The Age of Communication: a new organisational paradigm for the new millennium

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Abstract

In this article the author explores the fundamental shifts that occur in the relationship of the corporation to individuals, and to society as a whole, as a result of the emergence of new information technology in the Age of Communication. An overview is given of how the new corporate building blocks of connectivity, corporate renewal and culture can evoke and liberate the intellectual capital at the organisation, and more importantly revive the spirit of the organisation. The author concludes that corporations, within the Communication Age, can evolve from dominance to pre-eminence through taking on a broader social role and becoming fundamentally important socio-economic nodes in the individual's ever-expanding connectivity networks.

Introduction

"Weaned on the mechanistic view of business, most modern leaders are not yet fully prepared for the magnitude of challenge facing them."
Gouillart & Kelly (1995:3)

The swift movement of technology, the mobility of organisations and people in the global world, and the competition for markets and customers have all combined to ensure that the stable and developed world modern economics have known is forever gone (D'Aprix, 1994:14). Bartlett and Goshall (1989:198) identify two broad trends that influence changing strategic and organisational demands being placed on world-wide companies:

- continuing and accelerating changes in the international business environment, which are drawing more and more companies beyond their national borders;
- growing complexities of inter-organisational relationships between companies and their stakeholders, which are challenging companies to find new and different ways to manage across once impermeable corporate boundaries.

The increasing need for business transformation in order to position for the new millennium represents a fundamental shift in the relationship of corporations to individuals and to society as a whole. Halal (1993:53) states in this regard that the transition underway to unified global order requires transformation in today's technical, economic and political systems, and, most importantly, in the prevailing mode of thought.

Born in the Industrial Age, the dominant model of business has been a mechanistic one in which corporations have been economic agents in an efficient market system, parts of an ever expanding ever more complex machine (Gouillart and Kelly, 1995:3). According to Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997:109) companies have been forced over the past decade to rethink almost every tenet of managerial wisdom. Caught now in the Communication Age, the organisational models of the Industrial Age have been stretched to the limits of implosion (Gouillart & Kelley, 1995:4). There is an increasing realisation that the hierarchical system, with all its implications, is devastating to the human being and to progress, given that this system encourages distances between co-workers, leads to inertia and inflexibility, and is devastating to creativity (Österberg, 1993:63).

Gouillart and Kelley (1997:4) argue that the time has come to replace the mechanistic view of business with a more organic one, and to endow the recently discovered nature of corporations with a new spirituality that recognises the sanctity of individual human life and that has compassion for individuals. The organisation of the new corporation is not a fixed state, but a process in which people and activities are consistently grouped and regrouped to provide the best possibilities for creative work (Österberg, 1993:69).

Gouillart and Kelly (1997:4) argue that the Communication Revolution not only forms the basis of this new business model, which necessitates the ability to manage the flow of information, but is in actual fact the facilitator of a fundamental social and business influence; an unstoppable trend towards connectivity. These authors argue that the entire history of civilisation and therefore of business, is one of increased connectivity. As the trend towards connectivity continues, the role of corporations within society must change.

Dramatic changes in information technology have occurred in recent years. Personal computers, cellular phones, artificial intelligence, virtual reality and massive data bases are a few examples of how information is used differently as a result of technological developments... electronic mail systems are the first manifestations of a revolution in the flow and management of information in companies throughout the world. The outcome of these changes is that the ability to access and effectively use information has become an important source of competitive advantage in virtually all industries (Hitt, Duane & Hoskisson, 1997:15).

Globalisation and technological change are spawning new sources of competition; deregulation is changing the rules of competition in many industries; markets are becoming more complex and unpredictable; and information flows in a tightly wired world enable firms to sense and react to competitors at a faster rate (Day & Reibstein, 1997:2).

While paradigm shifts are most often driven by technology, ultimately the most important manifestations are social – increasing the level of social complexity and leading to profound changes in society to which the company (as the dominant institution of the industrial age) must adapt. Successful corporations in the new millennium will need to develop a new role, built around the invention of a new social contract which will see corporations redefining the boundaries of their responsibility and accepting accountability for the way they use resources and contribute to the environment.

The new paradigm: the third industrial revolution

Harman (1993:54) identifies a shift in some of the most basic underlying premises of modern industrial society, as being the result of two major forces:
- a cultural shift from separateness thinking (competition, national, sovereignty, man-over-nature, exploitation of resources) to whole systems thinking (deep ecology, co-operation and harmony and the like), and from an external authority to inner knowing, inner wisdom and inner authority;
- a growing realisation that modern society, in anything like its present form, does not work and is not sustainable in the long run.

According to Harman (1993:55) these two forces, the one pulling and the other pushing, are forcing a re-examination of the worldview on which modern society is based. The emerging worldview replaces the existing worldview on which

modern society is based (materialistic, reductionistic, exploitative, manipulative), with a worldview that reinstates the human spirit and transcendent values, and promotes a more holistic ecological viewpoint throughout. Business is forced to rethink almost every aspect of its behaviour in order to create a sustainable role for itself (McCown, 1993:69). More and more firms are realising that they must transform their old organisations in ways that allow them to add more value in an information age economy. What Prof. Michael Jensen of the Harvard Business School calls the 'Third Industrial Revolution' has already begun (McCown, 1993:69). Morgan (1993:15) refers to the New Organisation as the Emerging View and contrasts this view with the Dominant View which defines a business:

> ... as many people organised in their efforts to deliver a product or service, primarily to the benefit of certain non present people (the investors), while paying the employees market rates for their efforts. Return on investment and return on effort are both driven by supply and demand (Morgan, 1993:15).

In contrast, the Emerging View defines a business:

> ... as many people organised in their efforts to deliver a product or service in order to benefit those contributing effort through quality of life, meaningful work, a sense of community and financial compensation, and to benefit the communities where it exists directly (Morgan, 1993:15).

The New Organisational Paradigm recognises multiple constituencies, customers, the community, the environment and - perhaps most importantly – the employees. This new social contract is based on the principle that to create more value in the marketplace – through quality, responsiveness and innovation – more value must be created in the workplace. According to McCown (1993:68), the organisations that prosper and survive will be those organisations that find new ways to flatten hierarchies and empower the workforce. This entails more than a survival strategy, and a redefinition of employee relationships – it is the first step towards accepting the changing role that business must play as a positive social institution.

Gouillart and Kelly (1997:255) contest that corporations cannot help but adopt a 'sense of life' that represents the prevailing view the corporation has of its relationship with its employees. Within the new organisation a more enlightened view of the psychological contract is emerging which assumes individual self-responsibility as a given, while recognising that the corporation has an important social role to play. According to Gouillart and Kelley (1997:257), the new organisations are developing a social contract – offering not security, but an environment of opportunity.

In this Communication Age, corporations have an opportunity to evolve from dominance to pre-eminence, taking on a broader and broader social role and becoming fundamentally important socio-economic nodes in the individual's ever expanding connectivity networks.

From fission to fusion

Daft and Lengel (1998:16) use the metaphors of fission and fusion to describe the shifts in management style that the new organisational paradigm necessitates.

Fission, which creates energy by splitting the nucleus of the atom, is Daft and Lengel's (1998:15) metaphor for the style of management that has evolved over the last century. Fission management is characterised by:
- division of labour;
- individual accountability;
- formal authority and control;
- competition for resources;
- management alienation from workers and vice versa;
- narrow definitions of information and responsibility;
- layers of hierarchy and authority used for control;
- individuals motivated by self-interest to accept control;
- a focus on efficiency.

Daft and Lengel (1998:15) identify two drawbacks to the machine-like approaches of fission management:
- the limitations it places on ingenuity and creativity;
- organisational inertia with respect to rapid change.

This point of view is shared by theorists like Österberg, (1993:69) who states:
> ... the organisational forms of traditional companies have served as successful and constructive tools for implementing the purpose of old thought... Now in new thought, these organisational forms become destructive obstacles to progress.

Halal (1993:54) maintains that the prevailing mechanistic model of business systematically excludes the human and social values that are now central to human progress. According to Naisbitt and Aburdene (1990) individuals in developing nations increasingly strive for quality of life, community, self-fulfilment, and higher-order values that transcend material needs. This shift in

human value systems and perceptions corresponds with a transition to a holistic global perspective, which is summarised by Hall (1993:57) as follows:

The transition to a new Global Perspective

	Old Perspective	New Global Perspective
Technological base	Physical technology	Information technology
Economy	Capital centred	Human centred
Frontier of progress	Material Growth	Sustainable Development
Institutions	Hierarchical	Decentralised
International Relationships	Conflict	Co-operation

As a result of the transition to a new global perspective, managers are challenged to radically decentralise authority and responsibility in order to empower people to care for themselves more directly, simultaneously creating a self organising system for managing a complex world (Halal, 1993:61).

Daft and Lengel (1998:15) use the metaphor of fusion, which implies a common ground and sense of community based on what people share (vision, norms or outcomes) to describe the transition in management approach that is necessitated by the new Global Perspective. According to Daft and Lengel (1998:15) fusion is about joining, coming together, creating connections and partnerships. Fusion is about reducing barriers by encouraging conversations, information sharing, and joint responsibility across boundaries. A fusion approach strives for wholeness in both individuals and organisations – bringing body, mind and spirit to the workplace.

Frenier (1993:35) views the taking of responsibility for the whole as joining in with the whole in taking responsibility for itself. According to Frenier (1993:36), the new organisation needs to design structures that give everyone the space to jointly develop the new paradigm practices of the future. Österberg (1993:66) maintains that companies face their greatest challenge ever: to serve as instruments of process. In the new company, the organisational form will not be a state, but a process in which people are consistently grouped and regrouped.

Leadership within the new paradigm differs markedly from what was traditionally viewed as leadership or management. According to Österberg (1993:67), leadership in the new company is formed by mutual consent, and traditional leadership functions are replaced by co-ordinators. The co-ordinator role is broader than the traditional leadership role, because it is based on the premise that the company is there to serve employees – not vice versa. According to Österberg (1993:68), the organisation and its activities furnish to as large an extent as is possible, the best opportunities for personal development to all employees. This view is in stark contrast to traditional models of organisation and management

that Shipka (1993:21) believes has led to 'spiritual poverty' in the workplace. This 'spiritual poverty' has resulted in fear, anxiety, and a sense of isolàtion and despair, because *"...[employees] are supposed to check our deepest personal selves – our inner lives, our soul's development – at the door of the workplace"* (Shipka, 1993:21). According to Prescott (1993:63), this search for meaning, this spiritual quest, the desire for dignity and personal identity and the recognition that goes with it, is as present in the workplace as is it is in other parts of one's life.

Daft and Lengel (1998:27) draw a distinction between personal fusion and organisational fusion. Personal fusion brings together one's physical and mental abilities with subtle potential of mindfulness, vision, heart courage, communication, and integrity. Personal fusion enables individuals to integrate the interior and exterior sense of self. Organisational fusion is the integration of the individual with the collective – a process for bringing together all parts of the organisation, reducing boundaries, and creating a whole system that is fluid, adaptive and empowering for employees. The collective is based on connections, relationships, shared values, common ground and mutual understanding. Österberg (1993:66) maintains that it is in the process of meeting challenges, problems and failures, that collective and individual development occurs, because new experiences, insights and ultimately wisdom is attained.

According to Daft and Lengel (1998:17) participation empowerment, consensus teamwork and teambuilding are concepts many organisations want to embrace. Yet, these forces seldom attain true fusion because individuals maintain separateness and autonomy with respect to important issues such as vision. The power of fusion is that it can release a set of subtle forces (passion, ingenuity, vision, enthusiasm, morale, values and corporate culture) that have a far-reaching impact on organisational empowerment and change (Daft & Lengel, 1998:17).

Building blocks of the new corporate paradigm

Connectivity

With the unstoppable trend towards increased connectivity, individual and organisational networks are growing in size and complexity. Driven by advancing information technology, companies are forming partnerships with their suppliers and customers, becoming parts of networks, even networks of networks. Gouillart and Kelley (1995:204) state that the explosion of global alliances over the past ten years represent a new economic order in which businesses are nodes within networks, and in which the ability to effectively manage networks is the new measure of success. Halal (1993:53) maintains that information technology will

create communication networks that will form a universal norm of open trade, a global banking system and currency, and some form of world governance. Some evidence of this is the emergence of the European Union.

This development will, according to Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997:120), challenge the idea of the organisation as a self-sufficient system. According to Wooldridge and Micklethwait (1997), Xerox alone has over 300 alliances; and there are more than 400 airline alliances around the world, many of them designed to get round national boundaries. Gouillart and Kelley (1995:204) identify two basic motives that drive alliances:

- opportunistic goals such as improving cost positions, acquiring new technology, gaining market success or distributing risk; or
- the desire to learn. An example of the desire to learn is the opening of a brewery in Russia by South African Breweries that was not aimed at penetrating new markets, but rather at the transfer of skills and knowledge to the Russian brewing industry.

According to Gouillart and Kelley (1995:206), if knowledge is to become the fundamental driver of business success, then the ability to manage the flow, acquisition and *application* of knowledge will become a relevant measure of the company's value. As companies develop webs of alliances, strategic networks develop that govern the dynamics of individual companies. Thus the ability to build knowledge-based alliances is becoming a competitive advantage. Technology provides the wiring and programming needed to build connectors across corporate boundaries, allowing the company to be part of new corporate communities, and building electronic links between itself, its customers and its alliance partners, thus providing a conduit to extend the reach of the firm's core competencies (Gouillart & Kelley, 1995).

Stewart (1993:52) contends that, as the usefulness of information technology and technological work grows, business will increasingly replace physical assets with intellectual assets. In this regard, Stewart (1993:53) says *"[I]t makes sense that the core business of the knowledge economy will be ... [k]nowledge..."* Rosabeth Moss Kanter (in Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1997:139) argues that in a knowledge-based society, companies will have to share more power with their employees. Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997:133) contend that where companies once used to think their most precious resource was capital, firms now realise that their most important asset is knowledge. *"The trouble with knowledge however, is that it is so much more difficult to manage than capital, fixed in the heads of pesky employees, rather than stored in the bank, and infuriatingly volatile and short lived to boot"* (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1997:133).

Core competencies and knowledge inevitably reside in three types of knowledge that give the firm its competitive advantage (Barton, 1995:21): public knowledge, industry-specific knowledge and firm specific knowledge. According to Barton (1995:24-27), knowledge and competencies also reside in the various traditions of collective behaviour, also known as tacit knowledge. However, *"for organisations to really become learning ones... you have to build networks to shunt formal information from one end of the company to the other, and you have to look for barriers to tacit knowledge and remove them,"* according to Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997:145).

In this regard, Gouillart and Kelley (1995:290) say *"[c]apturing learning – enriching the organisations skill and competence base – requires building knowledge architecture, establishing a knowledge management process and creating a technical infrastructure which allows for generating, collecting, integrating and disseminating knowledge. The technical architecture allows every individual to gain access to knowledge wherever and whenever it is needed".* It must be borne in mind, however, that information is translated into knowledge through human effort, and that mere dissemination of knowledge does not constitute learning.

While setting up formal networks for knowledge to travel around, Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1995:145) contend that what knowledge workers need most to prosper is not structure, but freedom. While many organisations still view themselves as discrete blocks of functional capabilities, companies are learning that it is not so much how they are organised on the macro level, but what happens on the micro level.

Corporate Renewal

According to Gouillart and Kelley (1995:297), the problem with functionally organised companies is not their functional nature *per se*, but rather the rigid barriers that have grown between functions. Knowledge and learning does not flow across functions as it should; creativity cannot be injected where it is most needed.

In the process of corporate renewal, the link between entrepeneurism and innovation is the force that drives change. According to Gouillart and Kelley (1995:298), a prudent approach to corporate renewal is the creation of small teams of multitalented people with the authority to take action. Each team can rely on knowledge as its greatest asset, and should have a healthy sense of independence, self-reliance and self-responsibility. While independence is a

virtue for these teams, connectedness is the goal. Gouillart and Kelley (1995:295) view the role of leadership in corporate renewal as forging points of connectivity by redefining roles and responsibilities, driving communication, rewarding achievements, and allowing penalty free failures. Through building connectors across teams, networks start to emerge that become the very core of the renewed organisation and the basis of the future organisational structure. Networking means getting rid of exclusive structures and encouraging what Jack Welsch (in Tichy & Sherman, 1994:285) refers to as the *boundary-less organisation.*

Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997:128) point to the importance of networks to ensure that entrepreneurial ideas are disseminated throughout the company. Gouillart and Kelley (1995:238) view corporate renewal as a state where connections to people and things become more dynamic than static; a state of constant design-each-other-as-you-go interactions. The boundary between self and the external environment becomes blurred, with the self-expanding into the environment and the environment entering the self.

According to Gouillart and Kelley (1995:238), the spirit of learning and growth exerts itself through the building of bigger and bigger networks of connected nodes. The connectivity becomes one of 'many to many' rather than 'one to many' as before. In its most extreme form, management gurus hold that the future lies with virtual companies consisting of networks of small, fast-changing amoebae-like organisations of individuals which come together to get the job done and then break apart, only to reconfigure around another project. Handy (1996:185) talks about organisations becoming corporate condominiums – temporary collections of knowledge workers. Curruthers (1997:4) states that *"the global trend is towards smaller flatter organisations. This means that the concept of lifelong employment in a single industry is dying".*

The 40-40 concept of work – forty hours for forty years – cannot survive in the Information Age. Curruthers (1997:44) contends that most people will have between five and seven careers during their working lives, resulting in more and more people working for virtual organisations. Gouillart and Kelley (1995:5) caution that connectivity of the electronic variety can be a double-edged sword, triggering either greater isolation or a greater sense of community, depending on the role the organisation chooses for itself. While individual networks expand and while business networks become knowledge networks, there is a human element that warrants nurturing and renewal through the acquisition of skills.

Culture as glue

Bartlett and Ghoshal (1989:35) state that a company's ability to respond to the demands of the international environment depends on its internal capability that is developed over time and that cannot be changed overnight or by management decree. Many forces shape a company's configuration of assets, distribution of responsibility, dominant management style and ingrained organisational values. Gouillart and Kelley (1995:288) maintain that in the Communication Age, an organisation must maintain two seemingly antithetical characteristics: being clear and focussed, while being prepared for ongoing change and adaptation.

To change an organisation, it helps to be identified with a particular set of values or ideas, according to Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997:192). Jack Welch (in Tichy & Sherman, 1994:298) state, *"Every organisation needs values, but a lean organisation needs them even more. When you strip away the support system of staff and layers, people need to change their habits and expectations, or else stress will just overwhelm them... Values are what enable people to guide themselves through that kind of change "*.

Daft and Lengel (1998:170) contend that those who lead from a set of personal values provide the foundation for a prosperous corporate culture. A corporate culture can promote growth and dignity of individuals, stand for integrity and honesty in everything the organisation does, empower employees to freely enquire and solve problems, and affirm a direction for the company. In this process, vision is a rallying point for diverse groups of people. Once articulated and assimilated into a company's culture, vision is the force that pulls people together toward a desired future, aligning mindsetsn (Daft & Lengel, 1998:94).

According to Daft and Lengel (1998:94), the ideal vision is identified with the organisation – it allows the organisation to become self-renewing and adaptive, because each individual is acting independently, but moving in the same direction. Based on self-reference, this means each element will serve the direction of the whole system when organisational elements have an understanding of the whole. According to Daft and Lengel (1998:99), self-reference leads to a sense of identity, because it enables an individual to appreciate his/her place in it. Katzenbach (1995:64) states that vision gives meaning to changes, and provides mental pictures of where everyone is headed, creating a sense of pride and accomplishment through linking individual activities to performance results. According to Daft and Lengel (1998:109), visionary leaders shape their employees' perception of the organisation and their place in it.

The organic organisation needs corporate culture to attain harmony. Sekimoto (1995) contends that management must adopt more holonic approaches, enabling each part to act independently, while maintaining a balance within the whole. The challenge is even greater in the age of globalisation. In this regard, Anderson (in Steyn, 1996:105) states, *"although we may now envision one global culture, this culture is a thin, fragile ever shifting web of common ideas and values balanced by incredible diversity – more diversity than there has ever been"*.

Consequently, *"we live in the age of the fading boundary, the twilight of a mindset that structured reality with sharp lines. The boundaries between nations, races, classes, species – all become less distinct. Subcultures forge links all around the world – free floating communities of shared interests, ideology and information"* (Anderson in Steyn, 1996:105).

In constructing an organisational cultural paradigm, Johnson (in Reed & Hughes, 1992) comments that corporate cultures are seemingly, socially sanctioned symbolic networks; *"symbolic acts within an organisation can be powerful because of the manner and the substantial. As interpretations, they are vivid, emotive and are able to embrace excessive ambiguity and, in appropriate settings, seems to have a life of their own"*.

Turner (in Reed & Hughes, 1992:54) claims symbolic elements constitute the organisation's mode of being, enabling members to define collective needs and wants. They specify a collective identity and an understanding of the style and roles by which they should deal with one other. Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997:262) contend that corporate culture has become the fifth management asset, standing on a par with capital, labour, material and information.

Conclusion

This article discussed the fundamental shifts in the relationship of the corporation to individuals and to society as a whole as a result of the new information technology in the Age of Communication. The new technology does not simply augment existing modes of life, it changes our perceptions of reality and allures basic symbols that express life's deeper meaning. If organisations are to move towards sustainability in the new millennium, they must realise that technology as such is not an expression of human purpose. However, telepower is a technology of such all-pervasive influence, that the human consequences, which Channon (1993:20) calls the social architecture, must be considered. Not only will a deepened sense of interconnectedness be experienced, which will lead to a greater

sense of immediacy, but this resource will have a profound effect on our organisation and experience of work. Van Dusen Wishard (1993:59) believes the inundation of knowledge this brings about affects the conceptual foundations of all institutions, and that the struggle for new synthesis will lead to a redefinition of societal institutions and the role of individuals within these institutions.

Van Dusen Wishard (1993:30) states that a sustainable future requires a new worldview: of the standards people demand of themselves, the integrity of personal relationships, the human role assigned to work, the purpose of economy, the relevance of politics, the flexibility of education, and the tone of culture. The dominant mechanistic view of organisation is replaced by a holistic organic view that redefines the role and responsibility to society and the individual, and reinstates the human spirit and transcendent values. Hall, Kroening and Phillips (1993:79) contend that this revolution lies in reshaping the human mind, not financial capital. The challenge is to accept the role of creating a new relationship with employees that can lead to a new relationship with the community.

This new relationship requires new management approaches, entailing that employees accept increased responsibility for the destiny of the company. This management style is about individual and collective leadership – the ability to build relationships, connections, community and a positive culture and value system. The new organisation will be *"...member lead, authority driven, customer focussed, a team environment in which the whole is more than the sum of its parts; a flat management structure where employees and managers are fully empowered and decisions evolve close to the customer, a culture of learning rather than blame, a clear sense of purpose; quality service through direct provision and effective partnership..."* (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1997:I). In this organisation, Handy (1996:183) contends, the statement that *'people are our greatest asset'* may begin to be literally true with unforeseeable consequences.

In this article, an overview was also given of how the new corporate building blocks of connectivity, corporate renewal and culture can evoke and liberate the intellectual capital of the organisation. More importantly, it was illustrated how they can revive the spirit of the organisation through the understanding that people are the business, and are the purpose of the business, therefore business must be producing quality of life for everyone it involves. What is needed is an understanding that the health of employees and of their relationships with each other is the fabric of the organisation, and that this health stems from an increased sense of value and potential. *"To work, to engage in the creative process to see the product of one's labour used and appreciated – this is an essential aspect of what it means to be human. Working in a community and being part of an endeavour larger than oneself elevates the human spirit"* (Morgan, 1993:14).

Organisations are on the threshold of fundamental change in the business world and beyond. How organisations respond to that change will determine their sustainability in the new millennium. Change means opportunity as well as danger. The increase in connectivity driving the communication revolution is a double-edged sword. It can result in the loss of humanity or in a greater sense of community – depending on the role companies choose for themselves.

"The workplace has always been the real school of life. Perhaps it just needs to change its curriculum a little to tune in with the new age of personal initiative."
Handy (1997:262)

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