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What new skills will leaders need as new technology continues to revolutionise the way we communicate.... ?

I listened to a radio programme yesterday in which a number of academics were discussing the life and influence of William Caxton, the merchant who brought the printing press to Britain in the year 1476.

Opinions vary about who actually invented “moveable type” printing technology. The earliest candidate was a commoner in China called Bi Sheng who is believed to have created moveable type Chinese characters from clay between 1041 and 1048 AD. The most well known candidate in the West is Johannes Gutenberg who developed a printing press with replaceable/movable wooden letters between 1436-1440. The first book to be printed using his technology was the “Gutenberg Bible”, printed in Latin. The first English book to be printed using this technology (by William Caxton) was Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, in about 1476. The book is still in print today.

However, despite the debate over who invented it and when, it is indisputable that the moveable type technology **completely revolutionised the “printing industry”** by bringing down the price of printed materials and therefore making the printed word more accessible to a much broader population. And so, in due course it increased the availability and accessibility of great works of literature, science and history and creating a knowledge and literacy revolution that still continues today.

Today, 500 years or so later we are in the middle of a similar revolution; over 1 billion people¹ are able to capture their thoughts almost anywhere, anytime by clicking away at the small keys of their smartphone and with the click of a button share it with the world via the internet. People are able to video-chat in real time with friends, family or business associates all over the world, share documents, photos and videos “on the cloud”, search for information about almost anything one can imagine and navigate to almost anywhere, and all at relatively low cost.

At the end of 2011 there were over 2.2 billion regular users of the internet², and “The Global Village” is continuing to expand by about 200 million users per year.

So, what is happening inside global corporations as this new technology revolutionises communications and e-commerce. Companies are always looking to cut costs, speed up

¹ Source - Strategy Analytics (Bloomberg article <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-17/smartphones-in-use-surpass-1-billion-will-double-by-2015.html>)

² Source - Internet World Stats (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>)

transaction times, reduce leadtimes, time to market and reduce stock. Collaboration 24/7 enables work to happen continuously with global teams collaborating online and sharing resources and up to the minute information. **It is a great opportunity to gain competitive advantage.**

Leaders in these companies are increasingly needing to lead teams across timezones, geographies and cultures and having to respond to rapidly changing market conditions and environmental factors. Travel budgets are squeezed and people are increasingly expected to work “virtually” using e-collaboration tools, telephone conferences, webinars, e-learning and virtual meeting spaces. For sure, the technology one day (and sooner than we think) will no doubt be so advanced that we will be able to interact with people in 3D virtual reality environments, that will get close to the “meat space” that we have been used to working in, “pressing the flesh” and “seeing the whites of their eyes”..... But, until then it places new demands on leaders, some of whom are not as familiar, skilled and comfortable with the technology as their teenage kids.

And even when the technology does enable almost “real” face to face meetings, this will still not replace bumping into people by the water cooler or in the restaurant, or catching a glimpse of a colleague whose body language immediately communicates to you that they want a chat.....

So, just like the dawn of the printing revolution new technology is changing the way we communicate and it’s demanding that we learn new technical skills; but also as leaders we need either to develop new leadership strategies and skills or sharpen existing ones to make up for the loss of good quality face to face contact.

This has not gone unnoticed amongst the business community - in the last few days Richard Branson has posted an article on LinkedIn asking “Why aren’t more business leaders online ?”³

In the article he says:

“So why are only 16% of CEOs currently participating in social media? IBM’s 2012 Global CEO Study found that most CEOs are clearly not taking social media seriously. Only one of more than 1,700 respondents had their own blog! Some are on LinkedIn, fewer on Twitter and even less on Facebook, Google+ and elsewhere on the web.”

This is one of the trends that will have to change if business leaders are going to really engage their managers, staff and the communities in which their companies do business.

The use of the technology is certainly not without significant issues. There are the technology issues and compatibilities with corporate firewalls and security policies. There are challenges for participants to learn new systems and interfaces and dial in correctly - not to mention learning and remembering to mute their phones so we don’t hear the rest of their office, the traffic, their dog, their children or them stirring their coffee !!

³ Source - <http://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20121019130632-204068115-why-aren-t-more-business-leaders-online>

There are also some new habits to tackle. A few months ago I listened to a “virtual presentation” by Chris Carey of Axiom Communications (<http://www.axiomcommunications.co.uk>) about improving TC's and VC's and it included some interesting statistics. A study by Tandberg and RoperASW found that only 23% of participants paid full attention in an audio conference (and 8% weren't fully dressed !!!)⁴

Face to face communication will always be the “Gold Standard”. Nothing (so far) can beat being right there in front of someone sensing their mood, their expression, their body language, breathing, eye movements. Being able to respond almost subconsciously and immediately with no satellite delay or lip-sync issues.

But the new technology also reduces the costs of pseudo face to face and audio contact and that means there are new low cost opportunities to engage with people far better than an e-mail or a phone call. People that we would otherwise not have “met” but now we can meet them online - see them as well as hear them, find out more about them, their background, interests and have a much more engaging experience with many many more people.

We are in the middle of a massive global revolution, the pace of change is quickening. The business leaders and employees that take a lead in this change and refuse to be left behind, will be the leaders that will take their businesses and themselves to new levels of effectiveness, efficiency and engagement.

Bring it on !!!!

Postscript.....

In the radio programme that I referred to at the beginning of this article I learned that despite the new printing technology and the fears that “the scribes” had about their jobs, the hand-written manuscripts lived on for a century or more. They became an even more exclusive gift - it was far more special to give someone a hand-copied and illustrated book than to give them a bland printed one. And so, real face to face meetings will still be special, and **even more valuable** as we navigate this latest communication revolution.

Thanks for reading !!

Neville



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⁴ Source - http://www.ivci.com/pdf/tandber_roperasw_study_1103.pdf