

Staying Human in a Machine-dominated World

Susanna Opper

Imagine that it is the year 1151, and you live in a walled town in France. Consider how you would get information. You cannot read. Except for a few clerics, neither can anyone else. All the information you gain in your entire lifetime you either see with your own eyes or hear about. Before you die, you will have no more than 200 to 300 encounters with information outside your village. You depend on occasional visits from troubadours, traveling knights, pilgrims and other visitors, and listen with rapt attention to their tales late into the night. That is it. No television, no newspapers, books or magazines, no telephones, no airplanes and, of course, no Internet.

Now fast forward to today. Consider how our ability to be in touch and to obtain information has transformed our lives from a simple tedious, isolated existence to one that is rich, exciting, and global. But we are paying a price for this richness that leaves us vulnerable both as individuals and as business entities. Somewhere along the way we have lost touch with a part of our humanity. We will need to reclaim it in the years ahead.

‘Too much’

The sense of overwhelm that most businesspeople experience today cannot be sustained into the future. Frequently voice-mail in-boxes refuse new messages before their owners arrive at the office in the morning. Some of these same workers face 300 plus e-mails a day.

A senior executive recently related the favor she did for a subordinate who returned from vacation to 500 unanswered e-mails. The executive persuaded the head of information systems to delete all the messages. The subordinate, deeply grateful, thanked the executive profusely later that afternoon.

An ‘antidote’ is defined as a remedy to counteract the effects of poison or of anything noxious taken into the system. We need an antidote to the ‘too much’ of our lives today. There are simply too many choices, too many results in our Internet searches, too many possibilities, too little time.

Some of this overwhelm will be mitigated by the very technology that spawned it. Our information systems will learn our needs and scan themselves to isolate and present only critical information to our desktop. Like automobiles before them, our computers will become nearly trouble free. We relate to our computers today as automotive pioneers did to their cars in the early twentieth century. In those days a simple trip of 20 or 30 miles could take a day and might require one or several tire changes. Today automobiles are reliable with minimal maintenance for at least 100,000 miles.

Our technology is allowing us to work at home today as people have for most of human history. As more people telecommute and our entrepreneurial, home-based business economy expands, families will again dine together. Children will be raised with a clearer

understanding of work and their parents' vocation. These are all positive contributions our technology is making to the quality and humanity of our lives.

The shadow side is that we no longer have space between our work and our home. Faxes churn out into the night, e-mails pile up; cell phones seek us out on weekends, pagers call no matter where we are. Technology has increased not only the pace of external demands, but also, more importantly, the intensity of internal expectations. We believe we should respond to 500 e-mails. Did deleting the e-mail messages really free the overburdened employee? Will he, in the end, be more stressed as he struggles to explain why he did not respond to the missing e-mails?

Our enmeshment with technology has transformed us into entirely different beings than we have been historically. We look to machines to solve our problems. Our machines have become our beasts of burden. Laundry, washing dishes, cooking meals—activities as necessary today as in 1151—are made simple by machines.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Americans got lazy. Automotive transportation caused lack of exercise, which was eventually proved harmful by numerous medical research projects. So exercise was reintroduced—but this time largely by machine. We invented stationery bicycles and treadmills to challenge our muscles with fictitious hills. We still walked or jogged outside, but usually with a tape machine setting the pace with music or the persistent voice of a recorded instructor.

Back to basics

The keys to retaining our humanity in our machine-dominated world lie in those areas that have not changed since humanity began. Back in 1151 babies learned to walk and talk just as they do today. At night in 1151, people dreamed when they slept. We know little more today about those dreams than they did; perhaps, in our over stimulated world, we may even know less. We still do not fully understand how we learn or how memory works, or what inspiration causes an artist's creation or a scientist's discovery. We understand hardly anything more about our emotions—why we fall in love or out of it.

We will begin to regain our humanity by returning to more primitive behavior. We can see how this trend will work in the future by considering how we have adjusted our attitude toward childbirth in recent years. In the 1940s mothers bore their children under heavy sedation in an antiseptic environment that eradicated any emotional experience—either for the mother or the father (who paced back and forth in the hospital waiting room). Today children are often born at home again; fathers usually are present at the birth and have a role to play. Breast feeding—eschewed for decades—is common practice again today.

The Information Age is a leveler. The Internet allows everyone access to information so that many products and services are becoming commodities. The only way business entities can achieve and maintain success is to discover a sustainable competitive advantage. In most industries that advantage cannot be totally technology driven—it must be fuelled by creativity, by reflection, by the freedom to dialogue and invent. These very qualities are being squeezed out in our intensely competitive, informationally stressed business environment. In the race to stay current, many companies are allowing no time to invent their futures.

The rapid pace at which we conduct our business and our lives today has made a fundamental shift in the coin of the realm. Until a few years ago, costs were measured monetarily. Today time has become equal to money in evaluating costs. Free events are as difficult to sell as sessions requiring a fee because the knowledge worker's time is as valuable, or more so, than money.

The conundrum is that in order to be creative, it is necessary to spend time. As any artist will testify, you cannot know in advance how long creativity and innovation will take. While inspiration, by definition, occurs in an instant, it is impossible to know how long it will take for that inspiration to present itself.

Turning the tide

Anesthesia and hospital births altered our experience of the fundamental human process of birth. Similarly, our current dependence on electronic communication, coupled with our fear of spending time, threatens to change how we experience human connections. E-mail allows greater ease of communication, but can lessen face-to-face conversation. Soon new technologies will provide us visuals and video clips to put a face on our now faceless electronic conversations. But none of this will provide us with the relationship-building quality of a human connection in the same place at the same time.

In order to truly be creative about our business challenges, we need to take a fresh look at information. In order to be fresh, we need to clear our desks and our minds of the clutter and demands of daily business and escape to a purer environment. In that place we can reclaim some of our essential humanity. While we do not need to turn the clock all the way back to 1151, we will do best when we escape from the concrete modernity most of us work in. IBM CEO Lou Gerstner knows this: "Every six weeks he takes his top 40 managers off-site for a two-day retreat...dedicated to management learning in non-traditional areas. Each session features an outside speaker who addresses a topic that is peripheral to the immediate concerns of IBM's leadership...Gerstner personally leads these sessions: his objective is to give his executives practice in stretching their thinking and developing new perspectives on IBM's business."¹

Similarly, the Shawenon Center provides an unconventional environment in which strategic business issues can be discussed. Here participants explore using contemporary tools in a non-traditional setting. The center was founded to link state-of-the-art technology with a serene natural setting. Working with computer-based meeting facilitation technology, participants experience an environment in which business people confront key issues. The objective is to collaborate on creating an action plan everyone present can commit to. Along the way participants are encouraged to invent unconventional solutions by tapping into the inspiration of poets and artists—trees, water, grass, insects, birds and other animals.

The collaborative technology used at the Center helps uncover the basic values of the group by exploring the beliefs and commitments of team members. A clear statement of the problem or challenge and practical knowledge of resources are also key. Creative business solutions occur in this environment.

Getting creative

Creative solutions are possible even when it is not practical to travel off-site. Both changed attitudes and different behavior are key to creating this state of mind. Inner adjustments include recognizing that none of us can expect to read everything, visit every relevant website and respond to all the outside requests of our business and personal lives. These inner adjustments call for great clarity of purpose. We need to be clear about our values—what really matters and what can be pushed off, perhaps indefinitely. We need to be aware of the inherent seductiveness of our burgeoning information environment. We cannot pursue every tasty morsel of information. We also need to recognize that ‘no’ is sometimes the right answer.

Most of us were raised in a traditional educational environment in which we were expected to know it all. Success in school meant that you did your homework—read the chapter and did the exercises. Then we were tested on what we managed to remember. This educational concept, which assumes there is a finite amount of information, is inappropriate in today’s work environment. Still, most of us have the vestigial expectation that we can know it all. We need to give that up.

Behavior changes foster creativity when we learn how to maintain balance at work and at home and, most importantly, at our home office where the two come together. While not everyone can visit a serene rural environment, everyone can take time to walk in a nearby park. One Wall Street executive we know jumps on the ferry to Staten Island when he needs a break. In slightly over an hour, the water, the seagulls and the calming motion of the boat refresh him.

We need to allow ourselves some empty time to just think and find creative solutions to our business issues. How often a brilliant resolution to a nagging problem arrives while we are in the shower or behind the wheel driving to work. There is a reason for this. When we leave our minds alone, they often produce amazing results.

We need also to commit time to the things we love doing. How many people who used to love to paint, play an instrument, or indulge in a hobby have given that up? Taking the time to do the things we love seems an enormous indulgence in our over-worked lives. But perhaps these actions that keep us human actually contribute to our ability to solve problems and meet our daily work demands.

Sometimes it is just as efficient to let the strong hand of serendipity do the work:

“Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation) there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too.

“All sorts of things occur to help one that would otherwise never have occurred. A whole stream of events issue from the decision, raising in one’s favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way.”²

Years from now we will look back at the end of the twentieth century and wonder how we did it. How did we manage all the unsorted information, the uncertain software and the cranky hardware? How did we make the transition from technology being the focus of some to technology being the way of all?

In time, our technology will mature so that we can depend on it to make our lives easier. If we also pay attention to our humanity—to relationships, to discovering who we are and what we want to be—we will have richer and more productive lives both as individuals and as members of organizations. The power of human commitment and focus has not changed since 1151. We expect it will still be essential for setting things done in 2151.

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1. *Fortune*. 24 November 1997.
 2. W -N. Murray. *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition*.

“Staying Human in a Machine-dominated World,” published in *Web-Weaving: Intranets, Extranets and Strategic Alliances*, Paula Boyle and Peter Lloyd, eds., 1998, Butterworth-Heinemann, London.

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