulfil the role of FINDER, with a primary responsibility not only to oversee the strategic management and policy of the unit, but also to develop new business and open new markets.

The Associate level of the unit were to be the designated MINDERS, with the primary responsibility of client care. Initially, they were to be assigned to individual departments/functions of their sole client - Citycorp’s parent Authority, but over the longer-term they would be assigned to specific clients “who they will service, ensuring quality outputs, client satisfaction and, ultimately, repeat business” (ACE).

The GRINDERS area of the model consisted of the Team Leaders (TL’s), each of whom would be responsible for a specific commission, consisting of large individual projects or a number of smaller scale projects. The TL’s would be supported by a pool of resource skills known as the IMPLEMENTATION GROUP (IG), from which personnel would be drawn on an “as needed” basis.

In line with the general commitment to empowerment, the IG, at least in theory, offered the potential for cross-training and multi-skilling for Group members, as opposed to being assigned, as they had previously, to a specific function team. In addition, there was a more pragmatic aspect to the IG - unneeded/unassigned staff would remain conspicuous in the IG, whereas in the past, functional teams had used all team members, irrespective of direct need, without any concern for specific costs applied to the project, since salaries were paid from a separate budget head.
The FMG model represented, by the ACE’s own admission, “the results of a snakes and ladders exercise”, rather than any attempt to re-design the department from scratch. The 65/35 split of personnel between the Consultant and Client sides of the organisation, and the “horse-trading” within that process, produced a highly unbalanced situation in which some senior associates lost almost all of their team members and others lost none.

Thus, the objective of the model was to correct this imbalance, whilst at the same time creating sufficient operational change to convey the message that work under the new host would definitely not be ‘business as usual’. However, the ramifications of both the design and introduction of the FMG model have been even more significant, for the following reasons:

1. The vast majority of those interviewed, whilst recognising the change of ownership, continued to believe that work would indeed be ‘business as usual’. Promises from the Host Consultancy finalists that they would not be made to “run before (they) could walk” were latched onto as proof that the department would continue to serve their parent Authority (its “bread and butter business”), and very gradually absorb financial and Information Technology systems from the new host. After devoting a considerable amount of time to training and the assimilation of procedures, the department would then be ready to bid for other work - on a very small scale at first. To quote one Assistant Engineer (AE):

   “I don’t think the workload will increase that dramatically in the short-term - my guess is it will take 2-3 years before we’ll be fully up and running. We are a small scale operation and tend to operate on small scale projects - I don’t see us building dams in Malaysia just yet - we do the ‘bits and pieces’ of Municipal Engineering, and I think our prospective hosts recognise this - they probably just want us to fill a gap in the services they offer.”
In this respect, the FMG model appeared to have failed in its conveyance of the message of dramatic change.

2. The creation of the role of Team Leader (TL) to oversee/manage those projects assigned by the Associates, resulted in the merger of the Senior Engineer (SE) and Assistant Engineer (AE) positions. The AE’s saw this move as a step-up for them within the departmental hierarchy - “one step closer to the top” as one described it. The SE’s, on the other hand, whilst suffering no loss of salary or benefits in this move, nevertheless perceived it as a demotion. For some it was the positional issue of the loss of the word ‘senior’ from the job title. Others were more explicit in criticising the distinct move from “imagination to implementation” (SE), as they saw it, in the performance of the new role.

Indeed, most of the AE’s saw it as a non-issue. As one commented:

“*The Seniors will be the same distance from the top as they’ve always been - it's more a case of us stepping up than them stepping down - they haven't lost any pay, and we're not getting any more for it.*”

Another agreed:

“*I think it is a step up in hierarchical terms, but I don’t see it as anything more significant than that - the money hasn’t changed, and the work I’m doing hasn’t changed - I’m now further up a shorter totem pole than I was, that’s all.*”

In this respect, a model which would, ultimately demand a higher level of teamworking skills from the TL’s than they had been used to in the past, had already created clear divisions amongst the TL’s themselves, before the system had even been given a chance to work.
3. The ACE’s solution to the imbalance of personnel after the 65/35 split - the Implementation Group (IG) - was designed to encourage multi-skilling and performance flexibility amongst those responsible for carrying out project work - the TL’s and technicians, referred to in the model as “Grinders”. Unfortunately, this idea of a pool of resources had generated the most vehement opposition from the Associates and the TL’s themselves, the vast majority of whom remained convinced that it would not work in practice. To quote one AE:

"The type of engineering work that we do can take up to 2 or more years to complete, and you have a need for the skills of different people at different stages of that work, plus there are periods of differing work intensity. As far as I can see, when you want someone again to continue work he started, he may not be available, and the new guy will have to play catch-up. There's going to be no sense of completion for them and no real sense of job satisfaction - plus there’s going to be no ownership or incentive to do a good job because you’re more than likely to be assigned to another project before someone discovers you did a poor job. We’d really be better off just hiring from a temp agency.”

The technicians in the IG, whilst recognising the potential for skill enhancement through cross-training and multi-skilling, expressed grave reservations over the loss of identity within this pool of resources. Traditionally, they had been recognised as functional specialists within a stable team environment, and they were now facing an amalgam membership within an amorphous pool of individuals. In addition, reservations were expressed over the issue of transference of personnel from the new host, which would further dilute, as they see it, their identity within the IG.

4. At the time of the research visits, the fifth Associate position had yet to be filled, and there appeared to be a firm conviction amongst the other Associates that it would never be filled. The ACE, on the other hand, was already negotiating with a candidate for the position.
In the design of the FMG model, the role of this fifth Associate was to supervise/oversee the administration of the IG - basically to ensure that the resources within the IG were assigned effectively, and to co-ordinate opportunities for cross-training as and when they arose.

All of the Associates were opposed to this fifth position on the grounds that there was no need for them or their TL's to go “cap-in-hand” to another individual for the assignment of personnel to projects, when they were capable of sorting out those issues informally among themselves, as they were doing currently in the absence of a suitable candidate for that position. Indeed, many of them spoke of “dis-empowerment” and warned of problems of continuity of care and unofficial bartering when designated “first choices” were not available for specific projects. They were willing to acknowledge the need for a fifth Associate in an Office Management role to oversee/co-ordinate systems integration and training issues with the new host, but they remained adamant that the assignment of personnel was exclusively within their remit as the “Minders” of project performance and completion. As one Senior Engineer commented:

“I don’t believe that this ‘resource management’ person is necessary, or that we can even afford him anyway. Having visited three commercial operations as part of the VCT selection process, I am even more convinced, because none of them had one - so if they don’t see the need for it, why should we? They don’t have the same formal ‘pool’ structure either - they do pool resources on projects, but they still maintain section teams within which they still recognise a clear ‘head’ who operates a flexible system of loaning out people who aren’t currently assigned. If we were doing our job properly as a management team, surely there wouldn’t be a need for that extra person?”
The sentiment was matched by a fellow SE:

"I have worked in the Private Sector myself as a Project Manager, and I have always taken the view that you do not establish the organisation and then find the work to justify it - you get the work and then base the organisational structure on that workload - so for us to create a fifth post before the system even demands it is absolute lunacy."

5. The ACE's firm commitment to the FMG model was based partly on his experience with similar operational arrangements in another Local Authority. However, the strength of his commitment and the fact that the ultimate success of the model would only be proven by its operation (i.e. the proof of the pudding will be in the eating), had created a scenario in which the ACE was perceived as pushing this model through in accordance with his own hidden agenda with the new host, rather than any proven criteria for success.

This was a difficult situation, since many of those affected by the FMG model were not and could not be made privy to many of the personnel negotiations within the 65/35 split which preceded the creation of the model. However, the fact that the ACE was perceived as pushing the model through, suggested that the messages of operational flexibility and change management had not gotten through.

6.3 EVIDENCE OF EMPOWERMENT

6.3.1 THE PREVALENCE OF DISEMPOWERMENT

The utilisation of the VCT process in identifying a new host consultant, as opposed to pursuing the alternative of a CCT process, was presented as evidence of empowerment in the sense that the unit members had been given some element of control over their destiny in selecting a new host. In actuality, opinions on the VCT process ranged from "railroading" (AE) to "a token gesture" (SE), with no apparent evidence of any perceived empowerment on the part of those interviewed. There were three main reasons for this:
1. The VCT process, and the eventual utilisation of the Working Party structure as an information conduit, appeared to stagnate over a 12 month period, as negotiations on the Consultant/Client split and the specifics of the hosting tender document took place at Senior Management level. As such, the unit members were eventually presented with a choice of three finalists who gave presentations and arranged site visits in order for the staff to be able to make “an informed choice” as to who should be their new host. In practice, the presentations, site visits and voting all took place within the space of two weeks - hence the perception of “railroading”. Many of those interviewed were willing to make allowances for the time slippage due to the protracted discussions over the 90/10 or 65/35 split, but there was complete agreement on the notion of a “last minute rush” (AE). In the words of one Senior Engineer:

“Many of us are upset that we didn’t recognise the VCT horizon sooner, and grasp the implications and the opportunity to prepare that much earlier. We could, theoretically, have been preparing for this for the last 2 years to iron out all the wrinkles - but instead we got wrapped up in issues such as 90/10 or 65/35 and the like. I think we lost the opportunity to gain valuable experience from the process.”

2. The maintenance or matching of benefits under the T.U.P.E. regulations had given rise to a process of “harmonisation”, where the issues of transferred pensions benefits and the “buying-down” of leave days were to be resolved. At the time of the vote, many of those issues remained unresolved, placing the majority of the staff on the defensive, rather than anticipating any new era of opportunity with the new host.

3. The availability of CCT as an “escape clause” (ACE), even up to the vote on the three finalists, was dismissed as an “empty promise” (SE) on the grounds that Senior Management on both the Consultant and Client sides were unable/unwilling to provide the necessary information on indirect costs and overheads, or to provide the necessary training to enable the department to submit a competitive bid under CCT.
If employees must be aware of their own autonomy and the potential for future advancement in order to be called ‘empowered’, then the Citycorp employees in the Consultancy Unit were, to say the least, ‘dis-empowered’. They saw themselves as being forced into this situation through no fault or desire of their own, and appeared determined to focus on preserving the stability of the past rather than looking forward to the opportunities of the future. In this context, there was a clear sense of resignation, and a firm targeting of the ACE as the villain of the piece in pushing through VCT in accordance with his own agenda. Even the vote on the finalists was dismissed as a “token gesture” (SE), eventhough all of those interviewed admitted that it was better than having the decision made for them by the City Engineer. To quote one disgruntled AE:

“I'm taking the view that it doesn't really matter anymore. The process is a done deal and we will have to respond to that. Any one of the 3 candidates will offer us opportunities, and it's up to the individual to find those opportunities. I've always believed from the outset that there has never been a commitment from our Management to the CCT process - the whole situation has been manipulated.”

6.3.2 EMPOWERMENT BY DEFAULT

At the outset of this case study, the FMG model was presented as a means of achieving an empowered working environment through the utilisation of flexible and ultimately self-directed teams. At the time of the field visit, the new operating structure (with the absence of the fifth Associate) was in place either officially or unofficially, depending on whom you talked to. However, the majority of the work being performed centred on the completion of existing projects and the tying up of “loose-ends” (SE), rather than testing the boundaries of the FMG model with any new work. As such, there was no real ‘empowerment in practice’ to be observed.
The FMG model was, by the ACE's own admission, gestational in nature - particularly when it came to the potential for empowerment. Nevertheless, it was possible to trace the rhetoric of empowerment within the FMG operational template. The Associates, it was argued, were empowered by stepping out of their traditionally functional roles and taking on other skills and projects outside of their engineering speciality. The "Grinders" - TL's and technicians - would be equally empowered on the basis of cross-skilling and team-working which would bring out a more proactive/creative response than their membership of function and task specific teams in the past had done.

Unfortunately, all of this remained to be seen. Whilst the extreme demoralisation and frustration of the unit workforce did not bode well for a true and fair trial of the potential of the FMG model, the only clear evidence of empowerment found at Citycorp was that of empowerment by default, where autonomy and responsibility were granted primarily on the basis of being too busy with other projects. To quote one Senior Engineer:

"In general I prefer to let people have their own heads and to come to me if they need help. At present, I don't really have much other choice because I'm involved with so many projects, I simply don't have the time to watch them. That's the one thing that worries me about this new model and the whole Implementation Group idea - if I don't get experienced people that I know and trust on my projects, I don't know where I'll find the extra time to monitor and train them."

At this early developmental stage of the FMG model, there appeared to be no evidence of a conscious intention to empower amongst any of the Associates or Team Leaders. Where TL's did perceive themselves to be 'empowered', it was more a case of a supervisory policy of "don't bother me unless there's a problem" than any clear programme of skills enhancement or personnel development on the part of the Associates.
6.4 CONCLUSIONS

In the Citycorp case study empowerment was presented in theoretical form on the basis of an epithet given to a new operational template by the sole judgement of the architect of that new template. In this context, most if not all of the evidence of empowerment professed by Citycorp remained to be seen.

In a more utilitarian frame, Senior Managements’ efforts appeared to be focused on breaking the bureaucratic mould of the Local Authority mentality and shattering the illusion that business under the new host would continue as usual. Unfortunately, the problematic advancement of the VCT process and the vehement opposition to the FMG model had both served to seriously undermine that focus, to the extent that Citycorp was now beginning the transfer to the new host with an extremely disgruntled and demoralised workforce - not the most auspicious beginning for an ‘empowered’ organisation!

Fortunately, the ACE remained very aware of the extreme unpopularity of his FMG model:

"I realise that all four of my Senior Associates and about 90% of the Team Leaders are against this model, but no one has come forward with an alternative yet - they're still too wrapped up in the typical Local Authority rigidity which has given them such security over the years. I'm not saying the model is 100% correct, but it is flexible enough to accommodate the changes that they all know are coming in the very near future."

For the FMG operational template to mark the beginning of a new era, it would seem logical for there to be evidence of a firm foundation and a clearly defined road ahead. Citycorp appeared to have neither of these. As such, it became increasingly difficult to motivate employees towards such a long-term objective as empowerment when the organisation was in such a state of complete flux.
There was no evidence that dramatic change would be achieved solely on the basis of drastic structural alterations, and without clear policies as to the present and future value of the human element of the Citycorp ‘product’, the potential for empowerment within the FMG model may never be realised.

For the ACE, having shouldered the burden of imposing this model and pushing it through to completion, it would not be possible to walk away from it and go off in search of new business. There would appear to be sufficient dynamics in place to warrant very close supervision from Senior Management. The organisation had been designed, to a large extent, before the work was there for it, with the result that a heavy price of confusion and frustration was being paid for a longer-term reward of a multi-skilled and hopefully empowered workforce. In this respect, the animosity and criticism which accompanied the introduction of the FMG model may only be just the beginning.

The introduction of the FMG model demonstrated an apparent willingness to nurture and ultimately empower the workforce, but problems arise when the nature of the workforce being managed is considered. The problems are three-fold. Firstly, people usually work best with those they know and trust. In this instance an amorphous group of individuals had been brought together, unwillingly, under one roof in anticipation of this VCT event. Not only did this present problems of tribalism and territorialism, but even before this group has had a chance to establish their own working practices, the playing field has been moved yet again under the auspices of a new operating model and a new host.

Secondly, the vehement opposition to the FMG model would suggest that the dynamics of the template had still not been communicated well enough, and that the predominance of other pressures in the VCT process had forced a reliance on a ‘proof of the pudding’ attitude which gave no clear direction to those affected by the model other than to wait and see. Unless that vehemence was dissipated or channelled, they might well win the ‘wait and see’ game by undermining the model from the outset.
Thirdly, multi-skilling demands a heavy commitment to training which the Client, particularly in the current situation of more clearly-defined operational guidelines, might not have been willing to accommodate. As such, if the opportunity for short learning curves and on-the-job training were not available on individual projects, alternative arrangements would have to be made if the workforce were to become truly multi-skilled and the potential of the FMG model were to be fully realised.

There did appear to be potential for empowerment within the FMG template, but the only person who was aware of that potential would appear to be the person who designed it, and that did not bode well for its realisation. Whilst a strong momentum from the top could have added a critical endorsement to any empowerment initiative, it is not, in itself, enough - particularly if there is equal or stronger opposition to it from below.

There was no evidence that the employees of Citycorp were opposed to empowerment - everyone interviewed would have welcomed increased autonomy and responsibility, and the opportunity to make a contribution to the success of the organisation. However, at the time, they were too wrapped-up in the myopia of hosting and harmonisation to be able to contemplate that.

The ACE’s handling of the VCT process and the introduction of the FMG model had been, of perceived necessity, autocratic, and it remained to be seen whether that autocracy would be rescinded with sufficient dexterity to overcome the current demoralisation and ignite the spark of a truly empowered workforce.
7.0 CASE STUDY #5 - PARCELCO:

7.1 BACKGROUND

‘ParcelCo’ is the parcel handling division of a national delivery organisation. It is run as an independent business within a Parent Group, with its own management structure, finances, and network of Distribution Centres and Collection & Delivery (C&D) Offices.

Created as a separately accountable business entity in 1986, ParcelCo had yet to turn a profit. Its two sister companies within the Group were profitable, and this was perceived by ParcelCo Senior Management as placing extra pressure and attention on them as, to quote the Managing Director: “the major embarrassment” within the Group. As with any large corporation, the sole loss-making division had attracted the close attention of the Group Chief Executive, and the long-term future of the organisation was perceived, by all levels, as being in serious jeopardy unless ParcelCo could achieve profitability.

With over 4,000 firms offering parcel delivery services in the UK, ParcelCo found itself operating in an exceptionally competitive market, with large carriers being challenged by the rise to prominence of a number of medium-sized operators.

Business traffic represented 95% of revenue, and it was this sector which was experiencing “dramatic cost-cutting”, “loss-leader market penetration initiatives”, and “wafer-thin profit margins” (MD). ParcelCo’s Senior Management saw themselves as even further exposed by being the only carrier operating in “all markets, serving a customer range from home shopping and small businesses to private consumers” (MD).
Achieving profitability, or "turning the corner" as it was euphemistically referred to by Senior Management, was the primary objective in ParcelCo operations. All capital expenditures, Industrial Relations (IR) agreements, and long-term strategy decisions were geared towards this single objective. Any plans to capture market share or to 'achieve a competitive advantage through technological advancement' were perceived as being beyond the capabilities of the organisation at this point. To quote one senior executive:

"We cannot expect that kind of commitment from Group Board Level when we’re still not breaking even - but it is, of course, a circular argument. If you aren’t prepared to invest, then the losses and the downward spiral can only continue. Our ‘Track & Trace’ system (parcel tracking service) has been on hold for over two years - we’ve lost our competitive edge there, and our Sort Centres are using equipment that came in with the ark”.

Every major managerial initiative, both structural and functional, over the last nine years had been geared towards rationalisation and cost efficiency. These “annual rounds of cost-cuts” (MD) had been couched in “non-threatening” service quality initiatives under such banners as ‘SQL’ (Supporting Quality Leadership) and, most recently, ‘OQL’ (Organising for Quality Leadership).

1995 saw the completion of an extensive restructuring programme based on the complete integration of the delivery depot network, combining the handling of both ‘express’ (24 or 48 hours) and ‘standard’ (>48 hours) parcel traffic. This initiative had begun several years earlier as a result of an operational analysis by the McKinsey Consulting Group, which had identified the existence of separate but parallel express and standard parcel traffic networks, with the resulting duplication of vehicular traffic, as a primary opportunity for cost reduction.

McKinsey’s involvement had produced a ‘5 year plan’ which addressed not only cost issues, but also market direction, future trends, and the anticipated impact on staffing levels. The plan lasted as an overarching strategy for about a year before being replaced by a company-wide generic TQM initiative, then SQL and finally OQL.
The reductions in staffing resulting from these rationalisations (over 600 personnel) had been achieved through either internal personnel transfers to sister companies within the Group, or through Early Voluntary Retirement (EVR) programmes. A written agreement to no large scale compulsory redundancies between the Group and its Unions had proven to be, at Senior Management's own admission, "problematic" in achieving dramatic cost reductions, but the commitment to that agreement was expected to continue for the foreseeable future. To quote one General Manager:

"We pride ourselves on affecting major change without recourse to compulsory redundancy. The quid pro quo for that from the staff is that they have to be flexible in terms of where they will accept appointments and the type of job that they would be prepared to accept. By and large people respond well to that. We are also prepared to, and do, retrain people wherever possible - even training delivery drivers to do computer work or telesales.

You can manage these situations with no compulsory redundancies (so far anyway) but it's not getting easier as time goes on".

7.2 THE PROMISE OF EMPOWERMENT - ORGANISING FOR QUALITY LEADERSHIP (OQL):

Evidence of ParcelCo's commitment to an empowered workforce was offered in the form of a new organisational structure under the banner of 'Organising for Quality Leadership' (OQL). The purpose of this new structure was, to quote the Managing Director:

"To enable (ParcelCo) to finally break free of the old bureaucratic, civil service mentality, and to pull us up by our bootstraps if necessary to achieve a goal that has eluded us since we came into existence as a separate entity - profitability."
The creation of a new operating template involved a complete redesign of the Collection & Delivery network, combining 10 business regions (5 sales + 5 operations) into 8 commercial Business Units (BU's), and the creation of a new General Manager position for each of those units.

The 8 candidates selected for the GM positions underwent an extensive testing and interviewing process in order to determine their suitability as "proven commercial managers with the ability to lead people hands-on" (MD). Of the 5 Operations Managers interviewed, only one made it to the rank of Business Unit General Manager.

Once in place, those GM's were assigned full operational and sales accountability for their business unit on the basis of pre-determined Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) - including labour and non-labour costs, unit revenue, new business secured, damaged/lost parcel expenses, Quality & Service benchmarks, and depot-specific rationalisation targets. As one senior executive commented:

"This focus on income generation in tandem with operating costs marked a dramatic change for us - prior to that the two areas only ever came together in the Profit and Loss Statement at Head Office."

In addition, there were dramatic changes in reporting relationships and 'chains of command' to underscore this new role. As the General Manager of Personnel commented:

"There is evidence of empowerment in the clear devolution of responsibilities previously held at Head Office down the line to the Business Unit level - for instance, the Sales Manager for that BU will now report to the GM rather than to a Director of Sales at HO level - the same with Operations Management. These GM's really are expected to run the BU's as their own, separately accountable companies if you like."
7.2.1 THE PROFITABILITY MODEL

The key to full profit and cost accountability was seen by Senior Management to be the development of a complex profitability model which was designed to apportion not only Head Office and Support Service costs to individual business units, but also to capture transfer pricing revenues and costs for both ‘inter’ and ‘intra’ network traffic - i.e. a sister company utilising the ParcelCo network would prompt a revenue charge (‘inter’ traffic), and the movement of a parcel across several business units would generate a “handling charge” for each unit handling the package to cover their costs, and the charge would be paid by the unit ultimately receiving the revenue for posting the parcel (‘intra’ traffic). In this way, it was hoped, the Business Units would be able to generate, albeit on the basis of a notional costing model, as accurate a picture of operational revenues and costs as was possible, given the complexity of their delivery network and the lack of funds needed to develop a fully integrated tracking system.

To quote the Project Director in charge of developing the model:

"The key issue is accountability. Historically we have had a very strong centre in this organisation, with the people in that centre being in control of very big budgets. With those budgets now passing down to the Business Unit General Managers, there was obviously a need for both cost and revenue accountability in the management of their operations and their budgets. Up to now we've had sufficiently advanced MIS data and a strong enough cost model to give them the information they needed to manage according to their KPI’s. What they need now is accurate revenue data to show, hopefully, just how much money their operations are bringing in - we're not there yet - the model is only able to apportion notional revenue down to the BU level at this point - with a little more time, we will be able to generate data down to the individual depot level."

In this way, the profitability model was seen by the ParcelCo Senior Management as enabling the General Managers in the performance of their ‘newly-empowered’ roles.
7.2.2 HEAD OFFICE

The role of Head Office was also designed to change under this new template. Support functions for the business units, such as Payroll, Human Resources, Vehicle Fleet Management, etc., were centralised under a new Support Services division, with each BU contracting their services on the basis of internal Service Level Agreements (SLA's). As such, the BU's would no longer be supported by "free issue" of such services from Head Office. To quote the General Manager of Support Services:

"We recognised the need for these units to concentrate on getting the revenue and customer focus right, and also getting the operation right to deliver the promises that they were making to the customer. As part of that we decided not to encumber them with what could be called the 'processing aspects' of the operation."

At first, the Business Units represented a captive market for the Support Services Division, but there were plans to allow the Unit General Managers to outsource their payroll or processing work should a more cost-effective supplier become available. The possibility of such an event was seen as a prime motivator for Support Services to remain "cost-efficient and on top of our game" (GM).

In order to facilitate this centralisation of Support Services, many of the day-to-day personnel responsibilities had been devolved to depot level. Using a detailed procedure manual, the respective duties and authority of depot managers, Territory managers (area depot managers), and C&D managers (regional depot managers) were outlined. Depot managers were given responsibility for recruitment of depot personnel (previously a Head Office personnel function), but disciplinary authority was reserved for Territory managers. As one depot manager commented:

"I think it was essential that they gave us that responsibility - we needed to be able to develop our own crews and to really build a sense of teamwork at the depot - being sent preselected candidates by Head Office didn't do much to help us with that."
With day-to-day hands-on management responsibilities now devolved to the GM’s, the role of Head Office was designed to change to one of clearly reserved responsibility for “leadership and support” rather than “direct control” (MD). As part of this commitment came a promise that Head Office would no longer be the “Information Hoover” it had always been - Head Office demands for operational and sales data on a daily basis was viewed by all managers interviewed as “oppressive and very time-consuming”.

7.3 EVIDENCE OF EMPOWERMENT - OQL IN PRACTICE:

At the time of the site visits, ParcelCo was approximately 8 months into the new OQL structure. Senior Management, whilst expressing considerable satisfaction with the speed at which the organisation was “settling in” to the new operational framework, were of the opinion that it was still “early days yet” before the full benefits of a truly transformed OQL culture would be realised.

The Managing Director had more specific concerns:

“On the people side it’s already apparent that we have a few square pegs in round holes, and one or two may well be deselected for their roles because they do not appear to be up to the job. On the design side, there are no problems yet other than the delay in the Profitability Model - but (one of our sister companies) was 15 months late in getting their model up and running, so I think we’re still doing well - we will see.”

However, having committed the ParcelCo organisation, under the banner of OQL, to a management style of “leadership and support”, and to clear promises of no more “information hoovering”, Senior Management’s apparent satisfaction with the progress of the initiative was not shared by those on the ‘front-line’ of the organisation:
7.3.1 INFORMATION HOOVERING

To quote one Business Unit Operations Manager:

"My GM genuinely believes that I am accountable for operations, and leaves me alone to do that, but too much of my time is still taken up with administrative crap and ludicrous demands for information from Head Office. One form, for example, is called 'The Vital Few' - a real oxymoron - it requires over 1,000 separate data entries per month, and a lot of that data is already available to them from other sources - do we really need 76 different ways of recording head count?

All this second guessing goes against the operational autonomy we were promised under OQL - we still have a climate of Head Office needing to know everything, and yet we aren't in a situation financially or operationally to respond to the information that all this analysis will provide".

The Finance Manager for the same Business Unit appeared to agree:

"Head Office's line (on the Information Hoover issue) is that a profitable business would not require the same level of daily attention from Senior Management - they see it as keeping one hand on the tiller - but it completely flies in the face of OQL - if the purpose of the restructuring was to provide greater accountability to the field, to invert the hierarchical triangle, then they have to let go!".
7.3.2 THE MAGAZINE ‘X’ CONTRACT

In the second month of OQL, ParcelCo lost one of their largest magazine delivery contracts. The exact size of the contract in terms of revenue remained confidential, as did the exact amount per unit by which the account was lost to a competitor, but the impact of that loss was felt at every level of the network, from Sort Centre to depot and down to individual delivery route. From the perspective of the supposedly ‘newly-empowered’ BU’s, however, the loss of the Magazine X contract, and the organisation’s subsequent response to that loss was perceived as a critical first test of Senior Management’s commitment to the principles of OQL.

If Head Office, in their newly-defined “strategic” role of “leadership and support”, were to remain true to one of the most integral issues of OQL - namely that the BU’s are stand-alone with General Managers responsible for day-to-day operations, then, theoretically, they should have taken a back-seat supporting role and let the GM’s respond to the impact of the loss of ‘X’ in accordance with their job descriptions.

In actuality, their intervention was immediate and very hands-on. Edicts were issued specifying the number of ‘duties’ (i.e. sort shifts and delivery routes) and personnel to be cut in response to the loss of the ‘X’ account, with no apparent opportunity for direct input from the BU’s involved.

Senior Management’s position on this centred on two issues. Firstly that the loss of the ‘X’ account was too severe to allow anything other than a direct and immediate response. Secondly, that their involvement was more of a ‘hand-holding’ exercise than a direct appropriation of GM authority. In this context, those BU’s that complained most about the abuse of power were simply those that needed the most ‘hand-holding’ - their failure to perform on previously agreed rationalisation projects was taken as evidence of an inability to respond adequately to the demands of the ‘X’ situation.
7.3.3 EMPOWERMENT ON ‘THE FRONT-LINE’

The ‘big picture’ message of OQL appeared to be further undermined by actions in relation to the ongoing rationalisation of the depot network. Having granted operational autonomy within the Business Units, and created a series of Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) by which to measure the performance of the General Managers under this new autonomy, Senior Management’s ever-present concern for short-term profitability at all costs prompted the closure of the best performing depot in one of the Business Units.

This depot was meeting and exceeding all the KPI’s but was closed anyway. To quote the General Manager for that Business Unit:

“There was certainly some difficulty in understanding why you would close your best performing depot, but you have to think of the big picture - it was not cost effective to keep it open when I needed to downsize the BU network - we had too many depots for the volume of traffic and the configuration of the business unit.

There was an argument for the softer issues of messages to the other depots about star performers, but bottom line it was too small of a site (to keep open) - the decision was made on logistical terms, but looking at it parochially, it is a very difficult decision to explain to people.”

For the front-line workforce - the depot sorters and delivery drivers, who were being exhorted to ‘pull out all the stops’ to help the organisation ‘turn the corner’ to profitability, the closure of the depot carried another message. In the words of one depot worker:

“What’s the point? They give us KPI’s to work towards, without any say in how they are created, and even if you struggle to meet them, there’s still no guarantee that your depot will stay open - I’ve already put my name in for an internal transfer to (sister company) - they seem to know what they’re doing over there.”
Another example of the focus on short-term cost containment came from an extremely disgruntled and frustrated delivery driver:

"The Company keeps us informed as to what is going on, but nobody ever asks us what we would like to see going on - how we would like to see the depot run - or the entire Company for that matter. We all know the Company doesn’t have any money, and until we make a profit we never will have, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make a contribution - who’s to say we couldn’t find a no-cost alternative to getting things done?

I know that if we were given the tools and the opportunity, we could do the job a lot better - but the Company seems more concerned with cutting costs - for instance, we have new M-reg vans - Leyland DAF vans - which come standard with power steering - but the Company specifically requested to have the power steering removed to save money - so at the end of the day you are totally knackered from turning the wheel all day - why not leave it as it was? - they seem to be saving money on small things that ultimately affect the way you do your job, when there are a lot more important savings that could be made from all the special projects and committees that we seem to have."

7.3.4 EMPOWERMENT BY DEFAULT

The introduction of the OQL operational template appeared to represent a dramatic effort to bring ParcelCo to profitability. The combination of 10 business regions (5 Sales + 5 Operations) into 8 commercial business units singled out the role of the Business Unit General Manager as a key figure in making the quantum leap to profitability. With full accountability for both sales and operations performance, the ideal candidate for the role was determined to be a Business Professional - “proven commercial managers with the ability to lead people hands-on” (MD).
In practice, the 8 candidates who were selected on the basis of extensive testing and interviewing, could not be regarded as full Business Professionals - yet. Each was a proven functionalist seeking to pursue a very short learning curve in order to become a proven generalist in order to efficiently manage all aspects of BU operations.

As such, those GM’s with a predominantly ‘operations’ background admitted to giving leeway to ‘sales’ in running their own show, and those with a ‘sales’ background gave the same leeway to ‘operations’. There was no suggestion of weakness here, as both functions were staffed by proven professionals reporting directly to the GM.

To quote one Business Unit General Manager:

“I did find myself taking on far too much and getting too involved in cost and control issues on the operational side in the early days, and it was because I felt comfortable in that role rather than (because of) any perceived need - I have a very good operations manager here - now I have to step back and focus on bringing Sales and Operations together in a more cohesive framework - that is the value that I should be adding to the BU - creating a culture rather than dealing with nitty-gritty”.

However, in terms of the prevalence of empowerment within the OQL template, this issue of managerial leeway within the BU offered the only evidence of empowerment within ParcelCo, and even that was, technically, by default. The management teams of both BU’s visited admitted to operational autonomy on the basis of excessive workloads and lack of direct experience rather than any conscious effort to proactively empower their workforce. As the BU General Manager continued:

“I have found myself giving Sales & Marketing far too much leeway by virtue of my lack of experience there, and also my high comfort level with the cost and control issues on the operational side - and, to be fair to the very good Ops people I have in place in this Unit, I think there was a corresponding ‘dis-empowerment’ in their case as a result of my desire to be too ‘hands-on’.”
Similarly, the devolution of personnel responsibilities to Depot level (a corporate policy which pre-dated OQL) was presented as evidence of empowerment when, in reality, the transference was used to facilitate the development of a centralised Personnel Service Centre rather than any conscious effort to support or enhance the performance of the Depot Managers (DM’s). All DM’s interviewed expressed considerable frustration with the current level of personnel authority granted to them - withholding pre-determined disciplinary authority from line management and placing it in the hands of Territorial or C&D Managers served only to delay grievance procedures and created frustration rather than any sense of perceived empowerment. To quote one frustrated Depot Manager:

“It is possible to identify increased autonomy since OQL - we’re no longer presented with pre-selected job candidates, for example - but if you look at this position (Depot Manager) in our competitors, they are allowed to truly run their depots - not only hire and fire, but also to manage according to an operational budget that they have a say in creating - I don't have that. Here I am presented with a budget written in stone - I can't change it, I have no say in creating it, but I must abide by it and answer to it if I'm seen as failing in meeting the numbers specified in it.”
7.4 CONCLUSIONS

7.4.1 UNDERSTANDING & AWARENESS

For ParcelCo's Senior Management, the role of empowerment within the OQL initiative appeared to centre on exclusively functional issues of devolution of responsibility 'down the line' from Head Office. As such, empowerment was a 'means to an end' - i.e. the facilitation of the primary objective of cost-efficiency rather than an explicit commitment to any dramatic changes in management style or culture. Accountability and autonomy within the new template still related back to greater clarity of management control via budgets and KPI's, rather than any conscious decision to 'loosen the corporate shackles' to achieve a more motivated workforce.

Equally, there was no expressed awareness of an 'untapped resource' of employee creativity and initiative. That relationship, from Senior Management's perspective, appeared to be quite straightforward - a quid pro quo in which a written agreement on no compulsory redundancies was traded for flexibility in job function and location. The notion of direct employee involvement in the running of the organisation did not fit within the OQL template.

7.4.2 'WALKING THE TALK'

With the potential for dramatic change constantly being undermined by the more prevalent focus on severe and immediate cost-cutting initiatives, the message of OQL appeared to be perceived merely as, to quote one Depot Manager, "paying lip service" to change, as many other change programmes within ParcelCo had been.
In a clear case of actions speaking louder than words, the verbal commitments made by Senior Management to 'full accountability and autonomy' and 'no more information hoovering' were undermined by several examples of swift Head Office intervention when it was felt that the individual BU's were not moving at an appropriate pace towards cost-efficiency and, ultimately, profitability. The Magazine ‘X’ contract intervention was referred to by many as a clear loss of credibility on this issue, as was the continued requirement for extensive data collection.

Thus, the message expressed by Senior Management's apparent failure to 'walk the talk' was captured by one Planning Manager:

"This remains very much a 'fault-finding' organisation - using the KPI's and data collection, all we are looking for is fault and blame, and so people become focused on finding excuses rather than solutions. Unfortunately, the blame culture hasn't changed under OQL, which is a shame, because the potential is certainly there. We should be devolving responsibility and then supporting people in the achievement of those new responsibilities - instead we are focused on blaming them for their failure to perform, with a myriad of measurements that tell us precisely how badly they failed - and then we wonder why there's no trust in the organisation."

7.4.3 “SPECIAL PROJECTS”

The loss of personnel through the ongoing rationalisation of the delivery network was presented by Senior Management as a clear example of their commitment to 'turning the corner'. Much was made of the figure of 600 people being cut from Head Office. In reality, many of those personnel did not lose their jobs - more than 200 were 're-assigned' to the Personnel Service Centre (technically not Head Office), and many others were assigned to 'project teams' - particularly those with a long career history with the organisation (for whom, an EVR package would prove quite costly for ParcelCo). To quote one project team leader:
"These teams are sold internally as an opportunity to learn new skills, but we are all fully aware that this is a car park for those for whom there simply isn't a job. The objectives are quite laudable - we have a 'fast gains' team looking at quick cost-cutting ideas, and a '25 by 95' team looking to reduce unit costs by 25% this year, but for me, this job is really 2 or 3 levels below what I am being paid to do, which is obviously not a cost saving. I have people working for me who have quite simply dropped out of the bottom of the new structure - there were no jobs for them and so they were assigned to me to give them something to do."

For the front-line, such appointments were inevitably perceived as 'jobs for the boys', despite Senior Management's fervent protestations to the contrary. Arguments of "retaining valuable and highly experienced resources" (MD) appeared to carry little weight in the face of continued depot closures.

In ParcelCo, managers spoke of "labour surplus problems, inter-group personnel transfers, and EVR's" - all of which were designed to "slim-down" the employee numbers. Skilled and experienced people were being encouraged to leave the organisation early to save money, and, where necessary, they were replaced by inexperienced people on short-term temporary contracts (STTC).

This may have solved an immediate cost problem, but should the Group Board ever decide that there is some merit to the concept of empowerment, the organisation will already have two strikes against it. Firstly, EVR was depleting the very resource base that empowerment claims to access. Secondly, the utilisation of STTC's in the name of flexibility (and avoiding the Compulsory Redundancy issue) was creating an inexperienced workforce who, by the very nature of their employment contracts, were being given no incentive to participate in the future growth of the organisation.
As such, the future success of ParcelCo seemed to rest on an efficient (and stable) delivery network and the utilisation of technology in the management of that network (i.e. ‘Track & Trace’). However, those objectives were being pursued with an extremely demoralised workforce who saw themselves as undervalued and unappreciated production units to be trimmed wherever possible.

7.4.4 THE FUTURE FOR PARCELCO

Opinions on the issue of survival were broken down into 3 categories:

1. That OQL would succeed, the organisation would “turn the corner”, and ParcelCo would ultimately become the clear market leader on the basis of first-class customer service and on-time delivery.

2. In order to survive, all of ParcelCo’s standard traffic would be handed over to one of its sister companies, and the organisation would recreate the Express service and become an express-only network.

3. ParcelCo would ultimately fail to achieve the necessary cost reductions and would be swallowed-up by its sister companies in order to avoid any further embarrassment at being the only loss-maker within the Group.

Regrettably, those believers in scenario (1) formed a very small minority. The majority of those interviewed firmly believed that ParcelCo could not survive in its present form, and that long-term survival as an express network would be the best they could hope for.
For OQL to truly mark the beginning of a new era, it would seem logical for there to be evidence of a firm foundation (beyond merely a reshuffled template) and a clear sense of direction for the organisation. ParcelCo appeared to have neither of these. As such, it was becoming increasingly difficult to motivate employees towards a longer-term objective when the current state of the organisation was constantly under threat. With the network continually being ‘trimmed’ around them and no future security other than they would probably never be made compulsorily redundant, it is hard to imagine any ParcelCo employees taking ownership of the message of OQL.

There was no evidence that dramatic change would be achieved solely on the basis of drastic structural alterations, and without a clear leadership message as to the crucial role played by employees in the achievement of the extremely ambitious change objectives, it seemed likely that the workforce would continue to be thought of in terms of labour costs and number of “duties”.

Senior Management admitted that without dramatic cultural change, the enormous capital investment in ‘Track & Trace’ would only enable them to tell their customers how lost or how late their parcel was. Only when the downward spiral of depot closures, network integrations and separations, and traffic transfers to sister companies had come to an end, could Senior Management really begin to consider the future value of their workforce and the need to empower them in their work performance.

At BU level and below, however, other than the dramatic functional changes upon which opinions were clearly divided, the most common reaction to OQL appeared to be one of indifference. Given a heritage of a 5 year plan which was perceived to be aborted after only 1 year, and “numerous plans, programmes and initiatives” since then, comments from the front-line centred around such phrases as: “here we go again”, “I wonder how long this will last”, and “weren’t we just doing SQL?”. 

211
In general terms, while Senior Management may have perceived the OQL template as an integral foundation to ParcelCo’s future development, at the front-line it was seen very much as a ‘flag-waving’ or ‘window dressing’ exercise which would take second place to drastic cost-based rationalisation programmes. OQL may have changed the structure of the organisation dramatically, but the front-line perceptions appeared to centre on more pragmatic issues - in particular the long-term survival of the organisation.
8.0 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

One of the original aspirations for this research was that the case study subjects would be exemplars within their respective industry sectors, and that there would be sufficient conjunction between them to promulgate a more robust theory of empowerment for further research and analysis. In retrospect, five distinct organisational perceptions of empowerment have been examined across five different industries - Municipal Civil Engineering, Electronic Manufacturing, Chemical Manufacturing, Parcel Delivery, and Leisure/Tourism - although each considered themselves to be leaders in their respective markets.

In each case, the subject organisation was approached with a simple request - 'you profess to be empowering your employees, please show me how'. Examination of the respective 'empowerment' initiatives of each organisation subsequently revealed such a diverse range of expectations, assumptions, and comprehension around the concept of empowerment, that it became necessary to present each case as a stand alone interpretative example. Having examined each case in isolation, it is now possible to step back and both explore the broader issues raised and also to investigate any apparent concordance between the five study subjects.
8.1 A WORKING MODEL

In the literature review of Chapter 1, an analytical model of empowerment, as presented by Conger and Kanungo (1988) (see Fig. 1), was introduced as an investigative template for the documentation of the mechanics of each empowerment initiative to be researched. The distinction made in the model between empowerment as a relational construct (the delegation of positional authority within the operational framework) and as a motivational construct (enabling the achievement of self-determination and self-efficacy needs) facilitated the presentation of empowerment as a five-stage process in which the operational and structural conditions which foster employee 'powerlessness' are identified, resolved and referred back to the employees, with a consequent strengthening of perceptions of self-efficacy, and a long-term persistence of the behavioural effects of the empowerment process.

However, in attempting to overlay the Conger & Kanungo model as an analytical template for the five case studies, the presumptions made in the utilisation of the model then became apparent. The primary assumption was that it would be possible to find examples of contemporary empowerment initiatives upon which the five-stage process could be overlaid to document the progress of each initiative. In actuality, the five organisations studied saw themselves as empowering their respective workforces, but could offer no evidence of a clear devolution of functional responsibility (other than the theoretical potential of Citycorp's 'FMG' model – Appendix 6). Secondly, Conger & Kanungo interpret the managerial role of 'enabler' as being critical to the creation, at the outset, of a suitable work environment in which empowerment can then take place. In this research, each Senior Management Team (SMT) seemed to place a greater emphasis on managing expectations and avoiding the 'empowerment' buzzword altogether (e.g. TelCo, Funworld) than on creating a suitable environment for any empowerment initiative to flourish.
In the discussion of the methodology for this study, one anticipated problem identified was that the working model would prove to be insufficiently robust for the variety of case study subjects ultimately identified. In retrospect, the viability of that model was tested even further by the identification of five study subjects who seemed to offer little, if any, evidence of real empowerment. In this instance, the research data collected appeared to warrant an alternative analytical template that, out of necessity, could facilitate the identification of key factors in an empowerment initiative by their corresponding absence rather than presence.

Thus, with an initial working model found wanting, there appeared to be two options available - to either superimpose an alternative *deductive* model on the data as an external framework (for the purpose of more detailed analysis); or to develop an *inductive* model, generated internally from the research data collected from the five cases. Given the apparent diversity of case study subjects and the unique nature of each respective initiative, the decision was made to pursue the development of an inductive model - referred to here as the ‘*consequential model*’ (see Fig. 2). Classification of the case study subjects could then be achieved on the basis of a series of consequences and outcomes that could then be related back to the absence of a proposed ‘key factor’ for any empowerment initiative.
CONSEQUENTIAL MODEL
The Key Factors of an Empowerment Initiative

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<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Cognition</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Shared Information</th>
<th>Skills Training</th>
<th>Management Processes</th>
<th>Reward &amp; Recognition</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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Organisational Chaos
Misapplication of Concepts
Initiative Failure
Mixed Priorities
Initiative Handicapped
Unsustained Performance
Employee Resentment

Figure 2
8.2 A ‘CONSEQUENTIAL’ MODEL

In selecting the five case study subjects, the singular criterion for selection (representation of different industries notwithstanding) was that a public commitment to an ongoing empowerment initiative within their respective organisations had been made. Having attended the business conferences at which each of these public commitments were made, it became apparent that these commitments were more at the ‘pledge’ stage than any ‘outcome’ stage, where progress could be measured and hindsight shared. In each example, the conference presentation centred on the reasons for the empowerment initiative with a subsequent description, in very broad terms, of how the ‘new’ organisation would look. However, little, if any, concrete data were offered as to how the transformation would be achieved and how any inherent or anticipated obstacles would be overcome.

The assumption made here was simply that the brief opportunity for presentation of material at each conference prohibited the sharing of detailed information on each initiative. Having been presented with the ‘highlights’ of each initiative, field visits with each organisation would then enable the collection of more detailed information. In actuality, the field visits revealed that many of the specific factors or action items within each plan appeared to reside either in the heads of the Senior Management Teams (SMT’s) of each organisation, or ‘on the drawing board’ of the initiative. Very few of the highlights of ‘empowerment’ in each presentation were ultimately verified in direct observations and interviews within each organisation.
In this context, the research data gathered came to represent the combined ‘progress reports’ of each individual attempt to utilise the concept of empowerment for a specific purpose. Each progress report contained a selection of theory (as each SMT shared their concept of empowerment); a documented action plan (with varying degrees of detail); and recorded observations of progress made. With no ‘completed’ initiative available for detailed analysis, (and judging from the observations recorded in each of the five organisations, none of these would reach a successful conclusion either), the decision was made to pursue the identification of key factors that appeared to warrant close attention. Such classification was arrived at on the basis of the apparent failure of the SMT in each organisation to successfully transfer their own plans from ‘the drawing board’ to reality.

As such, the inductive template for the initiatives studied in this research became an attempt to capture the dynamics of why and how each initiative was failing, and to identify which key factors (by virtue of their noted absence in these failing initiatives) could be classified as being critical to a successful outcome. The five case study subjects could then be further examined as being indicative of the probable outcomes as a result of the absence of each key element in any proposed empowerment initiative.

A total of seven key factors were identified:
8.2.1 KEY FACTORS

• PURPOSE –

The degree to which the senior managers of an organisation have a clear sense of ‘vision’ or long-term direction for the future. On the assumption that an ‘empowered’ operating model will be dramatically different from the traditional bureaucratic hierarchical model, a clear sense of why such a change is necessary and what it will do for the organisation should be a key prerequisite to any change initiative.

Without a clear sense of purpose or ‘vision’ for the organisation, the pursuit of any change initiative runs the risk of becoming an ad hoc solution that is driven more by competitive pressures or topicality (the ‘flavour of the month’ concepts) than by longer-term practical value to the organisation. The outcome of a series of such decisions can be organisational chaos, as the company is perceived to be ‘jumping on the bandwagon’ of the latest initiative.

• COGNITION –

In the apparent absence of any commonly accepted definition of empowerment, the issue of cognition in this model focuses on the idea that each organisation has a clear awareness of precisely what empowerment means to them (and what they believe it can do for them). Organisation-specific details, over and above a generic textbook answer or ‘managerial guru’ response would be warranted here.

Any lack of clarity on this issue would then lead to misunderstanding and misapplication of concepts, such that the initiative would be severely impeded from the outset. The assumption, for example, that empowerment requires the transplantation of authority from managerial to front-line employees (with no subsequent managerial role for the donors) can be seen to typify many of the drastic ‘delayering’ or ‘downsizing’ initiatives that have been inappropriately labelled as ‘empowerment.’ Such an assumption fails to take into account the need for ongoing coaching and support for the front-line employees as they come to terms with their new autonomy.
• **STRATEGY** –

For an organisation to embark upon a commitment to a concept which appears to have the potential to transform the operation of that organisation on both structural and functional levels, it would seem appropriate that there be some form of plan in place for such a transformation to occur. The plan would be of sufficient detail to outline the key stakeholders involved in the initiative, how and when each operating unit within the organisation would be changed (on the basis of the devolution of functional responsibility), and how the progress of the initiative would be monitored.

The absence of such a strategy would most likely bring about initiative failure, since without a clear map to follow, the organisation would be open to change on the basis of the individual interpretations of each department. As such, some departments could embrace autonomy more readily than others and subsequently find themselves isolated within a persistently bureaucratic environment.

• **SHARED INFORMATION** –

The sharing of information within an empowered organisation (also referred to as ‘open-book management’) has been argued to be a pivotal issue both from the point of view of better communication between managers and employees in the daily operation of the business, and also from the aspect of giving the employees the appropriate information needed to perform in their newly-autonomous work environment.

Many of the featured ‘success stories’ of empowerment (Semco, Ritz-Carlton, General Electric) focus on the utilisation of an ‘open book’ management style, where it has becomes common practice for the organisation to share all information, both good and bad, with their workforce. This not only serves to redesign the communication chains within the organisation (by breaking down the more traditional informational fiefdoms), but also encourages involvement and a sense of direct participation as employees become more aware of the impact of their individual contribution on the fortunes of the organisation as a whole.
In this model, the issue of shared information also encompasses the degree to which employees are kept informed of the intent and progress of the initiative by Senior Management as a necessary precursor to the clear devolution of functional responsibility. Without such communication on a regular basis, the initiative is likely to become prone to rumour, speculation and assumption as employees attempt to extrapolate the ‘bigger picture’ from a series of individual events. With no clear statement of intent, priorities are then likely to be assigned on the basis of individual interpretation.

- **SKILLS TRAINING** –

In order to function appropriately in a newly created work environment (empowered or otherwise), there is a need for suitable training in the skills required to perform in any assigned role. In spite of the internal publicity with which many ‘empowerment’ initiatives are launched, and the significant changes that are typically promised and anticipated, in reality the daily outputs produced by each organisation are usually not expected to change - i.e. TelCo would still manufacture telephones, ParcelCo would still deliver parcels. The objective may well be to produce more, or the same quantity more efficiently, but in terms of a skills training need, the focus must therefore be on communicative skills within the organisations’ internal processes, rather than a required elevation of operative skills in the production process. However, it is the perception of these skills as being ‘soft’ which appears to inhibit a proactive commitment to this issue as an integral part of the overall initiative, arguably because ‘soft’ skills are difficult to measure and, hence, difficult to justify in terms of a return on capital investment.

The contrary suggestion that an empowerment initiative does not require skills training, rather just a carefully managed restructuring of the corporate framework, implies that the employees have been capable of working creatively and autonomously all along and have simply been prevented from doing so by the organisations’ managerial policies.
Stewart (1990) captured empowerment in metaphoric terms when she compared the process to Michelangelo’s carving of the statue of David from a block of marble - i.e. removing the obstacles (excess marble) to bring out what is already there. However, the practical reality implied by an empowered work environment is simply that employees will begin to make decisions on their own and come up with ideas and suggestions as to how their work could be done more efficiently. As such, they will be interacting with their peers in a different way and also looking for a different relationship with their managers and supervisors - one of support and guidance rather than direction and control. In this instance, there is a clear need for both interpersonal skills and problem-solving training, plus leadership and coaching skills training for managers as their role changes in this new operational dynamic. How well they are enabled to perform in this way will, it would seem, determine the success or failure of any empowerment initiative.

Without such training, it would seem likely that the success of the initiative would be severely handicapped as employees, feeling ill-equipped or unprepared, experience frustration and anxiety in their new work environment

- **MANAGEMENT PROCESS (POLICIES & PROCEDURES)** –

Conger and Kanungo’s (1988) identification of management’s ‘enabler’ role in the empowerment process highlighted the fact that irrespective of whether the initiative is driven by a strategic vision or a more pragmatic commercial imperative, empowerment will, at least in theory, originate from the managerial domain, since it is this ‘power’ which is being reassigned or devolved. However, this devolution of power cannot, in itself, represent the extent of management’s involvement in the process - such an act would amount to an abandonment of the managerial role rather than an explicit attempt to empower the workforce.
Jan Carlzon at Scandinavian Airlines (SAS) endeavoured to empower his organisation with a single memo that outlined the new rights and decision-making responsibilities of those front-line personnel who came in direct contact with passengers. Unfortunately, the memo prompted confusion in the minds of the newly-empowered as they each brought their individual interpretation to their rights and responsibilities, and created a ‘siege mentality’ among the middle managers as they saw their operational roles being disassembled with nothing immediately available to replace them. It would ultimately take a complete revision of every job function in the SAS organisation, with the direct involvement of each person impacted by those revisions, before the company was able to access the ‘discretionary output’ which has become the mantra of so many empowerment initiatives.

In this context, it would seem that the responsibility of the Senior Management Team must encompass the management of the entire empowerment process, not just its creation and launch. As such, the anticipated impact on the organisational structure and the role of managers within that structure must be addressed. To develop this argument further, the nature of this responsibility would, therefore, centre on:

- The creation of a support framework for the process on the basis of an assessment of the organisation’s readiness to be empowered - i.e. skills training for the less confident employees, and some form of manual or constitutional document to provide guidance and direction in the resolution of the disputes and conflicts which are likely to arise as the different levels of the organisation begin to experiment with their new responsibilities.
- A clear delineation of new roles and responsibilities for both management and front-line staff (if there is to be a realignment of the organisational structure).
- The development of appropriate recognition programmes and incentive compensation to motivate employees to participate fully in the new work environment.
- The creation of an ongoing monitoring process such that the organisation will be enabled to adapt and grow in line with the growing confidence of the employees in the operating parameters of their new environment.
Without a clear commitment to the ongoing management of the process, the initiative would run the risk of faltering as the initial excitement and momentum of anticipated change gave way to the confusion of a lack of long-term direction and support.

- **REWARD & RECOGNITION** -

  The issue of whether empowerment initiatives should be accompanied by incentives, or whether the personal enrichment of an autonomous work environment (as expressed by Conger & Kanungo's (1988) *self-efficacy* needs) is sufficient is a subject of much contemporary debate and remains a strong topic for further research and analysis. In the context of this template, the choice made by Senior Management in the acknowledgement of the relative importance of reward and recognition to the overall initiative is key. An assumption that there should be a corresponding reward for those employees who take on additional work and responsibility is likely to result in a dramatically different empowerment initiative than one in which increased autonomy in the work environment is seen as sufficient reward.

  An incorrect assessment is likely to lead to *employee resentment* as the increased autonomy and responsibility of the new work environment is interpreted as being simply 'more work for the same money'.

  Thus, the seven key factors identified can be said to originate from the similarity of promises and commitments made by each SMT representative in their original conference presentations (and there is a substantial overlay with the previously identified hyperbole of empowerment here). The seven anticipated outcomes developed for the 'consequential model' arose from an observed failure to follow-through on those promises and commitments. This, in turn, can be said to represent the harsh reality of a failed empowerment initiative:
8.3 SUMMARY OF CASE FINDINGS

8.3.1 PURPOSE

Each SMT interviewed, referred to a clear ‘vision’ of how the future should or would look for their organisation, arguing that it was this vision which drove their commitment to empowerment rather than any desire to ‘jump on the bandwagon’ of a topical management theory. Whether driven by a desire for competitive advantage (TelCo, ChemCo) or the apparent failure of an existing operating model (Funworld, ParcelCo), each organisation appeared to look upon empowerment as a means to another corporate end rather than an empowered environment being an end in itself.

However, to suggest that a clear vision or purpose for the organisation is a key factor in the success or failure of an empowerment initiative, does not then imply that empowerment must be the central tenet of that vision. It is more an issue of strength of commitment to a new organisation (whether outlined in cultural, structural, or functional terms), such that existing corporate paradigms can be broken or abandoned. The concept of empowerment can then, in theory at least, become an instrumental element for the achievement of that vision (e.g. Citycorp). Where the vision is less clearly stated - i.e. in terms of minor modifications rather than dramatic change - empowerment appears to be attractive as an ‘add-on’ component rather than a key factor.
For Citycorp, the corporate vision appeared to reside with only one person, the Assistant City Engineer (ACE) who spoke eloquently of a dramatic change in his department's *modus operandi* as a prerequisite to survival in their movement from a municipal to a fully-competitive market environment. The ACE clearly saw himself as the driving force behind this vision, determined to push the changes through, irrespective of the support of those directly involved in or impacted by those changes. The notion of an empowered operating environment (as created in his ‘Finders, Minders and Grinders’ (FMG) model) was thus able to offer a dual solution - it was "different" enough to underscore the needed break away from the "old civil service mentality", and flexible enough in methodology, at least in theory, to enable a smoother transition to the competitive operating model of their new host company.

For TelCo and Funworld, their purpose in pursuing an empowerment initiative appeared to be based on an awareness that they had come as far as they could with their existing corporate models, with the result that the future growth and development of their respective organisations could only lay with a different approach to both their way of doing business and to the utilisation of their human resources. TelCo sought "*asset optimisation*" through "*operational flexibility*", such that rapid production set-ups and "tear-downs" could be utilised in the delivery of short production runs of a wider range of handset models. This Just In Time (JIT) delivery capability would, it was argued, enable them to break away from their current dependence on one large-volume (and very low margin) customer. The key to this flexibility, as the TelCo SMT saw it, was self-directed work teams running as 'empowered' stand-alone production centres on the shop floor - again, empowerment as a means to a greater end.
Funworld had invested millions in the capital development of bigger and more exciting attractions within the park, but saw their extensive investment being undermined by the poor customer service delivered by a disenfranchised workforce. The SMT’s commitment to the “magic” of the Funworld “experience” led them to a ‘vision’ of a workforce which would be better appreciated, better paid, better supported in their work performance, and ‘empowered’ via increased autonomy in their customer interactions.

For ChemCo and ParcelCo, the objective was simply bottom-line profitability (“core businesses” for ChemCo, and “turning the corner” for ParcelCo). Change was looked upon as a prerequisite for the achievement of that objective, but in embracing such a notion, there appeared to be no commitment to building on the strengths or addressing the weaknesses of their current corporate models, or of any endorsement of markedly different corporate cultures. ChemCo’s ‘AAA’ programme and ParcelCo’s ‘OQL’ initiative were both plagued by generic aphorisms, such as ‘our people are our most valuable asset’, and ‘the role of senior management is to let the front-line managers do their jobs’. However, in both cases, the seemingly altruistic intent was undermined by an apparent unwillingness to give up a more traditional bureaucratic management style.

If the stated purpose for each candidate organisation is referred back to the apparent alignment between Institutional Theory and empowerment that was identified in the literature review, it becomes possible to discern a clear pattern of coercive isomorphic behaviour for each organisation in the adoption of the concept:

Citycorp appeared to face the strongest pressure, given that the order to change the organisational structure originated from a federal mandate to split up the department. The majority of those employees interviewed made vehement statements in favour of the status quo in preference to the new environment of the VCT host. In addition, the ACE’s endeavours to create an operating template that would facilitate assimilation by a host company can be seen to demonstrate a response to mimetic isomorphic pressure – i.e. that they should look like a private sector organisation from the outset, rather than a civil service operation.
For Funworld and ChemCo the coercive pressure was primarily economic — overtime costs in ChemCo’s manufacturing plants (at a time when their product margins were at an all time high), and lower capital investment in new rides and attractions for Funworld. In each case there was also an element of mimetic pressure. ChemCo had sold off “non-core” businesses and was therefore sharing their manufacturing site with other Chemical companies offering alternative compensation packages to their employees. For Funworld the mimetic pressure appeared to come from their competitors’ strong reputation for first-class family experiences in their parks. As the Quality Manager pointed out:

“They are larger organisations with much deeper pockets - we can’t win the race for bigger and more exciting rides, so we have to make sure that the family experience is as good as theirs and preferably better.”

ParcelCo and TelCo appeared to be responding solely to coercive economic pressure — for ParcelCo the very real possibility of being absorbed back into their parent company if they did not make a profit, and for TelCo the need to meet customer expectations of production flexibility and responsiveness in order to broaden their market base. In retrospect, this could also be viewed as mimetic behaviour in that their competitors we already offering or endeavouring to offer the same level of service.

Thus, the overriding issue here is that while each candidate organisation referred to an explicitly internal focus in their stated purpose for adopting an empowerment initiative, there were, in fact, very clear signs of external pressures leading to coercive and somewhat mimetic isomorphic behaviour in the decision to pursue the concept.
8.3.2 COGNITION

For each of the five study subjects, the attributes of autonomy, creativity, responsibility, and flexibility were strongly endorsed as being critical to the successful outcome of their respective initiatives. However, in seeking evidence of a clear understanding or awareness of what empowerment meant to each organisation, it became apparent that the senior managers had ‘put the cart before the horse’ as it were, by identifying the attributes first, and then realising that they all fit very nicely under the broader heading of ‘empowerment’. Even then, there was a common reticence to label the initiative as such, for fear of branding it with a ‘buzzword’ or ‘flavour of the month’ epithet. There appeared to be no conscious choice of empowerment as the most appropriate change mechanism for the organisation – rather a realisation that greater productivity demanded greater creativity and operational flexibility which, by chance, appeared to coincide with the basic elements of ‘empowerment.’

To have arrived at a clear understanding of what empowerment meant to each organisation, when linked back to their stated corporate vision or purpose, would have then facilitated the identification of the degree of opportunism with which the concept was utilised. For example, the practice of introducing the concept as a corporate endeavour immediately after reductions in personnel, where surviving employees do not face ‘more work for the same money’ but rather are suddenly ‘empowered’ to work more autonomously, could be classified as an opportunistic utilisation of the concept.

For Citycorp, the selection of the concept was deliberate and the initiative was labelled unashamedly as ‘empowerment’, although the emphasis was somewhat softened within the ‘Finders, Minders & Grinders’ nomenclature. Unfortunately, the majority of the potential ‘empowerees’ saw themselves as being in a situation where the long bureaucratic history and ‘civil service mentality’ of their organisation was too entrenched to embrace such a dramatically different management concept or operating template. As such, the awareness of what empowerment was and the confidence in what it could do for the organisation, resided almost exclusively with the ACE.
For TelCo, there was an open admission on the part of the Plant Director that they sought to consciously avoid the "plethora of clichés and platitudes surrounding empowerment". In doing so, however, their efforts to "simplify the message" fell short through frequent lapses into non-specific and taciturn terminology with sincere exhortations to 'communicate', 'consult', 'enable', 'invest', 'recognise' and 'respect', as expressed in the 'People Contract'. As such, TelCo’s cognition of the concept centred on what the SMT perceived to be the 'basic values' of empowerment (greater employee involvement, autonomy and creativity). However, the anticipated outcomes from the systematic development of these basic values within the organisation were not clearly defined.

Funworld's awareness of the concept of empowerment was derived primarily from the actions of the Quality Manager (QM). He had taken it upon himself to benchmark several leading organisations across a wide-range of industries in the development of what he saw as the key tenets of what was to be the 'Delivering The Magic' (DTM) initiative. In addition, as part of a personal career development plan, the QM had undertaken a great deal of academic research on the subject as part of a Master's degree programme. This gave him a greater degree of familiarity with the academic arguments surrounding the concept – in particular, the respective histories of scientific and humanistic management.

For his SMT colleagues, comprehension leaned more towards familiarity than understanding, as expressed in interviews which focused on the general theory of employee involvement without any apparent plans to relate that theory to practical changes in work design. The team appeared to be in agreement that improved customer service could be achieved through greater creativity and autonomy for the front-line employees. However, plans to achieve such an outcome were restricted to brainstorming sessions and minimal soft skills training. Significant work redesign took second place to a more critical need for a non-seasonal workforce. As such, their approach to the concept appeared to be one of selecting from an array of tools and techniques to support a series of front-line endeavours within the DTM programme without embracing the concept in its entirety.
The Funworld team appeared to share TelCo’s concerns over the possibility of the initiative being labelled as a ‘fad’ or ‘flavour of the month’. A conscious choice was made to focus on what were perceived to be the ‘basic values’ of the concept, with a subsequent avoidance of specific terminology. This reticence did not appear to extend beyond the issue of nomenclature, however. The decision to align the initiative to the marketing campaign of a ‘magical experience’ for a Funworld guest was seen by the SMT as a strong endorsement of the relevance of the DTM programme to the organisations’ long-term goals.

ChemCo is arguably the best example of prominent theories within the organisation appearing to coincide with the broader nomenclature of ‘empowerment’. This suggestion of coincidence is not meant to be dismissive of ChemCo’s organisational development plan, but it does capture the sense of surprise with which ChemCo’s SMT appeared to realise that their ‘mixed bag’ of team-based initiatives (MIT’s, RCM’s, SI’s) could be gathered together as a broader empowerment initiative in line with their parent company’s strong endorsement of the ‘AAA’ programme. In this way, the use of the term ‘empowerment’ was actively downplayed in favour of the preferred terminology of ‘AAA’ and it’s core premise of ‘Involvement’.

Awareness of many of the more widely-known success stories of empowerment (Semco, SAS, General Electric) was minimal, although the Quality Improvement Manager had purchased several copies of Byham’s (1988) ‘Zapp: The Lightening of Empowerment’ for distribution around the site. Only two of the people interviewed had read the book. As for a sense of what empowerment could do for them, the overriding sentiment appeared to be one of a willingness to listen to or try anything that would help them ratify the Labour Agreement (and avoid any production stoppages in the process).
ParcelCo made the most frank admission that, in the words of the Managing Director, "Organisatorially, empowerment is not something we have an understood concept of". When pressed on the issue, he was willing to commit to a general definition as "freedom within a framework to deliver the company's goals and to meet or exceed the customer's expectations". However, several of the MD's SMT colleagues appeared to disagree with his admission, pointing to many of the current devolution initiatives (in direct response to depot closures and staff re-assignment) as evidence of a conscious effort to increase the autonomy of the ParcelCo workforce. Here again, however, as with ChemCo, the driving force was a financial goal ("turning the corner"), with the result that the operational flexibility and increased autonomy granted under OQL to cope with depot closures were only later perceived as fitting under the broader nomenclature of 'empowerment'.

Thus, the absence of a clearly demonstrated understanding of what empowerment meant to the organisation and what it would do for the future growth and development of that organisation, suggests that all of the Senior Management Teams interviewed were simply 'jumping on the bandwagon' of a topical managerial phenomenon. The purpose served by such actions would appear to be two fold – both external and internal. First, the topicality of the concept (and the audience to whom the original conference presentations were made) would demand that the initiative should be presented as being as competitive and as 'cutting edge' as possible. In this way each organisation would be able to demonstrate that it was keeping up with current trends. Second, from an internal perspective, the presentation of change initiatives as being part of a larger corporate or industry-wide trend would help to allay employee fears that their division or department was being targeted in some way. Even those organisations (Funworld, TelCo, and ChemCo) which chose to avoid the label of 'empowerment', still presented their humanistic initiatives as being dramatically different for their respective industries.
The consistency of behaviour of the Senior Management Teams on this issue can be related back to Abrahamson’s (1996) notion of norms of managerial rationality and managerial progress directly impacting management behaviour and the functional structure of an organisation. All five of the candidate organisations were dealing with either civil service or commercially bureaucratic heritages that implied old traditions rather than new and improved techniques (managerial progress). In addition, they were all facing stakeholder expectations that their managerial policies and practices were explicitly rational, efficient and modern (managerial rationality).

For ChemCo and ParcelCo, the succession of highly publicised and fervently exhorted initiatives can be seen to link directly with the need for progress in breaking the restrictive constraints of past Industrial Relations agreements in highly unionised environments. In addition, the need for continued investment in new plant and equipment required that the leadership teams be perceived as being at the forefront of their respective industries. Their respective realisation that the individual initiatives could be grouped under the broader heading of ‘empowerment’ (an awareness apparently shared by all five candidate organisations) can be viewed as a direct response to both norms – the novelty of managerial progress and the implied efficiency of managerial rationality.

The topicality of the empowerment concept can be seen to align closely with the norm of managerial progress, although it is noteworthy that the management teams (Citycorp’s ACE notwithstanding) chose to observe the practice of managerial reality by endorsing the concept but remaining ‘rational’ in their decision to avoid the explicit use of the empowerment terminology.
8.3.3 STRATEGY

Thus far, the five case study subjects have been able to identify links (albeit tenuous ones) between their stated organisational ‘visions’ and specific initiatives which, from their perspective, constituted evidence of an ongoing commitment to the ‘empowerment’ of their employees. However, to then provide of evidence as to how this end-state of an ‘empowered’ organisation would be achieved and how this newly transformed organisation would function on a daily basis required a transition from a documented present to a highly speculative future.

With a common lack of understanding of the concept of empowerment already identified in section 8.3.2, much of the examination of strategy, or the absence thereof, can be foreseen. Citycorp’s strategy appeared to be determined solely by the timeline and procedural requirements of the Voluntary Competitive Tendering (VCT) process. TelCo and Funworld appeared to be making a questionable commitment to Conger & Kanungo’s (1988) ‘enabler’ approach by endeavouring to ‘seed’ the organisations with the basic values of empowerment, with little evidence of a strategy beyond the germination of those ‘seeds’. For the TelCo initiative specifically, the apparent reticence implied in the SMT’s ‘seeding’ approach was driven by the perceived failure of an empowerment initiative at one of their sister plants, where, in the words of the TelCo Plant Director:

“They had followed the Carlzon model at SAS and basically rewrote all the policies and procedures overnight, with the result that nobody knew what the hell they were doing, and chaos ensued.”

ChemCo and ParcelCo, on the other hand, appeared to have totally separate strategies that encompassed empowerment by coincidence rather than by design.
In this context, it was possible to identify a ‘strategy spectrum’ with Citycorp at one end, building a new organisational model to function on the basis of a supposedly autonomous workforce. At the other end stood ChemCo and ParcelCo, with organisational templates which were being modified to enable operational and financial efficiency within a static bureaucracy and an almost incidental awareness of employee autonomy.

However, in none of the five case studies was there evidence of a comprehensive empowerment strategy. Taking into account the evidence gathered from the detailed observations of five failed initiatives, and the logic of planning any change initiative, the components of such a strategy could be said to involve:

- Evidence of an awareness of the organisation’s state of preparedness to be empowered - i.e. are the employees ready and willing to take on increased autonomy and responsibility; are they eager to be given the chance to be creative and to add value to the organisation beyond the performance of their assigned job function; or is there a ‘civil service mentality’ or it’s commercial counterpart, where the bureaucracy has pervaded the organisation to such a degree that the workforce will need a great deal of ongoing support to make the transition to working autonomously.
- On the basis of this identified level of readiness, evidence of a plan to coach and/or educate those most likely to be directly impacted by this organisational transformation.
- Equally on the basis of this level of readiness, evidence of a conscious choice to either ‘seed’ the organisation with small initiatives with strong employee ownership in anticipation of a strong (and hopefully manageable) groundswell at some later date (as per TelCo and Funworld), or to launch an organisation-wide initiative which would be driven from the top (as per Citycorp). With the seeding process, what is the expected level of momentum, and how will that momentum be managed? With the ‘top-down’ approach, what is the expected timeline, and what are the established benchmarks or watersheds to measure progress?
• Plans to manage the different expectations and aspirations of each layer of the organisation - for example, if there is a large disparity between those employees who rapidly become acclimatised to the newly-autonomous environment and those who do not, how will that be managed? Equally, for middle managers that perceive the empowerment process as a direct challenge to their positional authority, how will they be acclimatised to the new environment?

• Evidence of how the organisational template will look in this new environment. Will there be a delayering of managerial strata and/or a re-assignment of functional responsibilities?

• If there were clearly established policies and procedures for the day-to-day management of and communication within the organisation, how will these be changed and when?

• If the plan is to delayer the organisation, what will career advancement look like in this new environment? On the assumption that there will be both 'empowerable' and 'unempowerable' employees, how will the organisation cope with the expected loss of the latter and enable the selection and hiring of the former over the long-term?

Thus, even for an organisation such as Citycorp, which envisioned a purpose-built model as their key to a successful empowerment initiative, the level of detail in the strategy was very low. Once the model was put in place (with little support expected from the many team members who expressed an extreme lack of confidence in the FMG model), the strategy for the daily functioning of the model appeared to be simply time allotted for them to "figure it out for themselves". The ACE would be busy ‘finding’ new business, with the ‘grinders’ on the front-line performing the work needed to meet the requirements of this new business, leaving the ‘minders’ to figure out the policies and procedures for how the organisation would operate on a daily basis.
For TelCo, there was an apparent perception that to present a complete empowerment strategy to the organisation would have meant the creation of, to quote the Human Resources Director: "a major industrial relations issue, because people would have been unwilling to participate in that change". It was this rationale which drove the introduction of the cell manufacturing process via a low-key "skunkworks" approach rather than an overnight reorganisation of the shop floor. The apparent success of this methodology - i.e. where employees were asking to become involved in cell manufacturing - convinced the SMT that they were on the right track. However, there was still no plan in place to manage the momentum they were creating, nor any sense of an overarching strategy for moving the organisation forward.

For Funworld, the strategy appeared to be formulated year-on-year - i.e. the DTM programme would be introduced in one season, and then modified for the next on the basis of feedback from the participants of the previous season. In addition, with the prevalence of a seasonal workforce, and the likelihood of only 60% of that workforce returning each year, it may be argued that the SMT felt that such an environment precluded a strategy of any greater length or complexity.

8.3.4 SHARED INFORMATION

Given the lack of collected evidence of information sharing in each of the five initiatives studied, it would appear that this issue also resides in the realm of speculation rather than documented reality. At a foundational level, the conscious decision to avoid the empowerment epithet altogether (as made by TelCo and Funworld) suggests a desire to explicitly manage the flow of information rather than share it. This, in turn, facilitated the management of expectations of the employees who may have felt that empowerment within their organisation would offer them more autonomy than the SMT was, in reality, willing to give.
TelCo appeared to be willing to acknowledge the importance of communication through such vehicles as the 'People Contract', the endorsement of 'Communication Teams', and a proposed 'Information Television Channel' within the plant (which, at the time of the field research, was only broadcasting employee birthdays and the local weather forecast). However, the SMT still approached the initiative with the attitude of releasing autonomy (and information) a little at a time, which implies both a predilection for direct managerial control of the situation and a lack of confidence in the ability of their employees to handle significant change.

At a second level, Citycorp's unashamed labelling of the FMG model as 'empowerment' (eventhough it later became apparent that the ACE was the only person who saw the model as such), and its subsequent presentation to the organisation as a fait accomplis, underlines the potential danger of a perceived failure to share information in the development of a key facet of the initiative. Funworld and ParcelCo appeared to face the same issues with their DTM and OQL programmes respectively, which were also presented to their organisations as a fait accomplis and consequently struggled for support.

Citycorp faced additional criticism over the sharing of information regarding the progress of the Voluntary Competitive Tendering (VCT) process. Commitments were made to keep those involved apprised of the situation at all times via updates from an appointed Working Party. In actuality, the key decision on the 65/35 split was perceived as being made "behind closed doors", with the information-sharing role further dismissed as merely the issuance of press releases rather than the creation of opportunities for constructive feedback.
For ParcelCo, the issue of information sharing became even more problematic as the SMT’s much criticised role as an ‘information hoover’ was seen to persist despite explicit promises to the contrary. This, combined with a perceived failure to share the rationales behind the closure of several successful depots, (depots which had been meeting and exceeding the Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) upon which much of OQL’s realisation was based), served to undermine the SMT’s exhortations that the OQL structure represented a new era in which the daily management of the business was truly in the hands of the regional GM’s. No matter how incidental the SMT’s commitment to employee autonomy may have been, there was still a general perception that information was provided on a ‘need-to-know’ basis, such that no-one below GM level appeared to have any sense of awareness as to the likely profitability of the organisation (linked directly to the absence of the ‘Profitability Model’), the current success or failure of the OQL programme itself, or even the respective rankings of the regional business units within the organisation.

ChemCo was characterised by extreme mistrust at the outset, given the volatile situation generated by the increasing pressure to ratify the Labour Agreement. As such, it was likely that any information shared would have been met with considerable scepticism. The accomplishments achieved by individual MIT’s were broadcast widely as evidence of the apparent success of the AAA programme, and the organisation’s commitment to its employees. However, even these initiatives were originated by edicts from Management as to which problems should be addressed first, rather than from an autonomous workforce who saw themselves as capable or, indeed, ‘empowered’ to identify and resolve problems without direct supervisory permission or input.
8.3.5 SKILLS TRAINING

In section 8.3.3, a potential disparity was identified in any organisation's readiness to be 'empowered'. On the one hand, employees could be perceived as being 'ready to go' and, hence, simply require the opportunity to perform autonomously. On the other hand, they could be entrenched in a 'bureaucratic mentality', where a strictly managed work environment has created an unwillingness to step outside of operational norms without clearly defined policies and procedures. In either case, there is a strong need for skills training in order to function appropriately within the proposed new work environment, whether it be to manage the highly motivated employees, or to support and nurture the more reticent bureaucratic group. For the five study subjects, the nature of these skills appeared to make this issue a significant stumbling block in the planning and management of each 'empowerment' initiative.

Funworld's DTM initiative endeavoured to create an increased awareness of the importance of human interaction in the customer's overall experience of the park and, by implication, the important role that the employees played in the creation of that experience. However, the methodology used - games and team-based role playing - appeared to offer no practical skills to be taken away and put into practice in the workplace.

ParcelCo's 'OQL' model implied that each Business Unit would run as an independent company-within-a-company. However, rather than build a training programme to develop new and future managers for these companies, the emphasis was placed on the selection procedure for the first General Managers, and, given the Managing Director's comments that: "It's already apparent that we have a few square pegs in round holes, and one or two may be deselected for their roles", the selection procedure was flawed from the outset.
For ChemCo, the emphasis on team-based initiatives suggested a need for team
building and team-management skills, but in the majority of cases, the MIT’s and RCM’s
were left to ‘figure it out for themselves’. The most successful projects - the ‘early
victories’ which appeared to create much of the attention and momentum for these
initiatives - did benefit from experienced facilitators (from ChemCo’s ‘Quality
Improvement’ department) who helped to develop ground rules and procedures for the
CAT’s (Corrective Action Teams) which were the prototypes for the MIT’s. However,
the fact that Shift Initiatives (SI’s) became prominent, does suggest that the teams had
difficulty in working with a cross-shift membership and looked instead to build upon the
existing relationships and dynamics of shift crews.

Citycorp adopted the same ‘figure it out for themselves’ approach, with no plans
in place for any skills training for any of the three levels of the ‘FMG’ model. In addition,
unlike ParcelCo, there was no selection procedure for the key players of the ‘FMG’
model - primarily because the negotiation process over which employees would remain
on the consulting side and which would move to the new host company, was based on
years of service and individual personal relationships rather than proven experience or
potential contribution to either side of the new operating relationship.

TelCo was the only organisation that made a conscious effort to recognise the
need for ‘soft’ skills training, through their use of the “Investing in Excellence”
programme, purchased from, and administered by, an American consulting company.
The focus on such issues as self-esteem, positive thinking, and “self-enlightenment”
suggests, however, that the emphasis of this skills training was more on the intangible
than the practical. Indeed, one of the criteria in the selection of the programme had been
its apparent success in helping the employees of a sister plant cope with a major
redundancy. This, in turn, suggests an agenda of conflict avoidance (similar to that of the
gradual introduction of the cell manufacturing process) rather than a proactive attempt to
equip their workforce with the skills necessary to cope with a new work environment.
8.3.6 MANAGEMENT PROCESS (POLICIES & PROCEDURES)

For the five case study subjects, all but Funworld were able to point to a new model or operational template as structural evidence of their 'new' organisations - the 'Finders, Minders, & Grinders' (FMG) model for Citycorp; the 'Organising for Quality Leadership' (OQL) model for ParcelCo; the Production Career Structure (PCS) model for TelCo; and ChemCo's 'bankable hours' system under the Labour Agreement.

Funworld saw themselves as being currently too restricted by the seasonality of their operation and their workforce to contemplate a dramatically different operating model. For them, there was a redefinition of the 'Area Controller' role into that of an 'Area Manager' (with a claimed increase in responsibility and autonomy), and the introduction of the 'Retainer Contract' (with half-pay out of season) in an effort to introduce some element of reward and recognition into the initiative; and there was, at least, a commitment to monitor success on a season-by-season basis.

For those with marked changes in their operating structure - Citycorp and ParcelCo - the introduction of the model appeared to be seen as being enough in and of itself. For ParcelCo, the apparent failure of the SMT to change their behaviour in line with the promises of the new model, greatly impaired any prospect of a successful outcome.

For Citycorp, the proof for the FMG model would not be available until after the completion of the VCT process, and even then would be dependent on an eventual alignment with the operational template of the new Host Company. The assumption here was that Citycorp would be left alone in the short-term to work as an independent division of the Host Company.
For ChemCo, the system of ‘bankable hours’ which formed such an integral and controversial part of the Labour Agreement, was seen by the SMT as evidence of a new era of maturity, trust, and autonomy in Industrial Relations (IR) with the Unions and their membership. The driving force here, however, was the punitive cost of overtime in the daily operation of the plants on the site, rather than any broader commitment to a markedly different or ‘empowered’ working environment. The potential for unused credit hours being kept as a bonus (and, by inference, a ‘reward’ for efficient operation) was severely undermined by an apparent lack of trust generated by past IR agreements.

TelCo’s Production Career Structure was not seen as a general support framework for the overall ‘empowerment’ initiative, but rather as a means of making sure that the employees could see “something in it for them”. The absence of a clear advancement process was felt by the SMT to be a significant obstacle to the gradual introduction of an autonomous work environment, since historically, career advancement had been achieved on the basis of perceived favouritism from the Supervisor (now ‘Team Leader’) or Line Manager through the so-called “Blue-Eyed Boy System” (which was referred to by many disgruntled shop floor operators). In this context, any ‘early-adopters’ who demonstrated a willingness to work autonomously would likely face considerable peer pressure as a ‘blue-eyed boy’.

PCS, therefore, was designed to encourage advancement on the basis of proven performance competencies, and in doing so, to provide a clear development path for shop floor operators which could parallel the structure already in place for the management and professional staff. So, while the model represented a ‘New World’ for the shop floor, it was not designed to underpin the whole initiative.
8.3.7 REWARD & RECOGNITION

The issue of reward and recognition appeared to be worthy of the attention of only one Senior Management Team - Funworld. Their concern over reward and recognition, however, centred more on the perceived handicap of being a seasonal operation than on any concern for the personal fulfilment of the workforce.

In the other four cases, anticipated changes in job design were regarded as an operational necessity for the long-term viability of the organisation. Increased creativity and autonomy were seen as advantageous to the bottom-line only because they offered production flexibility, not because they offered any type of intrinsic employee fulfilment bonus. As such, employees were expected to align themselves with those changes on the basis of their employment contract rather than through any perceived sense of personal growth or explicit managerial benevolence in managing the welfare of their employees.

8.4 CONSEQUENCES & OUTCOMES

The consequential model links the observed absence of seven key factors to seven corresponding operational outcomes for any organisation which chooses to pursue an empowerment initiative as a means of bringing about organisational change:

Organisational Chaos

The Senior Management of each of the five case study organisations sought to endorse their respective initiatives with a suitable label which set out a ‘vision’ or purpose for the new organisation - the ‘FMG’ model for Citycorp, ‘DTM’ for Funworld, ‘AAA’ for ChemCo, ‘OQL’ for ParcelCo, and the broader label of ‘Investing In Excellence’ for TelCo. In each case, considerable attention was given to how the ‘new’ organisation would be structured (along with a series of standard aphorisms on customer service and the value of employees for Funworld, ChemCo, and TelCo), but with little concrete data or guidance as to how the ‘new’ organisation would operate.
The launch of a major corporate initiative without a clear picture of both the current state and future direction of the organisation is likely to result in confusion. In the absence of a clear understanding of how the ‘new’ organisation will function on a daily basis, managerial policies and procedures could eventually deteriorate into a pursuit of individual (and possibly conflicting) agendas (reminiscent of the parochial and particularistic interests identified in Selznick’s (1949) ‘old institutionalism’). In the SAS example, middle level managers sought to deliberately undermine the newly granted autonomy of the front-line employees by instituting a strict adherence to organisational policies and procedures. With no clear sense of their role in the new operational template, such an act served to draw attention to their grievance in a very dramatic manner.

In ParcelCo, for example, the organisation set clear operational criteria via a series of Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) and then proceeded to close several depots with top KPI scores. This act represented a very duplicitous statement - firstly that there was a second “hidden” agenda behind the stated commitment to first-class service; and secondly that there was no real incentive to meet the KPI’s if your depot could be closed anyway.

In addition, the apparent failure to establish a clear link between the corporate visions and the respective empowerment initiatives only served to further classify empowerment as a ‘flavour of the month’ management programme to be added-on where necessary, rather than as an integral feature of the overall initiative.

Misapplication of Concepts

Each SMT brought a unique understanding of what ‘empowerment’ meant to them and, hence, what they believed it could do (or not do) for their organisation. There was evidence of a general familiarity with the ‘basic values’ of the concept - greater employee autonomy and operational flexibility in return for increased creativity and productivity - and the lineage of participative management. However, there appeared to be little awareness of the likely impact for the organisation as a whole in pursuing the concept as a mode of organisational change.
The consequence of this general familiarity seemed to be a willingness only to select individual facets of the concept - team-based initiatives, job redesign - and to apply them (often with unique interpretations) to specifically targeted areas of the organisation. For example, ChemCo introduced team-based initiatives on the site for topics that were pre-selected by senior managers (whereas in an autonomous work environment, the employees themselves could make such selections). Citycorp completely redesigned their operational template on the basis of criteria established by one man - the ACE - with no opportunity for input offered to those employees impacted by the change.

For those organisations that chose to avoid the epithet of 'empowerment' altogether, the rationale offered was that it carried a tarnished reputation as being 'flavour of the month'. In reality there appeared to be a clear preference to pursue a more opportunistic approach of taking pieces to solve individual problems whilst maintaining a general reticence to pursue the concept to its fullest extent and address issues of redesign of the managerial role. As a result, the initiatives presented as 'empowerment', ultimately lacked the most critical component - a clear transference of functional responsibility. Organisations were restructured (ParcelCo, Citycorp) and jobs were redesigned (TelCo, ChemCo, Funworld), but in each case there was no evidence found of a corresponding transference of the necessary responsibility to perform in those new roles. As such, to call such initiatives 'empowerment' was a misapplication of the concept.

Initiative Failure

Given the predominance of generic corporate 'visions' among the five study subjects, and only a vague familiarity with the concept of empowerment, the likelihood of a clear strategy for the development and management of an 'empowered' organisation seemed low. Even those organisations that sought to 'seed' their cultures with low-key participative management initiatives (TelCo's cell manufacturing, ChemCo's team-based initiatives, and Funworld's DTM programme) offered no long-term strategy for the reorientation of the traditional managerial role or the skills development of front-line employees in the near-term.
In this context, the initiatives were likely to fail on several counts - lack of involvement and support from managers who saw no future for themselves in this 'new' organisation; lack of involvement and preparedness from the newly-'empowered' employees; and organisational processes from both levels which could be expected to work at cross-purposes. TelCo, in particular, seemed confident that their approach of a gradual introduction of participative management concepts would enable the SMT to maintain direct control over the momentum of change. However, this confidence was based solely on the expectation that their initial success with cell manufacturing could be replicated in any department and on any work function. Other than a plan for operative skills development via the PCS, there appeared to be no strategy for managing changes in internal processes or job design. The Aries team, for example, was created as being a natural successor to the cell manufacturing initiative, but other than preselecting team members, the team was basically left to 'figure it out for themselves' with no clear mandate from Senior Management as to the specific parameters of their newly-granted autonomy.

Mixed Priorities

The absence of shared information, and the subsequent failure to support any open-book management processes can be seen to have a direct impact on the performance management systems within an organisation. Employees are asked to perform new tasks and to take on greater responsibility without the necessary information to do so, with the result that priorities become centred on the collection and management of information rather than on work performance. Equally, for the threatened managers facing an uncertain future in this new environment of greater autonomy and less supervision, priorities become centred on the control of that flow of information as their raison d'être (as demonstrated in the SAS example). Hence, any possible benefits to the organisation are subjugated by internal divisiveness.
The newly-appointed General Managers of the Strategic Business Units (SBU’s) under ParcelCo’s ‘OQL’ initiative, for example, were led to believe that they would be autonomous in their work performance – to run each unit as a ‘business within a business’. The reality was that Senior Management continued to demand vast amounts of information and to intervene as and when they chose. This gave the new GM’s no clear indication as to how autonomous they really were.

In addition, failure to share information is likely to be perceived as being indicative of the pursuit of an alternative or hidden agenda. For Citycorp, promises to update employees on the VCT/CCT discussions via an elected Working Party were not met, with the result that the ACE was perceived as following a personal agenda. Support for the new ‘FMG’ template from the employees was consequently minimal.

*Initiative Handicapped*

Failure to plan and prepare for skills development in any empowerment initiative suggests the view that employees already have all the skills and abilities to perform in an autonomous work environment with minimal supervision. By implication, therefore, all that is required for a successful empowerment initiative is the symbolic release of corporate chains such that employees can begin performing their assigned tasks with greater creativity and productivity. This model is flawed on two counts. First, the assumption that every employee will respond to the new environment in the same manner is unproven and illogical. Second, the assumption that any skills requirement can be addressed via new hiring practices, intangible ‘soft skills’ training, or leaving them to ‘figure it out for themselves’ has, in this research, been demonstrated to be equally inappropriate. ParcelCo’s attempt to select a “new type of General Manager” to place at the helm of each Business Unit under ‘OQL’ proved unsuccessful with several “square pegs in round holes” identified very early on in the initiative. Funworld and TelCo’s ‘soft skills’ programs created diversion and suspicion as to the true intent of each SMT rather than adding any real value. ChemCo and Citycorp seemed to view their responsibility as being merely to launch the initiatives, with minimal involvement in support or development beyond ensuring that the profit or performance objectives were met.
ChemCo did endeavour to support the initial Corrective Action Teams (CATs) with facilitation skills training, but the fact that this support diminished once the team-based initiatives became a sizeable project in themselves suggests that the original support was put in place to ensure immediate success rather than from any long-term commitment to support and develop the initiative.

In contrast, the fact that evidence was found of individual employees and teams acting in an autonomous manner in such environments (almost in spite of their environment) does lend some credence to the argument of an untapped resource of creativity and productivity which subsumes the dogma of empowerment. The fact that organisations as bureaucratic in nature as ChemCo and TelCo could still manage to produce innovative outcomes from their team-based initiatives (with minimal managerial support or involvement), does suggest that the willingness to pursue creative and often unorthodox job tasks (a core assumption of the empowerment philosophy) can be strong enough to overcome the traditional ‘command and control’ model.

Unsustained Performance

All of the five study subjects appeared to share the assumption on the part of the Senior Management Teams that their empowerment initiatives (such that they were) should focus exclusively on the employees rather than on all aspects of the organisation. TelCo, for example, focused on operative skills development through their PCS initiative, but failed to address the issue of how the organisation would change as an increasing number of employees developed from ‘operators-in-training’ to advanced Trainer/Assessors.
The work environment and performance responsibilities of employees are directly impacted by an empowerment initiative - specifically where there is a transfer of functional responsibility, but this transfer has even greater ramifications for the organisation as a whole. Not only will management and employee job descriptions change, but also the processes by which those two levels of the organisation interact. Such an outcome requires both the creation of an appropriate environment (Conger & Kanungo's 'enabler' function) and the leadership and foresight to establish operational guidelines within that environment. The organisations in this appeared to be willing to launch their respective initiatives (with some making a more explicit commitment to empowerment than others - e.g. Citycorp versus TelCo - with minimal detail as to the ongoing development and management of those initiatives, once launched.

In this context, the organisation may benefit from immediate gains in performance from those most easily acclimated to the new environment (e.g. TelCo’s Aries Team, ChemCo’s MIT’s), but it seems unlikely that the performance will be sustained without a support framework to both manage the expectations of the eager employees (who would see their new autonomy as only the first stage of even greater change) and to encourage and support the less enthusiastic participants to begin to think more autonomously.

**Employee Resentment**

Only one organisation, TelCo, addressed the issues of Reward and Recognition directly by incorporating a pay differential to each level of the PCS as an employee learned new skills. ChemCo’s Labour Agreement also centred on remuneration issues, but these focused on the avoidance of overtime pay rather than any direct link to the ‘AAA’ programme (and still managed to generate considerable employee resentment).
The other organisations appeared to see no direct link between increased performance/responsibility and increased remuneration/reward - arguably because the new responsibility would either be a reward in itself, or simply a prerequisite for continued employment with the organisation. Evidence gathered from these five organisations, however, suggests that the human resources or industrial relations aspects of these initiatives were regarded as being secondary to the need for flexibility of production and bottom-line profitability. As such, the potential for employee resentment of the work/reward ratio of their new roles, was not even considered. The options from the perspective of the SMT's were simply extended job security through the continued competitiveness of the organisation or nor job security whatsoever.

Even if there were some merit to the argument of an intrinsic (as opposed to monetary) reward for greater responsibility, it is unlikely that it would continue to be sufficient over the longer term. At some point a threshold would be reached at which the increased responsibility would become 'more work for the same money', and with the likelihood of a flatter corporate structure in a 'delayered' organisation, the opportunities for advancement (with a corresponding increase in compensation) would be few. Again, therefore, there is potential for immediate gain but a longer-term problem of employee resentment.
8.5 CONCLUSIONS

In the initial literature review, an apparent duality surrounding the concept of empowerment was identified - i.e. that it could be so highly praised and so severely maligned at the same time, with advocates applauding the concept as the universal panacea for all managerial ills, and critics denouncing empowerment as nothing more than an amalgam of all the participative management theories that have gone before it. In addition, an acknowledgement was made of the apparent naiveté of empowerment theory - namely that the simply act of ‘delayering’ the corporate hierarchy was sufficient to gain access to a claimed ‘untapped resource’ of creativity and productivity which Taylor’s traditional ‘command and control’ model of management had, as yet, been unable to do.

An examination of the theoretical antecedents of empowerment identified both a chequered heritage of humanistic management theories and some moot similarities in core ideology with Taylor’s principles of Scientific Management - namely, that both empowerment and Scientific Management are aligned with a foundational premise of production knowledge being held by the worker, with a consequent ignorance on the part of management - either by virtue of a basic lack of knowledge (Taylorism), or by physical separation from the ‘front-line’ (empowerment).

Further investigation identified an irreducible core element beneath the hyperbole and rhetoric surrounding the ideology of empowerment. This irreducible core centred on the clear transference of functional responsibility from one level of an organisation to another, with the proviso that employees are seen to be enabled with the necessary training and authority to fully undertake their new responsibilities.
After reviewing the research data collected on the five case study subjects, it is apparent that the search for evidence of this irreducible core element has been unsuccessful. In every case there appears to be a closer alignment with the platitudes and aphorisms of empowerment theory than any tangible evidence of empowerment practice. Senior Management Teams have made a conscious choice to embrace empowerment via a public proclamation of a commitment to a defined managerial concept as a means to achieve organisational change. However, the extent of the commitment seems only to reach as far as the utilisation of disparate elements of the ideology rather than endeavouring to pursue empowerment to its fullest extent.

As such, introducing team-based initiatives and job-enrichment plans can be seen to be more contemporary when given the label of 'empowerment', but this suggests a management philosophy that is guided more by rhetoric than a clearly defined strategy to challenge the status quo and pursue an alternative to the bureaucratic 'command and control' model of management. Moreover, empowerment only appears to be an attractive proposition when it is seen as not presenting a direct challenge to managerial prerogatives.

The Senior Executives of each organisation spoke with considerable disdain of empowerment's tarnished reputation and commonly perceived epithet of a 'flavour of the month' management concept (one even questioned the value of postgraduate-level research on the subject). Most took this disdain further by taking conscious action to avoid attaching the nomenclature to their initiatives altogether. Only Citycorp stood by the name, though on the basis of a conviction that their situation was so different as to preclude such an unfavourable outcome.
In practice, the subsequent behaviour of the Senior Management Teams of each organisation did more to prove an explicit alignment with the ‘flavour of the month’ approach than a conscious avoidance. In each case there was considerable dexterity demonstrated in capturing and endorsing the appropriate terminology and fervour that has come to accompany many empowerment initiatives, without any clear visions, strategies, or indeed daily operating plans to see their respective initiatives through to a successful outcome.

To some degree, the concept of empowerment itself can be seen to facilitate such an outcome. It takes little, if any, time or resources to make a corporate commitment to a new organisational culture, built, typically, on a newfound realisation of the value and potential of the organisation’s most expensive resource - labour. To put this in simpler terms, jumping on the empowerment bandwagon is too easy to do, as these case studies have demonstrated.

Any small-scale programmes that encompass greater employee involvement, work redesign, or team-based initiatives, can be seen to share a common heritage with empowerment; and if there is a sufficient number of these programmes within the organisation, a corporate ‘commitment’ to an ‘empowered’ work environment can be created with little effort, and even less substance.

Tolbert and Zucker’s (1996) notions of objectification and sedimentation gain relevance here. As long as empowerment retains the questionable nomenclature of a ‘flavour of the month’ or ‘fad’ initiative, those structures which do adopt the concept will remain semi-institutionalised and, more importantly, receptive to the next new managerial technique. Only when (or if) empowerment reaches some level of historical continuity (sedimentation) will there be any chance of removing the ‘fad’ label.
In addition, a too literal interpretation of the verb 'empower' as meaning to 'give away power' can be seen to result in an immediate and often drastic disassembly of the corporate framework with little thought as to how the organisation will function in the aftermath. Here again, a post-downsizing organisation can, conveniently, be labelled as a newly- 'empowered' work environment, since the absence of the now redundant middle managers and supervisors requires that employees work more autonomously. Unfortunately, the senior management team is likely to be dismayed when the much-heralded discretionary output from this 'revitalised' workforce remains out of their reach.

The inherent danger in this apparent lack of understanding (and consequent lack of preparation) lies in the emotions tied to the vested interests and positional fiefdoms that are directly challenged by any empowerment initiative. Employees are offered, in theory at least, the opportunity to start using their brains as well as their hands - in the majority of cases, a very positive and motivating prospect. Managers, on the other hand, see their traditionally authoritarian role as the leader, information giver, and permission provider, disappearing as their former charges begin making decisions without their input.

In a situation with such emotional volatility, a clearly-defined operational template is vital, not only to manage the expectations of the newly-empowered employees, but also to reassure and support managers as they transition from a controlling to a coaching role within the organisation. Without such a template, organisational chaos can ensue as individuals pursue independent agendas ranging from extreme over-achievement to direct and contrarian self-preservation.

For those organisations which sought to 'seed' their cultures with the 'basic values' of empowerment (Funworld and TelCo), and to then allow employees to experience autonomy on a gradual scale, there did appear to be some awareness of this potential emotional volatility. However, such efforts could equally mask a reticence to abandon the operational norms of direct managerial control.
Those who pursued separate, more financially explicit, commercial agendas (ParcelCo and ChemCo), using the concept of empowerment as an incidental (and often convenient) means to another end, appeared to run the greatest risk of creating expectations and fears which were not a part of the original plan, and hence were not prepared for. The consequent failure to acknowledge those fears and expectations served only to undermine the likelihood of a successful financial outcome.

Thus, all of the case subjects appeared to view empowerment either as an add-on component to a broader corporate initiative, (often as an apparently simple process for facilitating the disassembly of an expensive organisational framework), or, in a more humanistic vein, as a means of revitalising a disenfranchised workforce via the promise of creativity, autonomy, real input, and personal fulfilment. In either event, the initiatives were characterised by a lack of detailed understanding, preparation, both short and long-term planning, and awareness of the potential dangers should the initiative fail.

The lack of understanding only served to create a strong likelihood of misjudgement of both the organisation's readiness to be 'empowered' and of the amount of work and dramatic change involved in transforming and supporting the organisation through the process. Equally, a lack of awareness of the key issues, potential stumbling blocks, and determinants of a productive operative practice, would appear to preclude any form of successful outcome before the initiative was even begun.
Where the organisation chose to select what they perceived to be the ‘basic values’ of empowerment (TelCo and Funworld), there is a suggestion that the concept’s own genealogy has a role to play here. With such an inauspicious heritage as job enrichment, participative management, and employee involvement, it should come as no surprise that observers should look upon empowerment merely as a sum of component parts, and hence choose to select one or several of those components for their individual situation. However, whilst this approach may align itself to the ‘seeding’ methodology utilised by both SMT’s, it does not prepare the organisation for the change in design or operation which is most likely to follow as employees become familiar with their newly-granted autonomy. Similarly, where the organisation appeared to ‘stumble upon’ empowerment through the accrual of a series of independent initiatives (ChemCo and ParcelCo), the likelihood of a clear understanding of the potential impact of the concept for the organisation as a whole was again minimal.

The lack of preparation and planning was most evident in the area of skills training, where there seemed to be no concern for the potential danger inherent in creating an environment which demands a new level of performance without providing the tools and techniques to develop the skills to achieve that performance. To quote one disgruntled ChemCo employee’s description of his experience on an MIT:

“They open the door for you on all the possibilities and potential of getting things done through co-operation and teamwork, and then they slam the door in your face by sending you back to your own job where nothing has changed and nobody cares about the success you had with your project. It’s so frustrating.”
The key issue here is frustration. Committing to an operating environment based on autonomy and creativity without following through with the skills needed to work in that environment, delivers only false promises and frustration over both the loss of 'what might have been', and the complexity of what remains. For those employees that are able to experience the autonomy of a self-directed work team (ChemCo), the door is opened to an alternative means of managing an organisation. However, if this autonomy is restricted to specific project-based initiatives, then the door is closed when the employee returns to his or her regular tasks. Unfortunately, the isolationist approach to the granting of autonomy only serves to isolate those employees exposed to that autonomy. As such, the ease with which a diverse mix of humanistic initiatives may be labelled as 'empowerment' can turn out to be potentially the most dangerous element in the entire initiative, since it is this labelling which creates such high (and ultimately unmet) expectations.

8.5.1 EMPOWERMENT & INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

The distinct opportunism demonstrated in the adoption of empowerment by the candidate organisations appears to align closely with the key implications of Meyer and Rowan's (1977) notion that formal structures can have symbolic as well as action-generating properties:

1. *Formal structures can be adopted regardless of the current operational issues or problems facing the organisation:* All of the candidates responded to coercive (and some mimetic) isomorphic pressure in adopting empowerment initiatives as add-on solutions irrespective of the current state of their organisation. As such, the institutional constraints (along with Abrahamson's (1996) norms of managerial rationality and progress) appeared to carry greater influence than whether or not empowerment was the solution the any of the problems at hand. In addition, this brings into question whether or not there was any real commitment to an autonomous work environment for the organisation as a whole, or whether the concept simply offered a convenient short-term solution.
2. **Social evaluation of organisations (and hence organisational credibility and survival) can rest on observation of formal structures (that may or may not actually function) rather than observed outcomes related to actual task performance:** In other words, from an institutional theory perspective, the legitimacy of the organisation can be enhanced by the presence of the formal structure rather than its proven efficacy. If ‘empowerment’ is substituted as an alternate proposition (to the organisation of work) to ‘formal structures’, the conclusion is equally applicable. The presence of an initiative (even without evidence of proven activity) can be assumed to enhance the legitimacy of the organisation (as evidenced by the predominantly journalistic coverage of the topic).

However, without evidence of empowerment in action, the legitimacy rests on evidence of presence only and in the likely event of a failed initiative, credibility can only be maintained by moving on to the next ‘latest’ technique before the absence of definitive outcomes becomes apparent.

3. **The relationship between actual, everyday activities and behaviours of organisational members and formal structures may be negligible:** Here again, if empowerment is substituted for ‘formal structures’, the conclusion is equally applicable – i.e. there can be considerable disparity between the formal ‘theory’ of empowerment (previously identified in this research as the naivete of empowerment theory) and the reality of empowerment practice. In addition, a theoretical operating template designed to demonstrate increased responsibility and autonomy (Citycorp’s ‘FMG’ model for example) can ultimately bear little relation to the actual work being performed.
From the broader perspective of New Institutionalism (as represented by the work of Meyer & Rowan (1977) and Powell & DiMaggio (1991)), the level of attraction of empowerment to an organisation can be linked to that organisation’s desire to achieve or maintain credibility, legitimacy (and ultimately survival) through a perceived adoption of the ‘latest’ managerial technique. This compulsion can exist separately from any notion that the concept can actually offer practical solutions to current organisational problems. In simpler terms, it can be important to be seen to ‘have empowerment’ irrespective of a proven need for or confidence in the efficacy of the concept itself.

The inductive nature of the analytical template utilised here — the consequential model — was dictated by the apparent lack of evidence of any explicit transference of functional responsibility in the ‘empowerment’ initiatives of the five case study subjects. The consequences and outcomes presented in the model represent the observed dangers involved in the opportunistic utilisation of the concept to achieve alternate or specifically short-term organisational objectives.

This, in turn, presents something of a paradox. The desire for empowerment can be aligned to a compulsion for credibility, but the concept appears to have such volatility that the inappropriate utilisation of the concept can ultimately damage the functioning of the organisation (and hence its legitimacy and survival). So many vested interests can be challenged (senior management, line management, front-line employees) by a new autonomous work environment that the potential for organisational disruption appears to be enormous.

Thus, the unsuccessful endeavour to find substantive evidence of empowerment has resulted in a proposed extension to new institutionalism theory – namely that the state of semi-institutionalisation (characterised by Tolbert & Zucker’s (1996) objectification of a formal structure) can be said to carry the potential for organisational disruption. Previously, the state was viewed simply as a mid-point to formal institutionalisation as the structure experienced more historical continuity (sedimentation). As such, the nomenclature of ‘fad’ or ‘flavour of the month’ simply denoted a lack of expectation that the technique or concept was unlikely to make that transition.
The potential outcomes captured in the consequential model (on the basis of the research evidence gathered) suggest that failure to recognise the full range of ramifications involved in any empowerment initiative (i.e. that you are embarking upon a complete reorientation of the organisation's operational template) can pose a serious threat not only to the organisation's perceived legitimacy, but also to its core functioning.
9.0 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, & OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

9.1 SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The subject matter of this research study — the management concept known as empowerment — represents something of an enigma in Organisational Development theory. The concept's existence and utilisation is derided as being 'flavour of the month' and 'faddish', and yet, at the same time, senior managers feel compelled to introduce empowerment initiatives in their organisations — if only because their competitors appear to be doing so.

As is befitting any enigma, the concept is surrounded by rhetoric and hyperbole, promising dramatic organisational transformations on the basis of deceptively simple, if not blatantly logical, changes in managerial processes. However, beneath this alchemic façade lies a core of familiar and distinctly unfashionable humanistic management theories — work redesign, job enrichment and employee involvement.

Advocates argue that the concept of empowerment represents a new prescription of proven humanistic principles. Critics dismiss the concept as a contemporary reformulation of old and unproven material. Stories of corporate rescues, turnarounds and transitions seem plentiful, with accounts of 'failed' initiatives receiving considerably less attention. The success stories appear to suffer from the same alchemic patina, with a questionable substructure of journalistic data presenting anecdotal and subjective material rather than substantive, well-documented case histories.

Thus, in endeavouring to codify this enigma, a researcher is presented with an ill-defined subject that appears to promise a great deal but actually delivers very little, if anything, of substance, and yet manages to generate considerable publicity in the process. In this context, there appeared to be a need for a basic understanding of just how organisations perceive empowerment. Given all the apparent alchemy and hyperbole, what is it that managers understand empowerment to be, and what do they believe it can do for their organisations.
In the absence of a commonly accepted doctrine, reaching such an understanding would, it was hoped, generate sufficient data to validate the concept as being worthy of further, more substantive, research.

Five diverse case study subjects have been examined in an effort to understand the operational processes and original rationales behind their public commitment to an empowerment initiative. Intrigued, no doubt, by a plethora of attractive promises such as "release your staff's trapped potential" and "boost performance by removing barriers to success", (Stewart, 1994), each case study subject nevertheless seemed to bring a more pragmatic cost-driven perspective to empowerment. Each presented a specific set of expectations and assumptions as to how their respective empowerment initiatives would enable them to reach pre-determined organisational goals.

ChemCo, driven by prohibitive operating costs and a restrictive labour relations environment, sought direct bottom-line impact and appeared to see the label of 'empowerment' as a more 'employee friendly' means to introduce more flexible working practices. Funworld saw the potential return on heavy capital investments being undermined by poor customer interactions with park personnel, and sought to revitalise their staff through both increased autonomy and an enhanced awareness of their critical value in the overall 'Funworld experience'. ParcelCo, burdened by a similar operating cost and restrictive labour relations issues as ChemCo, sought greater flexibility through a dramatically restructured operational template. TelCo sought the benefits which empowerment seemed to offer to them in terms of increased productivity and flexibility without any explicit commitment to the concept within the plant itself. Citycorp saw their new operating environment under a 'Host' Company as only being viable with an empowered workforce, and hence the ACE (Assistant City Engineer) sought to drive his interpretation of the concept through as an operational necessity rather than an organisational goal.
However, this single-mindedness at least endowed the ACE with a genuine belief in the concept of empowerment, as opposed to the more opportunistic and utilitarian approach demonstrated by the other Senior Management Teams, who appeared to 'make use of' rather than fully embrace the concept. For them, the individual components they selected appeared to serve a specific purpose, and the ability to overlay a contemporary label (for their peers at least) was an added bonus.

The data gathered during the field research, however, suggests that, in every case, the 'empowerment' initiatives appeared likely to fail as a direct result of this opportunistic approach. Indeed, those few employees who were willing to attest to feeling 'empowered' admitted that they felt so almost in spite of their organisations rather than because of their new operating environments.

Does this then mean that empowerment deserves its much-maligned status? Is it the 'Emperor's New Clothes' (Argyris, 1998) of humanistic management theory? Any answer here would relate directly to an assessment of whether the initiatives witnessed in the case study organisations were truly empowerment (even in spirit if not in practice), or whether they were simply attempts to modify the more traditional ‘command and control’ model of management to achieve specific objectives.

The stated aim of this research was to identify organisational perceptions of empowerment by gaining research access to a series of companies who made a public commitment to the pursuit of an empowerment initiative in their respective organisations. Whilst no attempt was made to defend or challenge their individual definitions of empowerment on the basis of any form of an external quantitative model of the concept, it was necessary to develop a clear sense of an irreducible core of the concept in order to provide a suitable benchmark to assess the presence of empowerment within each initiative.
A review of literature and an examination of the theoretical antecedents of the concept led to the identification of an irreducible core element as being the clear transference of *functional responsibility* from one level of the organisation to another, such that employees are seen to be *enabled* with the necessary training and authority to fully undertake their new responsibilities. Moreover, in a more idealistic conception, only when the transference of responsibility can be seen to be proactive - i.e. that there is evidence of a conscious effort to align the organisational benefits of improved operational efficiency and productivity with increased job satisfaction for the employee, can it be called empowerment.

For these five organisations, each transfer of responsibility identified appeared to have been undertaken without any apparent concern for training or an appropriate investiture of the necessary authority - i.e. the transference remained *positional* rather than functional. ChemCo's team-based initiatives were driven by the expectations of Head Office's 'AAA' initiative, and staffed under extreme pressure from Senior Management. Once the project was finished, team members returned to their prior roles as if nothing had happened. For TelCo, even those employees who were advancing through the Production Career Structure (PCS) received only operative training, with no training in personnel skills or an apparent investiture of authority alongside their new responsibilities. Funworld offered the isolated example of the modification of the Area Controller role, but here again there was no training or increase in authority, only an increase in expectations of performance. For ParcelCo, the creation of the role of General Manager for each Business Unit was undertaken through selection rather than training, and the continued involvement of (and close monitoring by) ParcelCo Headquarters in daily operations via key Performance Indicators (KPI's) certainly offered increased performance expectations with no evidence of an accompanying investment of authority.
Such evidence presents a situation in which the Senior Management of five companies profess, in a public forum (business conferences), to be empowering their organisations, but can offer no evidence of such empowerment beyond the restructuring of their organisational templates and processes on a positional level. Justification for such behaviour can be seen to centre on four possibilities:

a) That there was a deliberate attempt to mislead and misrepresent the initiative from the outset. Given the common willingness to allow the researcher complete access to each organisation, and the frank and honest nature of the answers given to interview questions, this seems very unlikely.

b) That a conscious choice was made to explicitly label or frame the initiative in the most contemporary manner. This has some validity for the more bureaucratic organisations in the group. Both ParcelCo and ChemCo were endeavouring to introduce change initiatives which were likely to be perceived as dramatic by their respective workforces (and, hopefully, suitably aggressive and avant-garde by their Corporate Elders). In addition, each organisation was experiencing problematic Industrial Relations as a result of poorly-planned past negotiations with their Unions. As such, promoting a change initiative as being topical and forward thinking, avoided the issue of ‘fixing past mistakes’ altogether. For ChemCo in particular, there was already an established pattern, as noted by the Quality Improvement Manager of being “a sucker for any buzzword going.”
For Citycorp, the development of the ‘Finders, Minders & Grinders (FMG) Model’ had begun around the same time that the organisation began to search for potential ‘Host’ companies under the VCT process. Whilst Senior Management considered Citycorp to be an attractive proposition for any potential host by virtue of the history, tradition, and prestige of the Local Authority, the promotion of a contemporary organisational model which appeared to align itself with the concepts of a very topical management philosophy, would certainly help to assuage any concerns over bureaucracy or an inherent ‘civil service mentality’ impeding the required transition to the operating culture of the new ‘Host’.

In addition, the audience at the business conferences at which these organisations were first selected, would have been comprised of peers and colleagues, who would have been more receptive to a contemporary or at least topical initiative than a ‘nuts and bolts’ recounting of internal corporate initiatives.

c) Developing the Machiavellian theory further, it can be argued that there was a conscious choice to utilise specific ideas from the concept of empowerment to meet individual organisational objectives without embracing the entire philosophy as an overarching corporate strategy. ParcelCo and TelCo both needed more flexible working practices to raise productivity. ChemCo needed to introduce a more cost-effective compensation plan (built upon more flexible working practices) without jeopardising existing productivity levels. In this context, introducing team-based initiatives, new job descriptions, and higher expectations of work performance under the banner of a concept which purports to offer greater autonomy and job satisfaction for employees must have seemed like an attractive proposition. Moreover, all three organisations were aware enough of the tarnished reputation of the concept to downplay the nomenclature internally.
A significantly more difficult issue to address (and to prove, since it would require a direct admission) is that of a conscious avoidance of change to the managerial role within each of our case study organisations. If Bowen & Lawler’s (1992) three typologies of empowerment are considered, it is possible to identify support among the SMT’s of the five case study subjects for suggestion involvement (granting the power of suggestion with management retaining the rights of decision and final implementation) and for job involvement (job redesign and enrichment where employees are encouraged to bring a variety of skills to bear on their work performance). Indeed, all of the organisations were staking their future growth on increased job involvement from their employees.

However, there appeared to be little evidence of support for (or even a willingness to consider) the third typology - high involvement - where employees are given shared responsibility not only in their own work performance, but also in the performance of the organisation as a whole. (Full participation in all aspects of the operation is encouraged by means of free access to corporate information, and the provision of new skills training where necessary). At this level, the concept of empowerment is being fully embraced, and, by definition, everything in the organisation is open for revision - including the managerial role.

Both ParcelCo and Citycorp offered a redefinition of the managerial role in their ‘new’ operational templates (‘OQL’ and ‘FMG’), but in each case the driving force was operational (and geographic) practicality rather than any sense of a dramatic revision or enhancement of either the managerial or employee roles - ParcelCo redistributed their locations into geographic Business Units on the basis of the cost restrictions of their existing network of depots and sorting centres; Citycorp reworked their organisation chart into the ‘FMG’ model on the basis of a series of compromises over the Consultant/Client division at the start of the VCT process (and this, in itself, had been driven by tenure with the Local Authority rather than skills).
d) The last (and certainly the least Machiavellian) possibility is that there was a shared lack of understanding of the full ramifications of the concept of empowerment among the five case study subjects. If a distinction is made between the apparent naivété of empowerment theory (i.e. that this concept can address all managerial and organisational ills) and the pragmatic reality of empowerment practice (i.e. that the realisation of any of those claims requires the adoption of dramatically different organisational processes), then it can be said that the SMT’s had a general familiarity with the former, but very little understanding of the latter. However, in the interests of fairness, this issue would probably not have been perceived as a weakness by the Senior Managers themselves - they appeared to see empowerment as offering what they needed and simply chose to act upon that. Indeed, only the Managing Director of ParcelCo was willing to admit that: “Organisationally, empowerment is not something we have an understood concept of.” This possibility aligns with itself with a more common predilection for opportunism in the utilisation of the concept of empowerment, and for an organisation as large as ChemCo to use a narrative work such as Byham’s novella ‘Zapp! The Lightening of Empowerment!’ as an unofficial ‘handbook’ suggests even greater opportunism.

In each case evidence was found of a general cognisance of the ‘promise’ of empowerment, along with a professed agreement with the underlying logic of that ‘promise’ – i.e. that employees bring more than their hands to work and that work environments are not always conducive to the creation of highly motivated and engaged employees. In addition, there was a strong mindfulness of empowerment’s tarnished reputation as a management ‘fad’ - strong enough in several cases (Funworld, TelCo, and ParcelCo) to warrant a conscious effort to avoid the nomenclature altogether.

Beyond this basic familiarity, however, there appeared to be no willingness to consider the practical reality of the concept of empowerment - i.e. exactly what would be involved in bringing about the ‘organisational transformations’ that empowerment professed to deliver, and what the wide-ranging consequences would be for the organisation as a whole in bringing about such a deliverance.
Moreover, there appeared to be a stronger literal commitment to the verb than to the concept, with each Senior Management Team seeking to 'give away' just enough power to achieve their planned outcomes, without completely restructuring their organisational templates and directly challenging the status quo of their managerial roles.

Whilst the apparent willingness to acknowledge the need to revisit managerial processes does warrant some praise, the underlying intransigence implied by the explicit endeavours to merely 'modify' the 'command and control' model does suggest an affiliation more with the cautious 'lunatics running the asylum' view of empowerment (i.e. that increased autonomy promotes less control, which in turn promotes greater risk), rather than any firm belief in its full potential.

Any degree of unpreparedness on the part of the organisation's workforce should warrant caution in any major initiative, but it would seem that the response to that caution in a true empowerment initiative would be to address the unpreparedness via the development of a support structure of training and coaching rather than simply undertaking minor adjustments to the management of an existing model.

The absence of such a support structure in the five organisations studied can thus be seen to further reinforce how basic the level of awareness of the full complexity of any empowerment initiative appeared to be among the Senior Management Teams.

The SMT of TelCo can be singled out in this respect for their firm conviction that the motivation and commitment of their employees was directly manageable through the gradual introduction of team-based initiatives and therefore did not warrant the dedication of time and resources to the creation of a 'support framework' for their initiatives. Not only would their approach enable them to avoid direct confrontation with their Unions over performance-related pay issues, but also the replication of the cell-manufacturing approach would, they believed, allow them to control the momentum of change (and hence release them from any need to build a support framework in advance of any changes in organisational processes). The reality, of course, was markedly different. Employees in the plant were fully aware of the SMT's undisclosed pursuit of more flexible working practices and interpreted the low-key approach as being indicative of a hidden agenda which held the promise of a distinctly unfavourable outcome for the staff.
In this context, the decision to ‘manage’ the process rather than to address the issue of change directly, and to prepare for the consequences of those changes in the daily operation of the plant, succeeded only in creating a suspicious workforce who were negatively disposed to the initiative from the outset.

However, if this opportunistic approach to empowerment can be said to have predicated the apparent failure of their respective initiatives, this cannot then be taken as proof of any insubstantiality on the part of empowerment as a concept. On the contrary, it would appear to prove that the reputation which empowerment has engendered as being easy to implement (‘simply remove the organisational barriers to creativity and productivity’), has done more to harm its longer-term development as a pivotal concept in the humanistic movement than any individual misapplication.

In addition, the chequered heritage of such equally maligned humanistic management concepts as job enrichment and worker participation, has done little to lay a strong foundation for empowerment. Indeed, much of the core content of the humanistic ‘school’ is by no means radical. The idea of ‘treating employees like human beings’ rather than production resources may have been novel in its time but it has been around for 50 years or more in one version or another, and in each instance it has failed to completely overthrow Taylor’s ‘command and control’ principles, upon which most of modern commercialism is still based.
In this context, companies that have endeavoured to enhance the perceived autonomy of their employees have indeed witnessed improvements in productivity levels within their organisations. Unfortunately, the majority of these enhancements have been achieved either through sheer economic necessity ('backs to the wall’ empowerment), where a financial imperative has warranted ‘throwing out’ the old policy and procedures manual, or through the single-minded and often maverick vision of the organisations most senior executive (e.g. Ricardo Semler at Semco, Jan Carlzon at SAS, Richard Branson at the Virgin organisation, Herb Kelleher at Southwest Airlines, and Jack Welch at General Motors). In no case, as yet, has there been a situation in which a detailed plan was constructed in which the outcome of a theoretically ‘empowered’ organisation was fully visualised, committed to and prepared for, such that every member of the organisation was left fully aware of how their role in the company would change, what their new responsibilities would be, and precisely how the new organisation would function on a day-to-day basis.

9.2 IMPLICATIONS

The research findings have revealed that this proclaimed ‘universal panacea’ of organisational development appears to necessitate a great deal more thought, planning, effort and management than its characteristic adoption as a ‘policy du jour’ would suggest. Empowerment does profess to offer an attractive outcome for any organisation - an autonomous, creative, and highly productive workforce. It also appears to be malleable enough in composition (a selection of familiar, if disputed, humanistic management philosophies) to imply a deceptive ease of introduction and management. As such, Senior Managers can be seen to feel comfortable in selecting individual pieces of the concept to apply in their own organisation (most often team-based initiatives), without any apparent obligation or desire to consider the relative merits or ramifications of the ideology as a whole.
Thus far, a significant disparity has been identified between the clinical definition of empowerment and the more malleable and utilitarian definition preferred by the Senior Management Teams of the five case study organisations. Full empowerment, by the working definition of this study, demands change in both the managerial and employee roles over and above any consequent restructuring of the organisation chart and modifications to standard operating policies and procedures. This is critical if the transference of responsibility is to be functional rather than positional. Employees must feel enabled to take on those new responsibilities, both from the perspective of an appropriate senior management endorsement of their autonomy in the role, and in the appropriate skills training for that role. Managers, in turn, must feel equally reassured that they have a role to play in this new work environment, and that they clearly understand the parameters of their new role.

Senior Managers, it appears, would prefer to draw upon individual facets of the concept in order to achieve other corporate objectives, without challenging the status quo of a proven (from their perspective) managerial model of 'command and control'. As such, they can be seen to be 'making use of' the concept to achieve short-term objectives.

Unfortunately, the literature surrounding the concept is not exclusive to the managerial domain, such that employees are likely to be aware of the reputation of empowerment and to draw their own conclusions. Once the epithet becomes attached to the initiative, Pandora’s Box is opened. The employees bring along their own expectations of autonomy and/or reduced managerial oppression, and then appear to clash head-on with managerial expectations of increased flexibility and productivity with minimal impact to the classic managerial model.

This disparity has ramifications for empowerment as a concept, and for both the ideology and commercial application of management:
9.2.1 THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

There is no doubt that empowerment, as a concept, remains topical and contemporary and has garnered considerable attention as a management tool for organisational change. However, the absence of empirical data to support anecdotal 'success stories' has resulted in a tarnished reputation which has arisen out of a suspected misapplication of a misunderstood managerial philosophy. The genealogy of the concept is very familiar (job enrichment, employee involvement, humanistic management) and its promised outcomes (increased creativity and productivity in an autonomous work environment requiring less supervision) are particularly topical for a commercial climate which is increasingly focused on rationalisation of personnel as a means of cost reduction.

In this context, empowerment may simply be a victim of its own typology in that it is too easy to 'jump on the bandwagon'. As an amalgam of other theories, empowerment is, arguably, too malleable to stand alone as a unique philosophy with specific performance criteria. As many organisations appear to have found (ChemCo, for example), it is relatively easy to initiate a series of low risk/high impact front-line projects (usually team-based) and to then roll them up into one large enterprise under the banner of 'empowerment', with minimal ramifications for the standard managerial model. In this situation, the expectations of employees may be raised unreasonably high on the promise of greater autonomy and job satisfaction, with a subsequent demoralisation when the realisation that the managerial framework is unlikely to change sets in.

Thus, the expectations of managers are not met because the concept is often misapplied, and the expectations of employees are not met because the misapplication negates any possibility of a successful outcome - such is the origin of a tarnished reputation as a 'managerial fad'.
Reclamation of this reputation requires that empowerment not only begin living up to expectations (through thoroughly researched and documented case studies rather than anecdotal success stories) but also that the concept be more accurately defined and positioned, both clinically and commercially, such that it is no longer seen as an amalgam of other theories but rather a robust, empirically-grounded ideology with quantifiable outcomes that are attainable (as opposed to promised) on the basis of a clearly defined set of processes.

9.2.2 THE IDEOLOGY OF MANAGEMENT

Empowerment is often positioned as the nemesis of Taylor’s ‘command and control’ model of management – i.e. empowerment was considered because the existing bureaucratic model was perceived to be malfunctioning. However, as has been identified in a detailed examination of the theoretical antecedents of empowerment, this positioning is questionable at best. To assume that the principles of Scientific Management warrant the wresting of control from workers to managers is more Fordist than Taylorist, and to then proffer empowerment as the champion for claiming the control back again merely adds further confusion. This notion of a battle for power between managers and workers has generated a preconception that empowerment is a zero sum process with power being devolved from managers to employees, with the subsequent task performance of both donor and recipient changing dramatically, to the point where managers no longer have a raison d'être in the organisation. Not only is this argument solely substantiated by examples of past ‘empowerment’ practice, but it also rests on the same flawed logic as putting a fox in charge of a chicken coop (i.e. that those most likely to gain from the continuation of the status quo have the final vote on the change initiative).
In reality, the demarcation between donor and recipient is not that exclusive. Whilst it is true that the concept of empowerment suggests a superordinate to subordinate devolution, such a process is equally applicable to senior and middle management as to supervisors and front-line employees. Thus, the middle management function is not automatically made redundant by the empowerment process. As such, empowerment can be related more to a complete restructuring of the communication processes and chains of command than to a simple removal of specific layers of organisational hierarchy on the basis of power transference and consequent middle management redundancy.

However, for the ideology of management to embrace this possibility and hence to fully realise the potential of empowerment, requires that the traditional Fayol model of managerial functions - to plan, organise, co-ordinate, motivate, and control - be replaced by a recognition of (or at least a minimum level of faith in) the innate abilities of the entire workforce, and a commitment from the managerial domain to develop a suitably supportive and collaborative framework to capitalise upon those abilities. This, in turn, requires a covenant from Senior Management to develop the coaching and leadership skills of their managers as they face the reorientation of their role away from daily co-ordination and control.

9.2.3 THE APPLICATION OF MANAGEMENT

A key obstacle to the general acceptance of the theoretical validity of empowerment has been the economic reality of commercial business practice and the consequent cost-driven nature of most managerial initiatives. Under constant pressure to increase revenues or reduce costs (or both) in the pursuance of short-term profitability at the expense of long-term growth, rationalisation of the labour force has become a fruitful target. Whilst the justification for 'delayering' may be economic, the explanation for those surviving the process has been couched in the terminology of empowerment - greater autonomy and the opportunity for more creativity in work performance - if only to avoid a feared 'siege mentality' arising out of a singular focus on job security.
If the professed potential of empowerment is to be fully realised, then the opportunistic selection of individual facets of the concept demonstrated thus far must be replaced by a longer-term commitment to the direct integration of the ideology into the corporate culture (as opposed to pursuing the initiative as an add-on component to achieve an alternative corporate outcome). Such an approach requires not only more time than has typically been given to such initiatives (thus undermining any short-term gains), but also demands a greater degree of understanding, preparation and planning than has been demonstrated by these five case study subjects, along with a clear strategy for ongoing monitoring and support for the initiative once launched. The exact nature of this support would most likely be company-specific, but should include, at the very least, interpersonal skills training for those employees who will be introduced to team-based projects for the first time, and also coaching and leadership skills for those managers whose traditional roles would be re-oriented.

Obviously, such a commitment of time and resources carries with it a sizeable expense for any organisation, and it is here that the current absence of empirical data to support the theoretical validity of the concept continues to impede its advancement. If empowerment is to be differentiated from other ‘flavour of the month’ initiatives, then it ultimately needs to be quantifiable in order to justify the expense of putting a support infrastructure in place - i.e. there must be a way to show a measurable return on investment (ROI) rather than vague promises of organisational transformations.
9.3 OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In discussing the research methodology for this study, it was acknowledged that the subject matter - empowerment - is very contemporary yet fraught with potential problems in misunderstanding and misapplication of the concept. Clear disagreements were identified on a series of issues, including:

- What precisely ‘empowerment’ is - a theory, a concept, a philosophy, a ‘school of thought’, a process, or merely an amalgam of several humanistic management theories that have come before it.
- What an organisation can expect to gain from an empowered workforce - much is promised in increased loyalty, creativity and productivity.
- What employees stand to gain from being ‘empowered’ - again, much is promised in increased autonomy and greater involvement in the organisation.
- What it means to be empowered - do you feel different?; do you perform differently?, and if so, how?
- Whether or not it is possible to classify different levels or ‘degrees’ of empowerment.
- How you would go about quantifying those varying degrees.

The interpretative method adopted here, on the premise of an identified irreducible core element of empowerment (the transference of functional responsibility) has been designed to reach a broader level of understanding of what empowerment means for organisations - i.e. what Senior Managers consider it to be and what they believe it can do for their organisations - such that more substantive hypotheses can be generalised for future research.
The unexpected outcome has been that even with five public proclamations of empowerment across five very different industry sectors - Municipal Civil Engineering, Electronic Manufacturing, Chemical, Parcel Delivery, and Leisure/Tourism - no definitive evidence of the devolution of functional responsibility proposed in the tentative hypothesis has been identified. This, in turn, leaves many of the above questions without substantive data. However, the drawback in the absence of empowerment is counterbalanced by more robust data on:

- The low levels of basic understanding of the full ramifications of the concept,
- The apparent predilection for selective use of individual facets of the concept for alternative organisational means.
- The dangers inherent in the aggregate genealogy of empowerment.
- The apparent intransigence of Senior Managers in addressing the evolution of the managerial model.

What this means for future research is that the concept remains as a misunderstood and often misapplied managerial tool that is in great need of a more robust substructure if it is to survive its anticipated demise as a ‘managerial fad’. The nature of the outcomes of that future research should include:

9.3.1 A DISTINCT THEORY OF EMPOWERMENT

The irreducible core was developed out of a detailed literature review and an examination of the theoretical antecedents of empowerment. For empowerment to persist as a stand-alone concept, there is a need for clarity of definition over and above its chequered humanistic heritage. This definition could be arrived at through quantitative analysis of existing anecdotal data in order to identify common themes or tenets for a substantive definition (an inferential approach). Alternatively, an external deductive framework could be applied for reciprocity testing on both historic and contemporary data.
9.3.2 A CONTROLLED EXPERIMENT

One of the key impediments in the analysis of anecdotal data has been the isolation of an ‘empowerment’ initiative (and in particular the individual facets of that initiative) as the critical element in the achievement of the recorded outcomes (as opposed to the financial stability of the organisation, the forceful character of the Chief Executive in driving the change through, the unique mix of personnel in the workforce, etc.). A controlled experiment of sufficient complexity to gauge the impact of an empowerment process on an otherwise stable organisational model could generate vital data on which areas of the organisation are most impacted by empowerment and hence are likely to need support and skills development to arrive at a successful outcome.

The practical viability of a controlled experiment for an entire organisation is obviously somewhat limited, but the same methodology could be applied to an individual department within an organisation as a precursor to a larger study.

9.3.3 QUANTITATIVE MODELLING

Given that the current predilection for ‘delayering’ or ‘downsizing’ organisations is driven by the potential cost savings to be realised, one of the most promising ways to pre-empt such activity is to demonstrate the potential return on investment from the empowerment of an organisation’s workforce. Such modelling could include:

9.3.3.1 ‘Empowerable’ vs. ‘Unempowerable’ Organisations

Much of the naivété of empowerment theory centres on the notion that the ‘untapped resource’ of employee creativity and productivity is simply there for the asking, such that managers have little to do other than removing bureaucratic obstacles within the organisation to access this resource. In reality, not every member of the workforce is likely to react to increased responsibility or autonomy in the same way - some will flourish, others will perish, and others will endeavour to avoid changing at all - and not all managers are likely to respond well to the newly-defined role of ‘coach’ instead of ‘boss’.
Any form of template or assessment tool which would allow an organisation to gauge the level of preparedness for empowerment within their workforce would contribute greatly to the development of an appropriate support plan for the initiative and reduce the likelihood of failure. This could be achieved through the modification of sociological research - specifically profiling tools - since empowerment can be considered primarily as a behavioural issue.

9.3.3.2 'Greenfield' versus 'Brownfield' Empowerment

In a similar vein, the anticipated problems in the empowerment of a new organisation site (‘Greenfield’), versus and existing facility (‘Brownfield’), can be pre-empted via an appropriate assessment tool to measure the level of preparedness. For the Greenfield site, the level of preparedness could be managed through selection and hiring criteria (again using profiling tools). For the Brownfield site, you would be (as in 3.31) identifying the areas of the organisation most likely to need additional support during the process.

9.3.4 THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS

One of the key discussions identified in the original methodology of this study was the issue of precisely what ‘empowerment’ is - a philosophy, a concept, a ‘school of thought’, a managerial tool, or a process. A clear dogma (though aggregate in nature) has been identified around the subject matter, but since the root derivation is the verb ‘to empower’, it would seem that the most appropriate label is that of a process. When the anticipated transformation of the organisation is considered, there is a definite change expected, which is, of necessity, a process.
Conger & Kanungo’s (1988) model of the five stages of an empowerment process is qualitative and somewhat generic in design. For a Senior Management Team seeking to plan the empowerment of their organisation, quantifying such states as “vicarious experience” and “emotional arousal” in Stage 3 of the process is likely to prove somewhat difficult. A quantitative model could offer a more robust substructure to each stage, such that a predetermined score on a profile questionnaire could be used as a guide or indicator that the department or organisation is ready to move on to the next stage of the process. Here again, the preferred outcome is empirically sound data in order to build a case for the allocation of resources.

9.4 SUMMARY

Irrespective of its definition as an ideology or a process, the material content surrounding empowerment has proven to be sufficiently robust to have survived for 50 years or more in one theoretical form or another. The individual tenets of ‘job enrichment’ and ‘employee involvement’ and others have been criticised as being ‘soft’, ‘intangible’ and even ‘obvious’ and this may well be why the humanistic movement has been unsuccessful in bringing about lasting change in the traditional ‘command and control’ managerial model. This may also explain the apparent predilection for the reformulation of these concepts into contemporary theories every few years.

Nevertheless, the notion that employees have more to offer than the production skills for which they are usually hired does remain blatantly evident. The fact that empowerment as a concept has failed to address the continued obscurity of this issue to such a degree that it can now be maligned as “The Emperor’s New Clothes” (Argyris, 1998), suggests that there is a critical need to further support the concept with a robust and empirically sound substructure. Without a stronger theoretical base (either clinical or academic), and the development of a cadre of well-documented case studies in place, it is likely that the current misapplication by opportunistic management teams will continue to such an extent that a concept which has the potential to offer so much will remain as nothing more than a managerial fad.
If there were any blame to be apportioned here, it would seem that all parties involved could be seen to be guilty of misuse of the concept. Advocates, both academic and commercial, have sought to promote the concept on the basis of an operational utopia of motivated, fulfilled and creative employees supported by equally fulfilled and motivated (presumably as a result of being freed from the stress of supervision) managers. This promises much, but in the absence of well-argued (and well-documented) case histories for consideration, the argument degenerates into hyperbole and rhetoric. If a truly ‘empowered’ organisation does exist, research is needed to determine how such an outcome was achieved – what was changed and where, who was involved, how long did it take, and how the organisation functions on a daily basis – all very fundamental questions.

Critics of the concept focus on the aggregate genealogy of the concept – ‘all the old familiar humanistic concepts presented in a new prescription’. This may be factually correct, but the position does nothing to validate or invalidate empowerment as a concept. It may be argued that since the theoretical antecedents of empowerment have been unsuccessful in replacing Taylor’s bureaucratic model, a new prescription that seems to represent an amalgam of all those antecedents is unlikely to have any greater success. However, such criticism does not address the blatant logic underpinning the concept – namely that employees are capable of more than the productive output they are hired to generate – an issue captured so delicately in the phrase ‘you buy their hands and get their brains for free’.
This leads to the question that if the logic is so blatant, then why isn’t empowerment living up to expectations as a universal panacea for all managerial ills? The answer would seem to lie in the incorrect assumption that this ‘untapped resource’ of employee creativity is simply there for the asking, and that gaining access to such a resource involves only the removal of organisational barriers to productivity. The assumption is flawed on two counts. First, that every employee wants to be empowered and is simply waiting for the opportunity to flourish as a creative, motivated and highly committed team member. Second, that every ‘empowered’ employee will take to the new work environment like a duck to water, with no need for skills training or coaching support for him or his peers.

Furthermore, the apparent ease of utilisation generated by this misinterpretation has allowed most organisations that have been attracted to the concept to conveniently interpret ‘organisational barriers’ as being personnel (typically middle management) rather than managerial policies or procedures. Unfortunately, this has turned the focus away from greater creativity and flexibility to ‘the same production with less labour cost’. Employees, in turn, have come to recognise empowerment as ‘more work for the same money’. Even those who would have welcomed the opportunity for greater involvement and autonomy in their work performance and hence would have needed minimal support, end up frustrated at the organisation’s failure to fulfil the promise of empowerment.

In this context, a relatively straightforward and undoubtedly fiscally attractive human resource initiative can result in serious damage to the organisation. Production is likely to suffer (as the delayered organisation seeks to restructure information and communication links), and employee morale is damaged as workers face ‘more work for the same money’ and the uncertainty of further ‘empowerment’ down the line.
In conclusion, criticising empowerment as the “Emperor’s New Clothes” (Argyris, 1998) or ‘flavour of the month’ or even as a ‘fad’ can be seen to be just as easy as jumping on the empowerment bandwagon. However, a pivotal assumption is made in proffering such criticism – namely that Fayol’s management functions (plan, act, co-ordinate and control) should therefore remain the exclusive property of the managerial domain. If there is no such thing as empowerment, then workers, by definition, are capable of nothing but the performance of their assigned tasks. This is, of course, risible. Unfortunately, the selection of the root verb, to empower, has relegated serious discussion on the issue to who gives which power to whom and how much! As these five case studies have demonstrated, greater autonomy and creativity is not an issue of managerial authority to be given away (or not) by the incumbents of that authority. It is an issue of enablement for both the employees and the organisation as a whole. Greater autonomy means less direct control, which, in turn, means change to the traditional command and control model. Any initiative that endeavours to achieve increased productivity and flexibility without addressing this issue cannot succeed because there are too many vested interests at stake – employees need to know what they are responsible for, and managers need to now what it is they are managing.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX 1

Production Career Structure

TELCO
INVESTING IN EXCELLENCE (I.I.E.)

PROGRAMME OUTLINE

PHASE 1

UNIT 1
Our Belief System
UNIT 2
The Search for the Truth
UNIT 3
How Our Mind Works
UNIT 4
The Success Model
UNIT 5
The Psychological Foundation
Of Our Habits & Attitudes
UNIT 6
Assimilating Reality
UNIT 7
Comfort Zones – Internal
UNIT 8
Assimilating the New Vision
UNIT 9
Affirmations – the Tools of Change
UNIT 10
Imprinting
UNIT 11
The Success Cycle
UNIT 12
The Power of Self-Esteem
UNIT 13
Creating & Sustaining Momentum
UNIT 14
Captain of the World
UNIT 15
Practising Excellence

PHASE 2

UNIT 1
Living a Purposeful Life
UNIT 2
Building a Co-Responsible Team
UNIT 3
End Result Thinking
UNIT 4
Making Change an Adventure
UNIT 5
Governing Principles for Success
UNIT 6
Natural Creativity
UNIT 7
Guides to Goal-Setting Part I
UNIT 8
Guides to Goal-Setting Part II
UNIT 9
The Challenge is Yours
UNIT 10
Empowering Self & Others
TELCO'S
PEOPLE CONTRACT

The ORGANISATION will, in line with the aims of the business:

- Provide opportunities for all people to fulfill their potential both as individuals or as members of a team within the organisation.
- Communicate information to all people to enable them to understand and contribute to the business.
- Consult everyone on decisions affecting our future.
- Enable people to participate in adding value to the business and in eliminating non-added value.
- Empower people to contribute to achieving the site strategy.
- Invest in the development of its people.
- Recognise and reward people for their contributions.
- Respect and value people as individuals.

It is expected that EMPLOYEES will:

- Take responsibility for developing their full potential as individuals and team members.
- Be receptive to information and gain understanding of matters affecting the business.
- Feedback concerns and offer proposals.
- Take opportunities to actively participate in aspects of the business where they can add value and eliminate non-added value.
- Take responsibility in areas of the business where they can contribute.
- Use newly-acquired knowledge and skills to improve effectiveness.
- Contribute fully.
- Respect and value each other.
Citycorp
Consultant/Client Split

NOTES:
1. If VCT route was followed, the Consultant Team would leave to become a separate business unit within a 'host company'.
2. If CCT route was followed, the Consultant Team (if necessary) could become a separate business unit within the Local Authority, or become an outside company.
‘FMG’ Model

DIRECTOR
(Former A.C.E.)

Executive Assistant

SENIOR ASSOCIATE
Implementation Group

Team Leader  Team Leader  Team Leader

SENIOR ASSOCIATE

Team Leader  Team Leader

ASSOCIATE

Team Leader  Team Leader  Team Leader  Team Leader

ASSOCIATE

Office Services Manager
KEY INFORMANTS INTERVIEWED - BY ORGANISATION

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<tr>
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<th>FUNWORLD</th>
<th>CITYCORP</th>
<th>PARCELCO</th>
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<td>Human Resources Dir.</td>
<td>Quality Manager</td>
<td>Senior Associate I</td>
<td>GM Personnel &amp; IR</td>
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<td>Personnel Manager</td>
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<td>Delivery Drivers (3)</td>
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** BOXED ITALICS DENOTES MEMBER OF SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM - INTERVIEWED ON FIRST & SECOND VISIT **
PRIMARY & SECONDARY EVIDENCE REVIEWED

Conference Paper
ChemCo Annual Reports (5)
Internal Newsletters (12)
AAA Materials
HR Manuals
IR Reports
Labour Agreement Materials
Quality & Safety Reports
Meeting Agendas & Notes
Engineering Reports

Conference Paper
TelCo Annual Reports (5)
HR Manuals
Meeting Agendas & Notes
PCS Assessments
Telephone Schematics
Aries Schematics

Conference Paper
Funworld Annual Reports (3)
Parent Co. Annual Reports (2)
Meeting Agendas & Notes
DTM Workshop Materials
HR Manuals

Conference Paper
IEA #49 - Testing The Market
DoE - CCT Report
Citycorp - Annual Reports (1)

Conference Paper
ParcelCo Annual Reports
Sister Co. Annual Reports
HR Manuals
Meeting Agendas & Notes
Quality Reports
Customer Service Reports
Sales Reports

DURATION OF SITE VISITS/DIRECT OBSERVATION TIME

2 x 5 day visits to plant
2 x 5 day visits to plant
2 x 5 day visits to park
2 x 2 day meetings
10 days throughout network
APPENDIX 7c

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS – QUESTION AREAS

1. The financial and operational condition of the organisation before and after the initiative.

What drove the organisation to pursue a new operational template – i.e. how was the existing operating model perceived as being broken or flawed? How were those flaws quantified and what were the corresponding changes in those measurements upon completion of the empowerment initiative?

2. Why empowerment was identified as a possible solution.

To what degree was the existing model perceived as being beyond modification or repair, and how different or extreme would this new ‘empowered’ model be from their current template? What was the driving force behind this choice – cost reduction, greater productivity, industrial relations issues, competition – and who was pushing the effort – senior management or the front-line employees?

3. What the senior management team of the organisation understood empowerment to mean, and how ready they felt the organisation to be, on the basis of that definition.

Was empowerment perceived as a managerial issue (affecting the way managers performed their tasks), an employee issue (affecting how the employees performed their tasks), or a procedural issue (impacting the administrative policies and procedures of the organisation) – or was it seen as a combination of all of the above? In addition, on the assumption that the end-state of an empowered organisation could be clearly vocalised, how prepared was the organisation to make the transition – would the journey be long or short? What was ‘empowerment’ seen by senior management to entail?
4. How the initiative was developed.

What steps were taken to design, create and implement the initiative? Was it an exclusively managerial project, or was the entire organisation involved? Was guidance sought from external ‘specialists’ and were the examples of other organisations copied in the creation of the new operational template? Was the project driven by cost or by outcome? What time frame was set for this organisational transition?

5. How the initiative was implemented.

Was the change gradual or immediate, by trial department or organisation-wide? Was the initiative led from the top (via senior management endorsement) or built from the bottom up (via direct employee involvement and support)? Was information on the project shared with the organisation in its entirety or in a piecemeal fashion on a ‘need-to-know’ basis? Was the new operating model presented as a fait accomplis or was it open to modification as the initiative moved forward?

6. Perceptions of the ‘empowerors’

How did those employees involved in the delegation of tasks and responsibilities see their roles changing and what was their reaction to the situation — a siege mentality (as demonstrated by SAS’s middle managers) or positive acceptance of a new work design. Was empowerment perceived as a loss of authority/responsibility or the gain of a more proactive and creative work environment? Did they feel prepared for both the transition and the change in the organisation? Were they given the opportunity for input before, during, and after the transition?
7. *Perceptions of the 'empowerees'.*

Did those receiving the newly delegated tasks and responsibilities feel adequately informed and prepared for the forthcoming changes? Did they see the change as an opportunity for more direct involvement in their work and greater ownership of a more creative work output, or was it simply 'more work for the same money'? Did they feel able to handle the transition or was there a perceived need for additional skills training? Were they given the opportunity for input before, during, and after the transition?

8. *What changes, if any, took place?*

Having examined and assessed the initiative and the 'empowered' operating model in theoretical terms, what actually happened to the organisation and its personnel? Was the project seen through to fruition or were there unexpected obstacles along the way? If changes were brought about, were they permanent or temporary? Were the changes true to plan or did events change mid-course? If no changes were realised, what were the reasons for that?

9. *Did the initiative succeed or fail and what were the reasons for that?*

On the assumption that the initiative commenced with a targeted finishing date in place, what was the status of the project at that date? Had the plan been completed successfully? Had the expected outcomes been realised? Were there any unexpected outcomes? Were they positive or negative?
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