OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER AND THE TECHNOLOGY TRAP

There is a type of obsessive compulsive disorder which involves a mania for counting, cataloguing, tidying mundane objects over and over again. It is classified as an anxiety disorder, and 23 million Americans suffer from it.

We all suffer from it in one form or another, if you loosen up the definition a little. Do you remember the examination study schedules drawn up meticulously in different coloured inks, which took so long to perfect, that your study plan fell behind, and you had to revise the plan? Pretty soon, you are spending most of your time on getting the plan right, and not doing much actual studying.

I had a colleague once, who took over a training department. He was the second manager in a recently started department, it had had a few projects, which it had handled in a fairly entrepreneurial way (which is to say that sales took priority over systems), and his task was to put some order into the department, consolidate the portfolio of products that the department offered, and build up the customer base. He was in the job for two years, and excelled at the first part of his mission. When he left, the office was a model of organisation, with neatly labelled files for a comprehensive portfolio of training products. The only problem was, there was little of substance inside those files. Indeed, sometimes one got the impression that requests from clients were a rather troublesome interruption in this task of "organising" the knowledge we had.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is commonly thought to arise out of anxiety about things or life issues that cannot be handled, building up high levels of stress. The compulsive counting or tidying behaviour gives a form of temporary relief from that stress by immersing the subject in mundane, controllable and therefore stress-free tasks.

Many knowledge management programmes fall into exactly this category, and senior managers commencing on programmes often invest enormous amounts of money in what is, essentially, a bean counting exercise.

One of the most vocal sceptics about the technology driven sales hype behind knowledge management, Michael Schrage, recently wrote a scathing indictment of data-mining enthusiasts in *Fortune Magazine*.

"Are all these mine-worthy data truly an embarrassment of riches? Or are they a dangerous invitation to tail chasing? After all, correlation ain't causality. Just because single, left-handed blond customers who drive Volvos purchase 1,450% more widgets on alternate Thursdays than their married, nonblond, right-handed, domestic-car-driving counterparts does not a marketing epiphany make... data mining's dominant deliverable almost always takes the form of provocative questions rather than profitable answers. Creating new information about information guarantees a growing demand for...new information... The managerial endgame becomes a mathematical tale of organizations gripped by statistical introspection and perpetual conversations about significance. Then they data-mine their data-mining algorithms to ascertain any biases they may have. Data mining will prove a powerful organizational tool. But organizations that embrace data mining as a window into themselves and their markets had best become introspective about a lot more than their data."

(Michael Schrage, "Brave New Work; Sixteen Tons of Information Overload" *Fortune Magazine*, 2 August 1999)

Schrage is taking a polemical line, and so takes an extreme position. There are data-mining enthusiasts who can point to success stories to counter him. There is the famous, if apocryphal story about the supermarket chain that found through data-mining how sales of diapers and beer both rose at the same time, late Friday afternoons. They concluded that husbands were dropping in at the supermarket on their way home from work, and bought beer (for themselves) and diapers (for the baby). The shelves were reorganised, diapers were located close to the beer (just in case the husband were tempted to forget), and presumably sales of both went up - we suppose, because we are not told.

The key point is this: Schrage is right to state that going looking for interesting correlations is an interesting exercise, but should not take over the manager's work or the resources of an organisation. The psychologists would be correct in supposing that the manager's easy flight into numbers and beancounting (which technology does very well) is a flight away from the difficult, stressful, anxiety-prompting people issues (which technology does not do very well). There is, literally, safety in numbers.

Treatments for obsessive compulsive disorder include the use of tranquillisers to calm the central nervous system and reduce the level of anxiety. A somewhat mischievous thought: should we be tranquillising our digital nervous system, and would that then remove some of the stress that senior managers suffer?

Mischief aside, we are left with the most important lesson of the technology trap: one of the key snares of KM is to buy the magic bullet, sit back, and wait for results. Technology is only as good as its users. If we have no idea *which* knowledge is important to us or why, we should not be spending money on the instruments to measure and use it. Above all, giving ourselves technological playthings will not, ultimately solve the greatest challenges that face corporations in the 21st century: how to migrate our skills base to one that values communication as well as technical knowledge, and our people cultures to ones that value knowledge and promote its transfer. So far, most corporate investment is on the machines. It's time people got some investment too.

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