

FOCUS ON TECHNOLOGY MISSES THE MARK

Extracts from presentation by Les Pickett Chief Executive Pacific Rim Consulting Group and President ARTDO International Asia Pacific Human Resource Development Centre during the State of the Education Nation Conference in Sydney Australia on Thursday 22 April 2004

There is almost an obsessive focus on the technology revolution.

This misses the most critical point and may well be the reason many change initiatives fail to achieve the anticipated benefits.

Over the years I have been presented with cost benefit justification for major expenditure on technology – some running into millions of dollars.

There seems little hard evidence that many of these actually achieved all the benefits proposed during the justification for approval stage.

Many reasons are trotted out. They could just about be set in a standard formula for failure to achieve optimum results... to deliver on the promise.

- Circumstances changed.
- We had to wait too long for feedback
- Staff did not support our programme.
- There was lack of real executive support and commitment.
- The market moved in another direction.
- We did not expect that some phases of the project would take so long.
- New programmes and software became available.
- We forgot the need for additional facilities to support the programme.
- The dollar went up (or down) faster and further than we had anticipated.
- We could not find people with the competencies we needed... and when we did we could not keep them.
- People just do not want to change the way they do things

Rarely are we told that the initiating team of technologists just got a bit carried away with the challenges of a new plaything and lost objectivity in the planning and development stages. Over-optimistic planning and budgeting is quite different to creative, responsible risk-taking.

When we look back we recognise that we wanted a Holden but somehow it grew into a Ferrari ... and an optioned-up version at that.

It is very hard to the professional techo to resist the challenge of being in or directing a leading edge project utilising the latest or emerging technology – even though the organisation may still be in punched-card operating mode and senior executive management is happy with the comfort level provided by systems they know and understand and a business environment they can manipulate.

They hanker for the good old days when the boss was the boss, where bright young things with degrees did not rattle their cage and challenge the status quo, when there was a higher degree of stability and certainty and globalisation and terrorism were just words in a reference book.

Remember the promise of the paperless office, reduced working hours and increased leisure time? The national union campaign for a 35 hour week was a major watershed back in the seventies.

And some thirty years or so ago a review by the ILO of the projected global take up of the use of robotics in manufacturing show that actual usage failed to reach anywhere near the anticipated level. Main reasons identified included lack of understanding of their potential applications and benefits by senior management and lack of operating skills by the workforce.

Poor or inadequate training was identified as a critical contributor to the under-achievement... an international cross-cultural example of poor management of a significant workplace change.

What does all this mean? It means that we need to place far greater emphasis on human resource and people management..

When we look at the underlying cause of things that go wrong we can generally track it back to the human factor....caused by people who did not know what to do, how it should be done, where or when to do it.

There is clear evidence that that many people in the workforce do not know what is expected of them – what they were required to do.

There are people who lack the knowledge and skills to competently do their job.

Then there are people who have no understanding of why they are doing what they are doing day after day.

These are the people who come to work but lack leadership and direction, have low motivation and fail to utilise their personal capabilities. They turn off. These are the people that management has failed because the ultimate responsibility for lack of effective leadership in any organisation rests with the senior executive management.

We all know that people make things happen and while technology brings some truly great advances it is still just a facilitator.

So let's move the focus from the technology and information revolutions to the people revolution. We need to work far more effectively through the process of implementing significant change in the workplace.

It is interesting that, as a nation we cope well with change in our private lives and Australia has demonstrated time and again a willingness to rapidly embrace new technology (introduction of television, mobile phones, internet).

This makes me ponder on the contradiction. If we are so adaptable and willing to change so readily, be it with some grumbles from time to time (GST), why do around 80% of corporate change initiatives fail to reach their objectives.

The major cause can only be poor management. Failure to plan and manage change, failure to communicate, failure to involve people, and failure to bring them into the transition at an early stage.

Over the years a number of our major bitter industrial disputes have been around workplace changes. Some of these were specifically related to technological change.

Many of these divisive, non-productive conflicts could have been avoided with more effective planning for and management of change in the workplace.

We have been confronted with downsizing and retrenchments. The rate of staff and managerial turnover has progressively increased. Where it was once regarded as unreliable and disloyal to have held more than three jobs in a lifetime of work we find today that three years with one employer has become recognised as an acceptable level of stability and reliability.

This brings with it the increasingly serious problem of the retention of knowledge and expertise by corporations. Much has been and is being said and written about intellectual capital and knowledge management.

When someone (particularly a long serving specialist) leaves an organisation years of know-how walks out the door with them.

The recording and retention of the knowledge and experience of people who leave is increasing in importance to organisations around the world.

Then there is the emerging debate about who really owns the knowledge that is in the mind of people who leave. I suspect that there will be a number of legal challenges over the ownership of intellectual capital and the enforceable legality of some employment agreements in this area.

Knowledge management is trendy and there are many definitions. Standards Australia has a simple and realistic definition that recognises knowledge management as a multi-disciplinary approach to achieving organisational objectives by making the best use of knowledge.

During a period when there is great pressure to reduce enterprise overhead costs we are seeing the creation of yet another corporate role ... that of Knowledge Manager. ***Whether this is a transitional role or one of long term substance remains to be seen.***

Regardless, there are some key issues confronting today's enterprises. The following list of questions is not exhaustive but gives some indication of the scope of the challenge.

- Is there a corporate knowledge management, retention and communication strategy?
- Does the organisation know:
 - What it needs to know?
 - What it actually knows?
 - What it does not know?
 - What it does not know that is critical to future success?
- What use is made of technology to store and communicate knowledge?

- How is knowledge passed to those who need it?
- Is knowledge readily accessible, credible and usable?

Some thoughts for consideration

We know that the major challenges facing managers include:

- improving their communication skills,
- developing more effective leadership skills,
- coping with rapidly changing technology and
- developing more effective change management capabilities.

So let's get back to reality and recognise that people really are the key to ongoing business success.

- What should we do to address these challenges?
- What is stopping us from doing this?

And then perhaps we should try to answer the long standing question – if people are an organisation's greatest asset, as our CEOs so frequently tell us, why do we show them as a cost on the balance sheet?

Now that's something for the accounting profession to think about!

Some possible discussion topics:

How can we bridge the technology-human performance gap in the increasingly busy workplace?

Why do so few change management initiatives succeed when we have known for so many years that resistance to change is a major cause of underperformance?

Is there an underlying issue of time frames associated with the duration of management contracts, incentive rewards and the increasing pressure for continuous short-term improvement in business results?

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SOME REFERENCES:

WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

WSIS: Declaration of Principles

http://www.developmentgateway.org//e-learning/dg-contribute/item-detail?item_id=369741&version_id=223826&from=alert

This is the final Declaration of Principles agreed upon by the World Summit on the Information Society. December 10, 2003. The Declaration is available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. (PDF, 10 pages.)

WSIS: Plan of Action

http://www.developmentgateway.org//e-learning/dg-contribute/item-detail?item_id=369784&version_id=223854&from=alert

This is the final version of the Plan of Action agreed to by the World Summit on the Information Society. December 12, 2003. The Plan is available in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. (PDF, 14 pages.)

<http://ecommerce.wipo.int/survey/html/index.html>

WIPO report on Intellectual Property on the Internet: A Survey of Issues

<http://www.accountingforpeople.gov.uk/>

UK Accounting for People Task Force conclusions and recommendations

<http://www.ukonlineforbusiness.gov.uk/benchmarking2003/>

Business in the information age: 2003 benchmarking report.

<http://www.world-links.org/english/html/m-e.html>

Describes the monitoring and evaluation approach taken by World Links (an international program promoting distance learning). The site also provides links to two independent evaluations done of the World Links program.

<http://www.parsecinfo.nl/support/whitepapers/whitepapers.htm>

White Papers discussing e-Learning & Web Standards; Learning/Knowledge Management; "Live" synchronous e-Learning; multimedia authoring; Instructional Systems Design; and streaming media.

<http://www.humanresourcesmagazine.com.au/articles/73/0C01CC73.asp?Type=61&Category=905>

HR In The Firing Line – short article by Les Pickett: January 2004.

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