

The Failed Promise of High Tech

By Tom Northup May 2006

Can you imagine life without computers, electronic organizers, cell phones, digital music or high speed internet?

Many in the software and computer industries may not remember the tools that dominated the workplace 25 years ago, the typewriters, carbon paper, desk-bound phones, and desk calculators that technology promised to eliminate or make more efficient.

Has technology lived up to this promise to improve our work life?

Recent research finds that people complete less work in a day than they did a decade ago and that the number of people who call themselves successful has dropped 30%.

What changed ten years ago? E-mail, computer messages, cell phone calls and voice mails began their relentless bombardment of American workers. The promised new efficiency became a thousand fold increase in the number of items competing for our attention with the result that real work did not get done.

This failed high tech promise has consequences. In this article I will discuss these consequences and how they affect us in two main areas: the lack of focus caused by multi-tasking and the loss of effective communication. However, I believe that there is hope! I will conclude a way that we can overcome this lack of focus

Multi-tasking

Industry and individuals have embraced all of the high tech trends and gadgets. We pride ourselves on our multi-tasking ability, often juggling blackberry, internet and phone connections almost simultaneously, performing several tasks at once rather than concentrating on one task at a time. By placing ourselves on call 24/7 we respond in real time and regularly interrupt ourselves.

We think our connectedness makes us faster and more efficient. In reality, as we flit from one task to another, we lose efficiency and more importantly we lose effectiveness.

When we are always connected we allow ourselves to be continually interrupted. Consequently we don't focus. Each task takes longer to accomplish and we lose productivity.

People often confuse efficiency and effectiveness. They are very different concepts. Efficiency commonly means getting a job done quickly and on budget. Effectiveness means performing actions that help us generate increased success. Efficiency is doing things right. Effectiveness is doing the right things.

Which produces the best results? Peter Drucker said, "There is nothing more wasteful than becoming highly efficient at doing the wrong thing." Many people make the mistake of being efficient but not being effective. Consequently we lose our ability to drive results that are important to our success.

Communication

This loss of personal productivity is harmful but not nearly as harmful as the loss of personal communication. The humorous cartoon in which techies rely on e-mail instead of walking down the hall for a personal conversation is a sad but true social commentary.

The high tech industry developed through some of the most creative teamwork and personal communication in history. It is ironic that today's executives use high tech as a way to avoid using the communication model on which the industry was founded.

In 1970 the newly formed Palo Alto Research Center, or PARC, quickly became a great example of how to put technology to practical use. According to Alan Kay, one of the wizards of PARC, the strategy for letting creativity flourish was to "get really great people together and manage the social dynamic." He added that, "No organization works beyond the size you can get all the principals together in a room and thrash out the issues before you go home."

In 1979 PARC allowed Steve Jobs and his staff to look at their technology. Jobs immediately understood the potential and built a team of marketers and engineers to commercialize the technology. The Apple Macintosh story is now legend.

What did both PARC and the Mac teams have in common? They focused attention on their goal. They encouraged unfettered continuous communication. Both teams kept rules to a minimum. However, the one PARC rule that everyone had to obey without exception was that no one could miss the weekly meeting.

Not communicating face to face limits our effectiveness and our ability to drive results. When we are not face to face we miss tones, inflections and non-verbal communication. Good communication requires good listening skills. Listening well goes beyond hearing what is said. Active listening is all about asking questions to probe and clarify the information you have heard and delve into unspoken areas. We cannot do this by e-mail. Without face to face interaction we cannot have in-depth give and take to fully expand our ideas.

Communication and Best Thinking

The highest value of effective communications is the ability to develop best thinking by drawing on the full talents, experience and education of our people. Face to face conversations are the best way to develop in-depth best thinking. Thinking only at a personal level is insufficient. High level best thinking never happens in a vacuum. We must have continuous dialog with others if we want to develop and maintain our status as an expert in our field.

Best thinking is the catalyst that generates high level focus. Focus drives performance, performance drives results. Best thinking:

- Focuses the organization.
- Gives the company a competitive advantage in the marketplace.
- Allows us to achieve sustainable results.

Developing organizational best thinking is one of the highest and best uses of an executive's time.

Practical tip

Using technology cannot substitute for understanding how to be personally effective. One practical method you can use to minimize interruptions and develop focus is what I call the "Conference Planner Technique."

In the planning system you use, enter the names of those you confer with frequently. As you are reminded of items you need to discuss with one of them, don't immediately make contact. Instead jot down ideas under that name. Ask your associates to do the same with items they want to discuss with you.

Schedule periodic conferences with each associate. Before the meeting order the items on your list by priority. Strike out those items that you can best deal with in another way. Meet and have a focused discussion.

When you use this method, you control the timing of your communications, you are less likely to forget a topic, and you can have a focused conversation. Most importantly you limit interruptions, allowing you to focus more effectively. Remember, you can always conference immediately on those issues that are truly urgent.

Summary

High tech equipment has not fulfilled its promise to streamline work. Multi-tasking has actually reduced success. We regularly interrupt ourselves and as a result lose focus and the ability to complete tasks in a timely manner.

When we use email and voice mail as a substitute for face to face communication, we do not communicate at the level of in-depth understanding and shared commitment. We lose the effectiveness we need to drive results and success.

Connectedness offers great potential. The old barriers of proximity and time no longer constrain us. We can reach others when we are not physically close and we have instant communication across multiple time zones. We need to learn how to use connectedness to our advantage and not allow technology to control us.

The benefits are potentially enormous. If you are completing less work each day and are struggling to generate success, make it a firm goal to change your habits and learn to control technology to your advantage.