AN EXPANDING NETWORK

Getting an invitation to review the programme’s curriculum brought back some memories of when I joined the programme. In late 1999, like many Hong Kong people, I was in stock speculation on the dot com boom, undertaken in addition to my day-job as a banker. I thought I would have even better trading results if I knew more about the so-called e-commerce. This was frankly the key driving force in my application to join the MSc(ECom&lComp) programme in 2000.

The enrolment at that time was very competitive as the programme was the first one launched in 1999 in Hong Kong, and the second one launched in the world (after Professor Shamos’ in Carnegie Mellon), among my classmates I can count ten little windows that show my colleagues working in Singapore and Tokyo. Our IM (Instant Message) chats don’t just allow text chats; the same channel offers VoIP as well. Anyone in the organisation could have an IM conversation with me via multiple channels and in multimedia: visual, audio and text. I sit out of the open as no one has private offices in our company. Then again, private offices are anything but private in this day and age. Anyone from anywhere can interrupt me anytime and in any way they want. Oh, did I mention the speaker box on my desk that is connected to a worldwide “squawk” (voice) system and the more traditional overhead “public announcement” system that we are so fond of using?

We are in the information business and information travels fast and frequent in the company. We are constantly interrupted by multiple channels of communications from colleagues who want and expect instantaneous responses. While the speed is exhilarating and tasks get completed quickly, it is difficult when we need to write an evaluation, to develop a new plan or to flesh out a new idea. To do anything that requires more than five minutes of attention is often a challenge in Zen concentration. In fact, it is tempting to give up thinking all together when it is easier to shoot off a message to ask someone else. At the same time, since we know conversations on electronic mediums are kept for posterity, we tend to give the safest answer possible and sometimes with a few lines of legalese mixed in. When interactions with colleagues become fragmented, transactional and stifled, opportunities for discussions and creative thinking are lost.

As modern corporations race to embrace modern communication technology, this dissociation threatens to extend to client-business interactions as well. Clients are offered the use of online self-service systems, online manuals, context sensitive help, emails, electronic voice menus and IM chats by way of support. The last time I saw a bank teller might be about six months ago. Interactions between clients and their customers therefore also threaten to become fragmented, transactional and stifled. CRM systems (Client Relations Management) promise to help, but a vast database of fragmented interactions doesn’t change the fact that they are still transactional and can easily be commoditised.

People do business with people they like. In this highly computerized world of ours, the value of a genuine smile is on a steady up-trend. Our ability to interact with each other and to form relationships with a colleague or a customer is the key advantage that cannot be commoditized away. We are what we are, and we are unique. One of our company’s key competitive advantages is that they have us, and there’s only one just to go around. As clients, we all want attention, we all want to be treated as unique human beings that we are. The two questions most of our customers send to us everyday are: Do you hear ME? Do you understand what I want?

So, do not let the advent of technology dictate our agenda. Technology should not enslave us in small commoditized confines. Technology should free us up to be more human. As corporate employees, all our communication devices do not have to be on all the time. We do not have to read and respond to every single email immediately upon receipt. We do not have to jump every time our Blackberry beeps or when our IM agent flashes. We can check our communications at regular intervals and struggle to give ourselves time to think, to create and hence to do what humans do best. We can get off from our desk, walk over and talk to our colleagues in person. We can have conversations over coffee or lunch. By the same token, we can afford to be more human on emails and IM chats with our clients. We can let our personalities show (God forbid!). We can get off the “email trap” and pick up the phone and talk to our clients instead. We can visit our clients, break some bread and share some jokes. Our competitors might have the same technology that we have, but they don’t have us.

They don’t have us.

Use technology properly to free us up to be humans - to inspire, to create and to foster relationships. That perhaps is the real winning strategy in this competitive digital world.

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Technology as Liberator

When I get to the office everyday, I pull out my RFID staff card and register myself on a global system that tells the entire company that I am in and ready for action. I pull out my mobile phone and plug in my Blueberry for recharging at my desk. I clip on my in-house pager and I release my desk phone off “Busy”. I log into the computer system and my six “persistent” IM chat rooms start up automatically, along with my task bar and ten little windows that show my colleagues working in Singapore and Tokyo. Our IM (Instant Message) chats don’t just allow text chats; the same channel offers VoIP as well. Anyone in the organisation could have an IM conversation with me via multiple channels and in multimedia: visual, audio and text. I sit out of the open as no one has private offices in our company. Then again, private offices are anything but private in this day and age. Anyone from anywhere can interrupt me anytime and in any way they want. Oh, did I mention the speaker box on my desk that is connected to a worldwide “squawk” (voice) system and the more traditional overhead “public announcement” system that we are so fond of using?

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