



'Businessology' and Social Work

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There is a spectre stalking social work in many countries of the world. That spectre is the belief that social work needs to be reshaped in the image of capitalist business enterprises, what we might term business ideology or 'businessology'. Within that belief, the explicit or implicit assumption is that social work should, as far as possible, function as though it were a commercial business concerned with making profits. In those countries most affected, the culture of capitalism has colonised social work as business thinking and practices have been introduced. The embrace of businessology in social work is presented as a neutral trend, to which all social workers can be committed, namely, the modernisation of social work and making it more efficient through the application of distinctive and valuable expertise.

Here are two examples of the impact of businessology taken from the UK:

► *Can you work out what is being discussed in these examples? (Answers at the end of this essay!)*

(a) 'Mapping supply will involve an analysis of the market within which the service is operating. Within this analysis there will be four key areas for enquiry:

- An analysis of the existing stock
- An analysis of the various elements of service
- An analysis of services from other providers
- An analysis of alternatives that can be spot-contracted.'

(b) 'Our interest is in best practice in terms of what works why and how at the business level when customer-facing technologies are introduced. We have a services transformation practice and want to learn more about the art of the possible in order to help our clients solve their problems'.

These two extracts illustrate the extent to which, not just in the UK but also in an increasing number of other countries, 'strategies', 'visions', 'missions', 'business plans', 'performance indicators', 'devolved budgets', 'customer care' and so on ooze from every nook and cranny

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of social work. Far from being a neutral trend, businessology is a resource in a struggle for power. It is a strategy through which politicians and managers lay claim to power over social work. In many countries, business expertise has been used to rearrange and consolidate new sets of power relations in social work. The intention underpinning this power struggle has been the drive to cut the costs of social work, usually expressed in the language of businessology as 'doing more for less' or 'achieving value-for-money'. The overarching claim is that businessology has the solutions to any country's social and economic problems and that in pursuing those solutions politicians and managers have the right to claim authority and power over social work and to undermine professional and other sources of power. (Businessology regards professionals as potential villains, standing in the path of progress.) Social work regimes in which professionalism is prominent stand in the way of establishing new power relations, premised on the predominance of the exercise of managerial control.

Lest this be interpreted as a view of businessology as deterministic, it is important to stress that businessology does not have a single or fixed character. It is flexible and contingent; it is shaped by the national context in which it is located because here is significant variation in policy and in the organisational arrangements of social work in different countries. In any country that embraces businessology, there has to be *motive* and *opportunity*. For example, in the UK, the Thatcher and Major Conservative governments had both the motive and the opportunity for imposing businessology on social work. The motive was their commitment to welfare state reform, influenced by New Right ideas. The opportunity was provided by an economic crisis, the high degree of centralisation of the British state and the lack of a written constitution stipulating the limits of central government powers. These three factors provided the opportunity for Conservative governments to be highly interventionist in pushing businessology into social work, provided through Social Services Departments in local government and through non-governmental organisations. (The centralised state and absence of a written constitution enable New Labour governments to continue to do so.)

Drawing on the experience of countries that have experienced substantial onslaughts from businessology, is it possible to assess the extent to which it has penetrated social work in particular national contexts? Perhaps we can construct a '*businessology impact index*'. Here are nine indicators that might make up such an index:

- **The political positioning of social work in relation to the global economy:** The advance of businessology is often located in a political rationale about the pressure on nation states to reform their welfare systems in response to the demands for competitiveness in the global economy. This rationale is used to subordinate social work to the creation of economic and political conditions that will ensure international competitiveness. The introduction of businessology into social work is thus linked to maintaining the conditions necessary for profitability in order to avert capital flight and to attract new investment from multi-national corporations and international finance capital. Those countries in which globalisation is represented as an uncontradictory, uncontrollable, unitary phenomenon to which nation states must adapt in ways required by capital emphasise four themes: the primacy of economic competitiveness; the subordination of social work as an aspect of social policy to the needs of a competitive national economy; the limited or reduced scope envisaged for government social welfare intervention; and a central concern with control over public expenditure.

- **The intrinsic superiority of the market in the provision and delivery of welfare:** In those countries embracing businessology, market mechanisms are brought into the provision of social work in order to mimic the operational environment of capitalist enterprises, in the belief that the introduction of competition amongst service providers will result in more economical, efficient and effective services.
- **Privatisation:** Linked to the introduction of markets into social work is the privatisation of services and the introduction of competition between commercial social services and services provided by not-for-profit organisations.
- **The introduction of the purchaser-provider split:** In many countries, the cultural shift involved in introducing businessology into social work is crystallised in the purchaser-provider split, in which control resides with the purchaser who has the power to make decisions and see them carried through. The provider has to implement the purchaser's decisions. This clear separation in the roles of purchaser and provider is implemented through the use of service specifications and contracts.
- **The promotion of generic models of management derived from capitalist enterprises:** Capitalist sector management practices are seen as applicable to social work because businessology sees them as the solution to any problem. This generic management expertise is the foundation of businessology's reference to the 'right to manage' and 'good management practice'.
- **The intensification of work and increased scrutiny of work:** The overall underlying message, rarely explicitly articulated, contained within businessology and pursued through capitalist models of managing social work is that social workers should work harder. When they are managed as if they were employees in capitalist enterprises, pressure is exerted on managers to extract the maximum amount of work from them.
- **Scrupulous gate-keeping and strict rationing of resources:** Businessology requires social workers to see themselves not as professionals but as micro-managers of resources who carefully control access to and ration the distribution of services.
- **Subjecting social workers to standardised and computerised procedures:** Computerised information processing codifies professional knowledge through categorisation and classification of the life situations of service users and the social work practices directed towards them. Social workers follow through the actions required by information technology systems, which allow detailed specification of tasks and checking on their completion. Much of this control is expressed in computerised manuals, directions and guidelines that limit professional discretion and set up standardised and repetitive systems, with tightly defined criteria for eligibility to services, standardised assessment tools, interventions which are often determined in advance from a limited list, minimisation of contact time, micro-case management and pressure for throughput.
- **The use of capitalist sector performance management techniques:** Businessology introduces measurable standards and pre-set output measures and monitors the performance of social work against those standards and measures through audits, inspections, quality assessments and reviews.

► *How does your country measure up against the indicators in this 'businessology impact index'?*

Businessology may have been introduced into social work in many countries of the world but dilemmas, problems and contradictions remain. When managers exercise the power accorded to them by businessology, they do so in the face of continuing challenges, for example professionals will sometimes try to use their knowledge and skills to push businessology objectives and their implementation in particular directions. There is also the question of how the voices of the users of social work are to be heard. Great stress is placed on 'customers' by businessology and there is the potential for service users to take the businessology rhetoric seriously and insist on more meaningful participation in service provision. In other words, there is (at least limited, and more so in some countries than others,) space for struggles from professionals and service users in attempting to determine the forms which businessology takes. For example, talk by politicians and managers of making services more effective or improving their quality opens up spaces for professional and user groups, or alliances of interests between them, to argue about what 'effectiveness' or 'quality' means. In this sense, businessology creates sites for conflict between different interests through which claims to power can be pressed. This might not appear to be much of a radical thought in countries in which the impact of businessology has not been strongly felt, but it's a fairly radical thought in those countries in which businessology is well advanced. In any case, for the foreseeable future it may be all we have with which to work in those countries where social work has experienced the full force of businessology.

The examples of businessology:

(a) A senior manager writing about expanding the number of foster parents available to social workers to be used for placements of children and young people.

(b) A management consulting company explaining its interest in introducing telephone call centres into social work to replace initial contact with social workers.

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