

Manufacturing Excellence: The Competitive Edge

T. PFEIFER, W. EVERSHEIM, W. KONIG and M. WECK (Editors)

Chapman and Hall, 1993. ix + 571 pp. £65.00

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In contrast to many books with similar titles (e.g. Hayes and Wheelwright¹) this book is not focused on manufacturing management in the widest sense of the term, but is concerned mainly with the more specific topic of production engineering. The ambiguity of the UK edition's title may reflect the difference in priorities between the UK and Germany, where the book was originally published, but unfortunately this choice of words may hide the book from its potential audience. Given the perceived prowess of German engineering this book may prove useful to those in the UK involved in production engineering. However, the reader will have to work at extracting the value from the text; for example the majority of the references are in German.

The book is a condensed version (but still runs to 571 pages) of the papers from the Aachen Machine Tool Colloquium 1993 and represents contributions from academics and practitioners. The text comprises 16 chapters arranged into five parts which cover the following topics: business strategies, product development, production systems and processes, production plants and the environment. The editors and contributors appear to have spent time, and been mainly successful, in constructing a coherent text rather than simply placing a set of conference papers between covers with all the accompanying idiosyncracies of coverage. The book contains some interesting figures, which appear to be copies of overhead transparencies used at the colloquium, but unfortunately the text does not always provide the necessary explanatory comments that would accompany an oral presentation.

Given its price (£65) and contents, this book may merit a reference copy in the university or company library—its use beyond that is limited.

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Reference

1. R. H. HAYES and S. C. WHEELWRIGHT (1984) *Restoring Our Competitive Edge: Competing Through Manufacturing*. Wiley, London.

Organisational Fitness: Corporate Effectiveness Through Management Cybernetics

RAUL ESPEJO and MARKUS SCHWANINGER (Editors)

Campus Verlag, Frankfurt, 1993. 376 pp. £45.00

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Stafford Beer's viable system model (VSM) provides the main inspiration for this book. Read it to learn how the VSM is being applied today and how it has developed in the hands of his followers.

From the beginning, a certain tension was evident in Beer's work. At first he seemed to advocate a kind of artificial intelligence (AI) view of organizations. Of course, the VSM was obtained from studying the human brain, rather than the operations of a computer. However, the point is that AI experts propose that a conscious being can, in principle, be constructed from non-conscious matter because what makes it 'conscious' is not the materials it is made from but the way those materials are organized. Similarly, Beer seemed to propose that an organization can be 'viable'—i.e. capable of apprehending and adjusting to its environment, and therefore of existing autonomously—by virtue of the way it is organized, rather than because it is made of people who are themselves able to apprehend and adjust. The VSM was a statement of the principles of organization he deemed necessary and sufficient for this kind of mechanical autonomy.

However, this radical view came increasingly to resemble an ideal programme he found