HUMANS AREN'T PERFECT, BUT WE MAY BE NECESSARY

The living, breathing missing link in highly automated environments

by DOUG CATER

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It's almost alarming how many firms invest literally millions of dollars in capital projects tied to automation, that see very little impact to the bottom line, and only marginal improvement in product quality. I suggest there is a frustratingly simple explanation, but one that will continue to elude most senior management teams.

We often find ourselves working with organizations struggling to engineer and implement that perfect "technical" solution to their problem. I believe it speaks to our society's collective faith in technology and systems, and also to our poor understanding of the powerful forces affecting behavior in the organization.

In fact, from a manufacturing perspective, the entire technology revolution has been driven by two key factors:

- The desire to gain a cost advantage over the competition by lowering labour costs through automation and robotics; and
- The attempt to improve product quality by investing in technology designed to eliminate much of the human intervention present in the manufacturing process.

Why such blind faith in technology?

Over the past 20 to 25 years technology and computerization have continued to advance at exponential rates. We have continued to expand our reliance on technology to simplify and improve our personal lives. Our best data point here is the family vehicle: a complex system of hardware and software that provides dramatically better fuel economy, safety, power and comfort, than the cars of the past – but one that is also complex to the point of virtually eliminating the weekend mechanic.

Other household durables like the refrigerator; televisions and stereos; and washing machines, have also seen step changes in their functionality, reliability and arguably their quality. The result is, that most of us accept without question that advances in technology are for the better, and we fail to adequately challenge their application in the workplace, and their impact on the human aspect of the job.

Reducing Human Intervention

Despite these advances there are still very few "lightless factories." Yes, many individual processes and manufacturing cells have been developed with the ability to stamp, weld, paint, assemble and test subcomponents without people touching the product. However, few organizations have been successful in completely eliminating people from the entire process.

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In fact, it is not at all uncommon in most highly automated facilities, to still find people still playing a major role in set-up and adjustment of the tooling, maintenance of equipment, material handling and logistics. In many cases, feeding or loading material and components into the cell remains a manual process. It's also not uncommon to still rely on people to handle final assembly and inspection.

The missing link

What is often missing in these highly automated environments is ownership of the process; ownership of the result; and the will to ensure the customers' expectations are being met.

Machines and computers have no desire to identify opportunities for improvement. Machines and computers cannot go the extra mile to ensure customer expectations for quality and delivery are met. Technology, in and of itself, cannot take ownership or be held accountable for the process or its output.

> If people believe in the change or the solution, they will make it work, and ultimately make it better.

The perfectly engineered process, with the most technologically advanced equipment and software, will always rely on someone at some level in the organization to turn it on, program it, supply material to it, and maintain it. Someone will need to make changes to it to satisfy customers' changing expectations. Someone will need to find ways to improve the process – to keep you ahead of the competition.

We should be seeking solutions that have ownership and buy-in with the process owners, even if it is not a perfect solution. If people believe in the change or the solution, they will make it work, and ultimately make it better.

In the end, a solution with the full support and ownership of the employees who will turn it on, maintain and support it will always be better than one developed by "Engineering" in isolation, or by an outside contractor. The concept of "process owners" in a high-tech environment is just as important as it is in a process with a high degree of human intervention – and ignoring that fact will provide an opening for your competition to better your performance with a simpler, more manual process, as you ride your "fully automated" process down the slippery slope of mediocrity because no one "feels" ownership for the output.

BOARD CULTURE BY DESIGN

Healthy culture never happens by accident

by JIM BROWN

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Every board has a culture. The way we discuss at our meetings, whether we end on time or routinely go past midnight, how we talk about each other outside meetings, how we interact with the CEO ... all describe our culture. The question we need to ask ourselves, though, is whether our board culture is developing by design or default.

Entropy Applies

Theory tells us that everything in the universe tends toward chaos. With no intervention, things get worse by themselves, not better. If you've had children, their bedrooms prove this! And it's absolutely true for boards and board culture. Unless positive energy is added to the situation, things deteriorate.

Culture Multiplies

Actually, things get worse at an increasing rate. Whatever your board's culture is, it feeds itself. It multiplies. If a couple of people are habitually late—and it goes unchecked – more people will start to arrive late. If directors are allowed to add personal attacks as they debate, most others get swept into the downward spiral.

We need to ask ourselves whether our board culture is developing by design or default.

Designing Your Culture

So what do you do? You accept responsibility to design your board's culture rather than letting it develop by default. Decide together what a healthy culture would look like for your board. Here are a few qualities worth including for any healthy board:

Meaningful Debate

To start with, boards need conflict, but this doesn't mean you should be throwing things at each other! Too many boards have a tradition of directors being "nice" to each other. They become overly agreeable; even apathetic. A healthy board demands meaningful debate. Ideas aren't accepted just because the CEO or longest-serving director said them. Hard questions get asked about assumptions and motives. Alternate perspectives are pulled from the group. In effect, the board members "mine" for conflict. They believe the best answers are inside them, but are rarely found on the surface.

Strategy Setting

There is no time when meaningful debate is more important than during discussions about the company's strategy. Interestingly, this has classically been considered forbidden territory for the board. "You hired an expert to run the company, so get out of the way and let him do it" is the refrain (usually emphasized by the CEO!). But there is a reason it's called a board of "directors" rather than a board of "protectors" and you will have to be deliberate to raise the directing quotient within your board's culture.

We don't suggest that the board become involved in deciding the operational details. However, the overarching vision, the mission, the values, and the key result areas are well within the board domain. And agreement between board and management on measurable indicators of success is critical.

Results

The indicators of success speak of results. Healthy boards are especially focussed on the company's strategic results. This absolutely includes profit and share value, but is much more than that, too. A stunning result area these days is public and shareholder perception of the company. (Think about those probes into options granting and how that affects results in the longer term!) This focus on culture can be articulated as expectations for the board so it can be examined in terms of results, too.

Fun

All work and no play makes a board dull. If you are designing a culture for your board, why not em-bed some levity into the mix? There will be plenty of times when the discussions cause sober tones and serious exchanges. (Did I mention options investigations?) Those times are much easier to take when they are balanced against some good times together as a board. It could be a round of golf playing 'best ball' in threesomes. It may be an evening at a lively comedy in the theatre. It could be as simple as a casual conversation about the fireplace sharing "the dumbest mistake I made in management." All of these are fun ways for directors to connect, which serves as glue to hold the board together in the challenging times.

Board culture is a reality. And it really impacts the health of your board. By raising the topic and setting some higher standards, you will enjoy a culture by design, not default. ☒

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL SEVERANCE

Important steps in the severance process are often overlooked

by MELANIE REIST

MELANIE REIST is a civil litigation lawyer and a partner in the Kitchener firm of Charles Morrison & Melanie Reist.

When it comes to the negotiation of severance packages, employers and employees have more in common than one might think. Typically both want to avoid costly litigation and reach a reasonably quick and fair resolution.

Since it is often the employer who has greater control of the process I offer some tips to achieve these objectives:

1. In the termination letter clearly set out what you as an employer are prepared to offer;
2. If the dismissal is not for cause, do not suggest in the letter that the company could have pursued a dismissal on the basis of cause;
3. Advise the employee to obtain independent legal advice and provide a reasonable opportunity for him or her to do so, usually one to two weeks;
4. If the employee needs an extension of a few days to obtain independent legal advice, then grant it;
5. Provide a letter of reference;
6. If an agreement cannot be reached, ensure that the requirements of the Employment Standards Act are met with the time prescribed.

While these may seem straight forward, they are often overlooked. Where an employer engages in hardball strategies to try to pay less, it may come back to haunt them. In the decision of Justice Echlin in McCulloch v. IPlatform Inc., the employer ended up paying twice the amount of damages for breaking tips # 2, 5 and 6.

Where an employer engages in hardball strategies to try to pay less, it may come back to haunt them.

In that case Mr. McCulloch, a manager in his 50's, was terminated after only 105 days of employment. In his dismissal letter, Mr. McCulloch was advised that his termination was as a result of corporate restructuring. The letter also thanked him for his contribution, and the employer proposed to pay one month's salary in severance. When Mr. McCulloch sought to obtain more by way of a severance payment, the employer then asserted that his employment was terminated for just cause, alleging that Mr. McCulloch had failed to perform his duties as required by the employment agreement; failed to identify and correct errors in the work of others; and failed to prove his job performance.

At trial the court accepted Mr. McCulloch's evidence that in the 105 days of his employment there were no concerns raised with respect to his performance, nor was he given warnings or disciplined in any fashion.

Having regard for Mr. McCulloch's age (54), and managerial position, Justice Echlin fixed the notice period at three months. What is interesting about this case, however, is that the Court believed that the employer had played hardball, and ordered an additional three months wages be paid for the employer's bad faith conduct.

The court found that the employer had acted in bad faith by:

1. Asserting just cause well after the fact of the dismissal when there was no basis for such a claim;
2. Failing to provide a letter of reference;
3. Failing to provide disability insurance forms when Mr. McCulloch experienced a stress-related illness shortly after his dismissal, and
4. Delaying the payment of statutory entitlements under the Employment Standards Act.

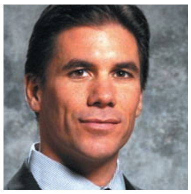
In the end the employer was ordered to pay total damages of six months' pay for an employee who had worked 105 days.

The moral of the story is that an employer needs to be careful to ensure that employees are treated fairly at the time of and following a dismissal.

IT PAYS TO KNOW

Unraveling the mystery of how your investment advisor gets paid

by DANIEL E. GIRARD



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There are a few great mysteries in life worth contemplating: why does buttered toast inescapably fall buttered-side down? Why do hotdogs come 10 to a package and hot dog buns 8? Why does anyone watch Jerry Springer? And, how does your investment advisor get paid? Although science has yet to solve the first three, let me try to shed some light on the final one.

No matter the type of advisor you work with – financial planner, investment advisor, stock-broker, wealth manager, insurance agent, or bank employee (figuring out the difference of all these titles is another great mystery we'll explore in a future column) – they are all compensated in essentially one of two ways: commission-based or fee-based.

Commission-based advisors, by far the most dominant, earn two types of payments. The most common is an upfront payment that is tied to the particular investment being utilized. Examples of this would be a commission to buy or sell a stock or bond, an upfront commission from a loaded mutual fund, commissions paid on life insurance contracts, and fees paid to sellers of GICs. The majority of these payments are buried inside the investment and are difficult for investors to scrutinize. Nonetheless, buried or not, you are paying them and they are a real expense that can be substantial.

> Investors should not be paying more with a fee-based advisor.

The second form of commission advisors earn is in the form of ongoing service payments. These take the form of trailer fees, which are typically paid monthly from loaded mutual funds and wrap accounts (investment programs that hold various funds under one product umbrella). Trailer fees are paid from the investment firm that manufactured the fund or wrap program to compensate an advisor for ongoing service to the client and monitoring of the portfolio. A typical trailer fee is one-percent annually on the value of the investment.

Fee-based advisors, on the other hand, are typically paid an annual percentage of the total assets they manage on a client's behalf. For instance, if your portfolio is worth a million dollars, the advisor may charge 1% annually to manage those assets. The 1%, in essence, replaces the foregone upfront commissions and the monthly trailer fees. It's important to note, however, that investors should not be paying more with a fee-based advisor. The annual fee should have the effect of lowering all other investment costs, imbedded or otherwise, and thus costing the client about the same as a commission-based method. Also, to be a true fee-based approach, the fee has to be universal to all investment options. If it is tied to a particular program or product, it's not really a fee-based arrangement. It's a trailer disguised as a fee.

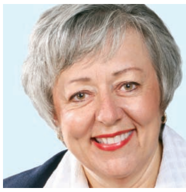
So which is better for you as a client? Although there are highly professional advisors in both camps, I'd suggest that a fee-based approach is superior based on the following reasoning (disclaimer: my practice is predominately fee-based, by choice). A fee-based approach better aligns the client and advisor as the advisor's compensation only increases when the portfolio appreciates in value, not when something is sold. A fee-based approach allows the advisor to manage a portfolio without any biases toward which investments are used. The advisor can utilize any available investment without regard to the level of compensation generated from the various choices (because there is none). And a fee-based approach allows for a portfolio to be managed in a much more flexible manner as there are no costs to make structural changes when times warrant.

Following one compensation method or another does not make an advisor better or worse. However, understanding each will make you a more informed client, which is always a good thing. And remember, hold onto that toast!

THE GOLDEN AGE OF PHILANTHROPY?

Boomers are in a position to reshape the charitable landscape

by ROSEMARY SMITH



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Are we in the golden age of philanthropy? Without a doubt, philanthropy is receiving more and more attention as evidenced by this column on the subject, and the many organizations – both non-profit and corporate – who are now involved in assisting donors in their charitable giving. Literally translated, the word means "for the love of humankind". The opportunities in benefiting humankind are enormous.

Currently, the popularity of philanthropy has been most evident among the wealthy. However, increased focus on philanthropy will likely lead to an increased expectation among all income brackets that those who can afford to give will do so.

Tax changes in the federal budget of May 2006, are having a large impact on giving. Donations of publicly-listed securities are exempt from capital gains and also entitle donors to the tax credit for the charitable gift. It has been estimated that Canadians own about $1.3 trillion in shares. As more individuals begin to understand the opportunities for strategic philanthropy, the impact of this opportunity alone is tremendous.

Canadian estimates predict a wealth transfer of somewhere in the range of $800 billion to $1 trillion in the next few decades. This transfer of assets to the "baby boomer" generation comes from parents who were considerable savers. As the first boomers enter retirement, they have amassed significant assets in their own right. When these assets are added together, boomers are in a position to reshape the charitable landscape.

Statistics Canada reported that more than $6.9 billion was claimed by 5.8 million Canadians in charitable contributions during 2004. In Canada, the amount of donations increased in all provinces and territories, with the Yukon (17.5%) and Alberta (13.7%) leading the way. For those reporting contributions, the median donation was $230, up $10 from the 2003 amount. And, the median donation has increased every year

> The more time an individual donates, the more he or she tends to give financially.

since 1999. Nationally approximately 25% of all tax filers claimed a charitable donation. Ontario has the second highest percentage at 28% following Manitoba at 29%.

Recent studies indicate that "giving back" is much more important to donors than "leaving a legacy". There is a surprising correlation between donations of time and donations of dollars. In fact, the more time an individual donates, the more he or she tends to give financially. Studies also show that entrepreneurs are especially generous and support a very broad spectrum of charitable activities.

Many more companies are launching corporate cause campaigns or corporate social marketing campaigns aimed at a variety of issues such as changing behaviour for the sake of improving health, encouraging charitable giving or encouraging volunteerism within a community. Sponsorship is a business deal, not a donation, notes Patricia Martin, author of Made Possible By: Succeeding with Sponsorship (Jossey Bass 2004). The values which are important to businesses are based upon consumer values and the commitment that potential customers have to any program under consideration. Recent research indicates that it is important to customers when companies support charitable causes or initiatives and that a significant number of customers are more inclined to use the services of a company who is socially responsible.

Donors expect more involvement to ensure that their dollars make a significant difference in their cause or causes of choice.

With all these circumstances aligning, it is absolutely reasonable to infer that a golden age of philanthropy has arrived. Although the popularity has been most prevalent with the wealthy, it is spreading and becoming for commonplace for all. Even if a small portion of those who are able to give do so, the impact on charities will be substantial.The imminent large scale wealth transfer, the opportunity for additional donations of many types of financial assets and the increased popularity of charitable giving can and will have a large impact on the charitable sector in Canada.

Along with the increase in philanthropy comes an increase in donor expectation. The relationship between donors and charities is shifting. Donors have always expected accountability, transparency, efficient organizations and good governance. Now, they expect more involvement to ensure that their dollars make a significant difference in their cause or causes of choice.

Donors want to ensure that administrative overheads remain low. In addition, however, they have adopted a targeted approach to their giving, often focusing on program specific funding. Fewer and fewer donors are interested in supporting operating costs.

A focus on the relationship that donors have with charities will be the topic of a future column.

MAKING AN INSTANT CONNECTION

You've only got milliseconds to make a difference

by WAYNE VANWYCK

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Those who have the ability to make an instant connection with people they don't know will be more successful in business.

However, the lack of that skill is very costly to individuals and the businesses that employ them. We've all walked away from a store in which we intended to buy something, simply because we didn't warm up to the salesperson.

When you meet someone for the first time, in a matter of about two seconds you've sized them up and have determined whether you will like them or not. It may not be accurate or fair, but you make an almost instantaneous judgment. In fact, Malcolm Gladwell says in his book "Blink" that we make a judgment in milliseconds.

Why is this so important? Nicholas Boothman, author of "How to Connect in Business in 90 Seconds or Less," says that if we like someone, we tend to see the best in them and look for a reason to say "yes". If we don't, the reverse is true. We tend to see the worst in them and look for a reason to say "no".

Now let's put that in a practical business context. You have two salespeople. One has the ability to connect with people and make them like him or her. The other doesn't. The one with the ability to connect gets people to want to say yes. The other either drives people away or makes them buy in spite of the salesperson. If each of those salespeople met only 10 people per day, that's 50 per week, 2,500 per year. If they are in a busy store and meet 30 people a day, well ... you can do the math. One salesperson is an asset and will drive sales. The other is a liability and will cost you sales. This isn't chicken feed.

Fifty five per cent of communications is what you see, 38% is tone of voice and only 7% is the words you use

Intuitively we know and understand this, but I am appalled at how many people I meet who represent their company in a drive-through window, a bank, a high-end clothing store, a medical office, a flight check-in or a "service station" who lack this very basic skill.

Boothman has some great tips for connecting immediately when you meet people for the first time.

Check their eye colour. Look to see what colour their eyes are and you'll make that all important eye contact.

Smile a warm friendly smile. Not a strained, plastic smile, but one that is natural and relaxed. In your mind, say the words "great, great, great!" as you are approaching someone. With each "great", get louder and more enthusiastic. This simple act brings out a natural smile.

Point your heart at them. Face people squarely with an open body language.

The mind and body are one system. Get your ABC's right. Your Attitude must align with your Body Language and you need Congruence between what you say and how you say it. Fifty five per cent of communications is what you see, 38% is tone of voice and only 7% is the words you use. If you use the right words with the wrong body language or tone of voice, you are not believable.

Be a chameleon. People like people who are like themselves. When we say "I like you", it is equivalent to saying "I am like you." Learn to read people and adapt your approach to be more like them. If they are thoughtful, slow-paced and quiet, then you should slow down, become less animated and soften your voice. If they are outgoing, excitable and enthusiastic, you should flex your style so that you are more animated as well. Adapt your approach to the person you are with.

Synchronize your body language. Mirror their actions. If they put their hand on their chin and nod, do the same. If they sit down and cross their legs, do the same. Smile when they smile.

Get people talking and keep them talking. Ask open-ended questions.

Listen with empathy. Listen actively by interjecting a "yes...", "uh huh...", "OK". Encourage them to open up by saying, "Tell me more..." or "That sounds really interesting, can you elaborate?"

Boothman asserts that the ability to connect quickly and effectively is sadly lacking in our society. But learning how to connect is relatively easy and can transform your business. He should know. He speaks to sold-out crowds around the world and has sold hundreds of thousands of books on the subject. If you want to learn more, you can find him at www.Nicholasboothman.com.