

Business Computing: the Second 50 Years

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Conference e-workshop report

Transition into the e-world

Chairman: Rudy Hirschheim, University of Houston

Rapporteur: Ann Brown, City University Business School

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eWorkshop: Transition into the e-world

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11 Delegates attended

The group agreed to consider both business and social transition issues.

The discussion covered a wide range of issues pertinent to the transition process, but spent less time on what an e-world might look like or whether such a world is likely to represent a major change. Although several subjects were debated with passion, the group came to few conclusions. For participants the burning issue was the need to make a successful transition to the e-world.

The future e-world

Core to much of the discussion was the view that we cannot yet conceive the full richness of what e-communication can be used for, hence rational planning methods by themselves are unlikely to be an adequate approach. Text messaging and the use to which teenagers are putting this was seen as a typical example of the unexpected use to which e-functionality could be put. In the light of this the two issues, of how to capture and implement fruitful ideas and who to look to, for these ideas were seen as very significant.

How do we manage this transition?

The pain of transition is and will be high because many will not admit to what is happening. The group agreed on the importance of:

- ? Managing the technology. There will be a fountain of ideas emerging of which those that are valuable will through management eventually become an integrated part of society. At this stage it is important not to suppress or reduce the flow as we are not yet in a position to tell which will be significant.
- ? Learning to live with continuous change. The concept of moving from the current position square to the next via some line was proposed and dismissed. Transition is/will be a continuing process of change with no fixed end point. We can expect to live with permanent change. In fact rate of change is accelerating and what will matter is the direction taken.
- ? 'Short-termism' - a wider problem of current society. Most organisations and people aim to meet immediate needs. There are many examples of companies maximising short term profits at expense of longer term planning - UK example of accountants' views and measures dominating. Example of students meeting requirements for passing exams rather than obtaining useful skills. One counter view proposed was that 'short-termism' could be a survival strategy in a period on great change.

Who is best fitted to design the transition?

It was suggested younger people could develop scenarios of what the e-world will look like 'out of the box' in a way that older generations could not. Don Tapscott in his book 'Growing Up Digital : The Rise of the Net Generation' suggests that the only people fitted to design the e-world effectively belong to the generation that have grown up with the internet

i.e. those below the age of 25. This quote sparked considerable controversy with an alternative view being proposed that it is the young and retired that have had time to master the internet and that it is these groups that can best contribute. As one group member commented 'We have 5-8 years experience already - observation should give us a good lead on the 'future'.

Role of education and values in achieving the transition

Effective education methods were considered key to a successful transition and the current secondary and tertiary sectors were thought to be unable to deal with the educational needs of the e-world. Problems noted include:

- ? information systems development replicating the mistakes of the 70s and 80s. This was in part attributed to the lack of professional standards.
- ? Current system not geared to change (either actual changes or educating people to handle change)
- ? School education seen as one conduit for political control
- ? The example of computer science courses at University level being behind technology developments

Apart from calling for redesign of courses the main suggestion for improvement was that of enabling teachers to take break periods away from teaching so that they could rejoin society, returning to teaching with a clearer idea of both how the technology is being used and what impact it is having.

The expansion of graduate and postgraduate courses world wide posed a concern for some members of the group. Within a short time horizon graduates and postgraduates will be numerous - far more than the population of many small countries and they will be able to network across the world forming a new elite. Is this a change for the better?

Society's values were also considered key to a successful transition.

Some debate ensued on both the nature of these values and the effect of value changes in society. The group agreed that attitudes to a range of issues would determine success. Society (businesses, organisations and individuals) needs to clarify group and individual values. It is particularly important for groups to make group values explicit and known. Events often show that actors hold differing values which only becomes clear at action points. It was noted that Political Correctness in the US tended to reduce opportunities for such discussion. Identifying the values that are fundamental to existing societies as compared with the more ephemeral knowledge could be valuable when managing change.

What is a successful e-w value set? This question was discussed but not really answered. It was felt that many changes are occurring

- ? Family values have changed significantly over recent decades
- ? Mantra by top executives that 'people are the key resource' inconsistent with trend to outsource and approach to redundancy
- ? Work bargains changing from life time commitments to high pressure short term jobs with early 'burn out' or to people centred jobs
- ? Trust and commitment is key to successful companies (Boeing example)
- ? Central value today is wealth creation

There was no sense that this is a controllable process, hence the significance of public discussion.