

"Practical values in virtual working"

[youtube:http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=Bu2cy0RPAug auto]

Interview 4 April 2000 - accurate forecasting / workplace trends analysis.

Most new technology applications fail to achieve what was promised because of very simple human factors. Take for example a large company with a new e-mail system. In many organisations it is already common for executives to receive up to 100 e-mails a day - and this is the first day of the digital society. There are constant complaints of information overload and a real risk of serious error. Most people say that the majority of their written [communications](#) are electronic - a huge change in the last three years - and yet they also say their typing speeds are just as slow as they ever were, typically less than twenty five words per minute.

A senior executive thinks at around 10,000 words a minute (a picture is worth a thousand words), and scans a newspaper at 5,000 words a minute. He or she speaks at around 100 words per minute on the phone to a client, and yet can type only perhaps 15 words per minute.

What is the point of spending a fortune on new computer systems for people who cannot even type? The single most important technology tool for increasing productivity may be a typing course, and executives whose typing speed grows in three weeks from 20 to 40 words per minute will literally double their output.

People say that it is quality not volume that counts and that speed will not increase quality. This is nonsense. If I phone an investment adviser I expect 100 words per minute of pure gold: world class advice at normal talking speed. Therefore his brain is capable of thinking new messages at that speed.

But listening on the phone is very inefficient for me. I only get 100 words a minute from my

adviser. I would prefer a 1,000 word e-mail which will take me less than a minute to read. That's a ten-fold increase in my own productivity. But if my advisor can only type 20 words a minute, my own increase in productivity is at the cost of a five fold decrease in his own productivity, because it will take him at least five times as long to write in an e-mail what he would have said on the phone.

The lesson is that e-mail works and the phone does not. Phone calls are very inefficient. The phone is a hundred year old invention that has not changed in any way whatever, except in cost, and the fact that I don't need a wire to the exchange. Trying to get two people together in a phone call is increasingly difficult in a busy, global world where chances are the person in another country is not even awake when you are wanting to chat.

So then, at the very least you should assess typing speeds of all new executive recruits, offering courses to all who need them.

There is another reason why keyboard skills training is essential: repetitive strain injury. One of your team takes you to court because he or she cannot type any longer. The Judge awards huge damages against you because answering e-mails was a part of the job, for which no keyboard training had been given. The volumes of on-screen work required led directly to the injury which the court says has made the executive unemployable. Damages awarded are to cover lost earnings and expected promotions for the next twenty years - and could run to several million dollars.

Another example of human techno-failure is videoconferencing. I have yet to find a group of executives where more than a tiny number actually enjoy videoconferencing. Most people say it is no substitute for a personal meeting, that it feels impersonal and that it is impossible to build trust. However there is a simple reason why: lack of eye-to-eye contact. Try having a conversation with a colleague in the office while staring only at each other's eyebrows. It feels awkward, rude, offensive and strange. You have just done a videoconference. 99.5% of all videoconferences are like that.

I did one videoconference recently with a senior sales and marketing executive of one of the largest computer companies in the world. I saw only his left ear - because the camera was on his left and the screen was directly in front. Even if you place the camera on top of the screen, you will fail to get eye-to-eye contact if you look at the person on the screen instead of the camera.

Rule number one for relationship building is to look at the person when you are talking to them. The eyes are the window of the soul. That means looking into the lens of the camera when speaking, and looking at the screen when listening. CNN know this. That's why they never ever allow people being interviewed in remote studios to see any screens at all. They are told to look directly at the camera to create the illusion of intimacy.

Of course in ordinary videoconferencing there is a more natural way, simple and virtually zero cost yet almost totally ignored by even the largest corporations. If you place the camera right in the middle of the screen, then you can look at the other person and as you do so you will be looking into the camera. And why try to do it all using a heavy great lump of glass tube? The old TV set is an over-grown valve and should be consigned to the rubbish tip. How can you possibly expect to join a board meeting from a remote location when in addition to total absence of eye-to-eye contact, the entire board is reduced in size to an image on a TV?

Use a data projector, and the board members become life-size - all ten of them, and with a camera mounted on the wall you will have for the first time a convincing two-way trust-building meeting.

So then, attend to the basics and the fundamentals of human life when installing technology and you will transform your organisation with minimum cost.

Solutions must be practical, time-saving and fit into every-day life. The best solutions sell themselves with team members campaigning for earlier introduction and better access.

Let people make their own choices. For example, what's the point of air travel except to communicate? That means all travel budgets should be combined with communication budgets. Fax, phone and other communication costs should compete with air fares, taxis, hotels and the rest. Let executives decide what they need: videoconferencing equipment of their own at home perhaps rather than yet another round the world ticket. When people can choose, they often invest in more technology to "get a life".

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