

Managing Change & Technology

The Light Version... Vol 3, #7
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*To Embrace the Future,
Let go of the Past
PdJ*

THE KEY QUESTION

A reader's question

A precise encapsulation of the challenge

I've been involved in the IT industry for over 30 years now; you remember... back in the days of wooden computers. During all this time one issue has consistently bothered me.

Why is it so difficult to generate user/client enthusiasm in IT projects?

It makes no difference if it was an old 5081 card Accounts Receivable application or the newest interactive web site, an ERP solution or a new project management methodology; users are just generally unenthusiastic about being involved with the decision making going into the change that will affect them for better or worse.

I've always attributed this to the ostrich syndrome (by the way, I don't think I've ever seen an ostrich place his/her head in the sand) but somehow I suspect it goes deeper than this. Is it fear of technology? Is it lack of perceived benefit to the individual?

Anyway that's my "big bug" question.

This question is a very precise encapsulation of the "Change Management" problem facing most managers. It doesn't matter what type of "project" we're talking about, it certainly does not have to be, but most often is, a technology related change.

Sound, solid, useful answers to that question would go a long way to increase the number of successful change projects. Considering the state of change management today, this would be a good thing.

Managers would be even more impressed if they could find out not only why the problem exists, but how to either a) make the problem go away or b) avoid it altogether.

There is however a huge, almost insurmountable obstacle between managers' current thinking, and where they have to go to make this problem go away. This obstacle is easily highlighted by making a slight change to the key question:

Why is it so difficult to generate user/client enthusiasm in MY projects?

Now granted, I did perform a little bit of prestidigitation here. There is a difference between 'my' and 'IT' (Information Technology) but not within the context of the stated problem. IT projects are seldom, if ever, initiated by the user community; they DO belong to the IT department. They are usually initiated outside of the user department; and that is the key to understanding why it is so difficult to generate user enthusiasm, AND what you can do about it.

There is however, another aspect to the perceived problem that by itself poses an unusual obstacle to the manager trying to implement any new system/business process. This aspect is, without doubt, the most difficult to overcome.

Take a look at the revised question again...

Why is it so difficult to generate user/client enthusiasm in MY projects?

...and I'll counter with a related question:

Why do we suffer under the delusion it should be easy?

I'll do my best to unravel this mess with a personal example.

I started using computers back around 1976. The first one was a programmable HP calculator. The one I finally ended up buying myself was a North Star Horizon Z80a CPM based machine. The next were a series of IBM DOS PCs and eventually a PC capable of running one of the many early versions of Windows. I was a bit of a DOS power user; I could make the machine do practically anything, except brew a cup of coffee.

I eventually became proficient with Windows, and most of my work was done on my PC. During this time I was given a Mac by Apple as a part of a consulting contract. So even though I was a Windows user, I had the competing operating system on my desk.

Now it is important to note, that if you had told me to stop using Windows and move my work over to the Mac, I would have resisted you tooth and nail. Yet over a period of about a year, I slowly, but inexorably, moved all my work from the PC to the Mac.

Why?

Not just "Why did I move?", but also, "Why would I have resisted being moved?"

And why is there no contradiction between “Refusing to be moved” and “Moving of my own free will”?

The answer is so exceedingly simple that most people are totally unwilling to accept that it *predetermines* the success or failure of the majority of change projects. I’m positive, knowing what I do about human nature, that if the reason were more complex, more people would be willing to accept it. Unfortunately, it isn’t complex, it is simple.

The reason I moved from one machine to the other, is that I decided to do so based upon my first hand experience with my work and how each operating system facilitated the completion of said work. I decided myself that my needs would be better served learning how to use the new system, even though I already knew how to use the old system. In short, the decision to change was my own.

On the other hand, if you’d come to me and told me to change, I would have ignored you and even strengthened my resolve to stay with what I knew. By trying to compel me to change, you made it less likely that I would. Yes, this is a bit ‘perverse’ on my part. Welcome to human nature. We do push back when pushed.

You might have taken a slightly different approach and tried to convince me to change (this is called the ‘buy-in’ strategy) but it would still have been your idea that you’re trying to foist off on me. It will be a difficult sales job.

And so it should be. Persuading someone to do something they did not think of themselves **SHOULD** be a difficult task. Otherwise we’d be at the mercy of every salesperson with something new to sell us. It should be difficult to get a department to be enthusiastic about your pet project, otherwise they’d be at the mercy of every idea you, or your manager, or some writer in a magazine, comes up with.

The question:

Why is it so difficult to generate user/client enthusiasm in IT projects?

contains within it the reason for its own difficulty. It is difficult to generate user/client enthusiasm for IT projects, because the IT projects were not initiated by the user/clients. The IT projects are perceived to belong to the IT department and **NOT** the users/clients.

The solution to this ‘problem’, is to get the user/client to initiate the change (ie. perceive the need for change) before the IT department. That is achieved by keeping users/clients informed of what is possible. Users **SHOULD** be techno-savvy. They should know what is possible. They should, in their never ending quest for efficiency, effectiveness, competitive advantage etc. etc., be seeking out change, technological and otherwise, that will allow them to achieve these non-technical business goals.

BUT... in many organizations, technological change is confined to the IT department. It is their mandated responsibility to inflict change on other departments. And we wonder why it's difficult to generate enthusiasm?

Summary?

Of course there is an additional problem waiting in the wings. If we do create an environment where change is initiated in the user departments... how does IT respond when the users/clients are requesting too many changes?

Do we then have to answer the question...

Why is it so difficult to generate IT enthusiasm for user/client projects?

When you realise that the answer is yes... with no irony intended, then you have gained a deep level of understanding of the change process. You've done well Grasshopper.

Yours truly
Peter de Jager
June 18, 2002

*We are judged by what we finish,
not what we start.
Anonymous*

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All comments are always welcome! Send them to me at pdejager@technobility.com

Change Seminars in the UK & Eire

I will be in Scotland the First week of October.

If you wish to schedule an in-house seminar, presentation or consulting assignment, or even express a desire to get together for lunch in London around that time, please contact me, as soon as possible, to make suitable arrangements.

Call for contributions

Folks? In the interest of providing multiple perspectives on change. I'm happy to consider articles of 500-700 words for publication in the next issue of MC&T. Or, if you prefer... pose some change related questions and I'll do my best to provide an intelligent answer.

MY SERVICES & PRODUCTS

I'm primarily a speaker/consultant on issues relating to Change and the Future. You can contact me via e-mail at pdejager@technobility.com or call me at 1-905-792-8706 to discuss how I might be of service to your organization.

My primary speaking topics fall under the umbrella of Change, Technology and the Future. Here are some sample titles.

Managing the Impact of Change...

Basically everything I talk about in this journal are topics I consult and speak about. Let's discuss how I might be of service to you. If I can't help you, I know someone who can.

Commerce ends with an E!...

Our focus is first on our 'commerce' and then on the Internet

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Why rapid change in ANY direction forces you to re-examine your business, your industry and even society.

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What instant access to information means to any industry.

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Why cities in Italy are reversing the clock on Technology.

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See www.truthpicks.com for online ordering! And the latest TPs!

Truth Picks, is a collection of 130+ similar observations on a wide range of topics. If you like my style of writing, you'll enjoy these.

That's it... see you next month! (or thereabouts)
Peter de Jager