

## **SO MUCH TECHNOLOGY, SO MUCH STRESS!**

“Technology is dominated by two types of people: those who understand what they do not manage, and those who manage what they do not understand.”

### **(Putt's Law)**

I must hold my hand up and admit that I have no idea who Putt is but his law seems to make a great deal of sense because, for example, we have people at the top of the tree, in many organizations and companies, who have little or no idea of what their employees do nor how they do it and what forms of technology they use to carry out their tasks, and that often includes desktops and laptops although that situation is improving as younger generations come along; and, on the other hand we have people, technologists, technicians, call them nerds or geeks if you like, who can manipulate any and all forms of technology, IT systems and equipment but have little or no idea how to manage people.

Over the past few decades the pace of introduction and implementation of information technology (IT) systems, software programmes and automation on manufacturing and production lines has increased considerably. Hardly a week goes by without the introduction of some new equipment designed to, basically, speed up processes and procedures and make organizations more effective, efficient, productive and competitive. But have all these systems made our personal and working life any easier?

In many instances the reverse is true. Indeed levels of stress and frustration, at home and particularly at work, are increasing to such an extent that it is, perhaps, one reason but not an excuse for the reported incidences of road, rail and air rage. Picture this, possible, scenario for an employee who commutes to work in a major city, it could be London, Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Leeds or Liverpool or, perhaps, any other growing global International city.

You leave home at 0600 and drive to the railway station to catch the scheduled 0640 train to the city. On arriving at the railway station you discover, much to your chagrin, that the parking ticket machine either has a 'sticker' saying 'Out of Order, is not working or taking your money and not dispensing tickets or, at the very least, is not giving you change. If you do not display a ticket there is a risk of being 'clamped' and then being charged for release. So you hurry to the booking office to explain to the ticket clerk and to buy a ticket if possible causing more delays.

The train arrives at your station 10 minutes late because either the driver turned out late or, the train had a minor electrical or mechanical defect or, there was a signal failure or, a broken rail or, overhead power supply problems. Having started late your train misses its scheduled time slot and is delayed further either by yet more signal failures, a broken rail, and overhead power supply problems or by slower rail traffic ahead. The result is that your train arrives in the city 25 minutes late, which is not long enough for you to be compensated for the inconvenience but long enough for you to have either missed an onward rail connection, a bus or, in the worse case scenario, a plane.

On the other hand you may have to cross the city by its public underground network. You discover that there are delays because of a signal failure or, a broken train means that services are suspended for the time-being or, other commuter trains like yours have been delayed and the underground platform and trains are overcrowded. Added to which it is one of those hot and humid days, there is no air conditioning and the underground railway trains are akin to saunas on wheels.

In my view the overcrowded, inefficient, overly-expensive, unreliable, uncomfortable and sometimes dirty public transport systems, overground and underground, are the root cause of many levels of stress for those who have to commute to work. The need to get to work to complete tasks is what causes increased in blood pressure and sickness and leads to the high levels of sickness taken by employees especially those who work in inner city areas. However, undeterred and once out of the tunnelling system and in the open air you try to use your mobile phone, no matter which model or system, to inform the office of your delay but your battery has gone flat or you are in an area of poor transmission and reception.

You eventually arrive at your office 35 minutes later than expected to find that some of the lifts are out of action causing delays and overcrowding. When you get to sit at your desk you are informed that your line manager wants a brief on a particular matter in the next 15 minutes. Added to which an important customer has been trying to place an order with you for the past half an hour. He tried to contact you on your pager but you discover it is not working because of a technical 'glitch' in the system or the satellite re-broadcast channel facility is not working. In the end he has gone elsewhere and to cap it all you forgot your desk drawer keys.

You switch on your desktop, or laptop, computer and try to access work information only to discover that the company-wide internal network is down and you cannot access relevant files or, your keyboard has jammed. The IT department tells you it will take at least an hour to fix because one or more of the network servers is down or, they do not have a replacement keyboard on site.

You decide to send an important e-mail using a colleague's machine but you find that their modem is not working or, the ISDN line is not available. Being sharp you decide to send a facsimile message only to be informed that the FAX machine is broken awaiting a replacement part or, the telephone line is not working or, the machine is jammed and you cannot remove the overnight messages.

Undeterred you attempt to photocopy some material to send to customers by mail only to discover that one of the photocopying machines is broken awaiting a replacement part and the working machine has a queue of people waiting to produce work or, the machine will only print A3 size copies or, there is an electrical power supply problem.

By this time your level of frustration has reached boiling point. So, you decide to get a cup of tea from the automatic drink dispenser only to find that the machine is broken or, you are unable to select the programme you want or, it has run out of cups and you watch the liquid disappear down the centre drain.

Eventually the computer network is fixed, the fax machine is repaired and the photocopier repairman arrives to fit a replacement part. And, all is well with the world, or is it? When you try to print pages from your computer the printer, despite being cleaned recently by someone from the outsourced supplier, decides to screw up the pages making them unreadable.

Meanwhile, it is a Friday. It is the end of the month and you expect to receive your computer pay slip informing you that money has been transferred to your bank account so that you can cover your mortgage and other bills. However, a new company-wide computer software programme, which might be in another part of the country, has caused a 'glitch' and payments will be delayed 2 working days to allow the outsourced IT contractors to unscramble the programme.

By this stage you are really beginning to run out of patience. Why, with so many bigger, thinner, faster, smoother, quieter and sometimes cheaper information technology systems are so many, apparently, increasingly unreliable and why does it appear to take longer and longer to fix them when they go wrong? And, why are the associated machine and software introduction and operating instruction books and literature so confusing? Do we really need systems to shrink and expand documents; do we need to continually update software packages; is it cost effective to keep trying to do more with less or have we reached the stage of information overload? And, is the paperless office now really just around the corner?

The crux of the matter is that, having been programmed, by management consultants, theorists and economists to accept in the growing global economy that change is constant and that IT systems get quicker and quicker, we have got used to instantaneous responses; and, when it doesn't happen we are placed under additional pressure to perform. As the US historian Arthur M Schlesinger suggested,

“Science and Technology revolutionize our lives, but memory, tradition and myth frame our response. Expelled from individual consciousness by the rush of change, history finds its revenge by stamping the collective unconscious with habits, values, expectations, dreams. The dialectic between past and future will continue to form our lives.”

**(Arthur M Schlesinger (1917 – 2007), US historian and social critic, ‘The Challenge of Change’)**

Further, because of the inexorable introduction of technology companies have delayed and downsized their workforce to reduce overheads. In many instances they have used age as the basis to force through early retirement programmes or compulsory redundancies. In most cases those that have left have not been replaced and the result is a loss of middle management expertise and common sense.

Some companies have outsourced areas of responsibility, more noticeably IT, electrical and engineering support as well as security, cleaning and catering services, previously undertaken by their own staff. And, an outsourced contract often means that people are not always readily available, on site, to effect repairs.

Re-organization, re-structuring, re-engineering, resource re-alignment, re-grading and resource re-allocation programmes, they all mean the same thing getting rid of employees to reduce overheads, now mean that many people feel over-worked, under stress, unappreciated and not paid enough to take on additional work; and, increasing frustration with IT equipment, tools and software programmes is a sure sign that all is not well in the land of work. As the American social scientist and Professor of Business Administration at Harvard, Shoshana Zuboff, suggested,

“If the technology cannot shoulder the entire burden of strategic change, it nevertheless can set into motion a series of dynamics that present an important challenge to imperative control and the industrial division of labour. The more blurred the distinction between what workers know and what managers know, the more fragile and pointless any traditional relationships of domination and subordination between them will become.”

**(Shoshana Zuboff (1951 - ), US social scientist, In the Age of the Smart Machine (1988))**

The result is that because areas and levels of responsibility, in the supposed flatter managed but not flatter paid companies and organizations, have increased people do not have the time or the effort to deal with an increasing number of IT and IT related problems. One major problem area appears to be that some companies have a habit of introducing new technology systems and equipment and expect people to get on with it without providing any training before it is introduced and more often than not as a way of saving on costs.

The fact is that technology systems and new technology problems will always be around and with us simply because companies in the electronics industry and associated software fields, indeed in all areas of technology, are in the business of refining and improving the performance of equipment and software packages, and sometimes withdrawing support from older equipment and programmes, simply as a way of getting people, individuals and companies, to spend more money on up-rating or upgrading. But do they always improve our lives, make work easier and allow us more time for personal time with family and friends doing what we would like to do. As the German-born political theorist Hannah Arendt wrote,

“The discussion of the whole problem of technology ... has been strangely led astray through an all-too-exclusive concentration upon the service or disservice the machines render to men. The assumption here is that every tool and implement is primarily designed to make human life easier and human labour less painful.... But ... homo faber, the toolmaker, invented tools and equipment in order to erect a world, not ... to help the human life process. The question therefore is not so much whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things.”

**(Hannah Arendt (1906 – 1975), German-born US political theorist, ‘The Human Condition (1958)**

Does this sound familiar? And, what are you or your organization doing to reduce the results of technological, IT, management and organization frustration?

(2144 Words including quotations)

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