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Towards the modern business school in the information age

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For the better part of a century the dominant paradigm for business school education has revolved around capitalist production systems, and for the last half century the business school has been the cornerstone for transmitting and in calculating the norms, values and goals to future captains of industry. However, as we rapidly head towards the 21st century an exponential growth of new information technologies based upon computerization has brought a new age that most commentators have labeled "The Information Age." In less than two decades the evolving information revolution has not only changed how we "do" business, it has changed the total concept of business. Computerization lays the foundation for new "skilled machines," robotics, automatic accounting and quality control systems, automated materials handling systems, and the list of changes appears endless.

The industrial age paradigm of business has been to break down the industrial experience into operational segments or disciplines like marketing, advertising, production, management, operations, computers, accounting, finance, human resources and the like. A curriculum was developed for each discipline that stood as a separate identity. Thus, students would major in disciplines which was topped off with an integrated experience of business policy or strategic management. In this way, the student or prospective employee was prepared to go into the workforce. Unfortunately, with the integration of information technology into the industrial place things started to change rapidly. The workers needed to know how to use information technology to their business's advantage.

Today, in the information age, a new paradigm needs to be developed. This new paradigm should address the flexibility of the lightning speed of the information technology and the new way of thinking that has been developed by digital age people who are entering the world of business. The digital age people are those individuals who are under the age of 25 years and who have grown up with the Nintendo game machine. The digital age people just think and act differently and are prepared for a "totally different experience in life." A totally new experience in life means a new way to teaching business for a new way of doing business.

Simply stated, such tumultuous changes wrought by information technology and the advent of the information age requires that the business school evaluate its role, function, clientele, staff and place in the academic community.
The most basic change that the business school must confront is a shift from production based focus to an information processing focus. It is the aim of this paper to log out the antecedent factors involved in the "New" business school by presenting a heuristic framework for the 21st century business school. In order to do so the paper will identify new issues and components that must be integrated into a functioning framework: specifically (1) "the new student," (2) multiple learning concepts, (3) interdisciplinary analysis, (4) decision making under conditions of uncertainty, (5) expanded spheres of factor analysis, and (6) communicating in new ways.

The New Student

The socialization of a new generation of students to the information age has been rather obvious to many observers. A standing quip goes to the effect of if you are having trouble with some task on your computer then call your kid who will proceed to accomplish the task with blazing speed. Yet, this should not be amazing when one considers that these kids have grown up with Nintendo, arcades and a plethora of other computer generated activities for them. The computer is simply another tool that has been there since their early remembrances. The point for the new business school to remember is that these coming students already have the eye-hand coordination for the information world, and secondly they are already cognizant of computer techniques.

Multiple Learning

The history of education within the common school of business curriculum focuses upon a generalized fact dissemination gathering and retrieval process, and the foundation of perceived excellence in that forum is predicated on language and memory. But what is becoming rather apparent to casual observers is that the new keyboard maestros have learned something other than "facts" - they have learned advanced hand-eye skills, multiple dimensional analysis, and even an irreverence for traditional learning boundaries. The point is that what elementary teachers have come to understand well is that there is more than one learning skill and managers of the future are going to be required to be adept at multiple learning factors.

The business school will have to adapt, and even become instrumental in multiple learning theories advancements, because without that recognition of how students learn and integrate those learning skills on the job and in management. If the business schools do not become cognizant of these theories then the business school will lack both relevance and currency.

Interdisciplinary Analysis

There have been several pushes for development of interdisciplinary analysis in the academic environment; to the extent that there are even interdisciplinary majors, or focus majors such as American studies or environmental studies founded upon interdisciplinary approaches. However, simply calling out for an interdisciplinary approach or labeling a program as inter-
disciplinary does not mean that it is truly based upon multiple paradigmatic analysis. One of the clearest areas where there is deviance between espoused commitment and actual commitment is in the business schools. When one looks at the AACSB procedure for accreditation the disciplinary pigeonholing by disciplinarians becomes the operative criteria. Thus the message for the business school faculty and deans is that specialization and narrowness of focus will be the rewarded behavior.

The expansion of the "Information Age" into the business schools has had an impact on the traditional narrow focus of business schools by adding a new and unique disciplinary layer to the business curriculum. What is different with the information management curriculum is that it is not a seemingly separate and distinct discipline such as marketing, accounting, or law, but an integral component of each of these disciplines; further pushes for ethics, environmental management and international management may help to facilitate the expansion of interdisciplinary analysis in the business school.

The point that needs to be stressed is that there will be a set of dynamic factors associated with the information age that will coerce business schools to adapt to this new age by instituting fundamental structure changes to the school and the curriculum - namely interdisciplinary analysis. Failure to implement these changes will signal an impending demise to the business school.

Decision Making Under Conditions of Uncertainty

If we as managers and teachers have learned anything from recent history it should be that the old axiom "nothing is certain" has taken on expanded validity. At almost every level of analysis the ability to predict and control prospective events appears to be diminishing. Yet the business school curriculum is dominated by a "fact" orientation. Tests are of a true or false nature, multiple guess or simply getting the right calculation. This focus of curriculum arises for multiple reasons—larger class size in many programs, more demand on faculty acquiescing to student demands of class certainty and thus better grades, student evaluation procedures and many other reasons. The net effect is to instill in students and over time to faculty that there is a right answer, that there is one way to do it and implicitly simple models and simple rules will be sufficient. The focus is on the facts. Yet the reality of the business world seems to be quite different. Chaos and uncertainty are the ubiquitous components of almost every major decision that confronts a manager. As a point of fact for most on-line managers, there are no simple decisions, and internal and external politics, conflicting goals, Wall Street vs. Main Street, international concerns, corporate appearance, and community relations cloud these decisions which seem so simple in the business school classroom.

The advent of the information age has maybe not really simplified true decision making but complicated the process by making more information available at each step of a decision-making process so that the decision maker has both more information, but also more uncertainty confronting them.
The business school in the information age, if it is to serve future managers, might change from a fact orientation to an organic procedural approach. This will require expanded contingency analysis, multiple framework applications, and integrative option analysis.

Expanded Spheres of Factor Analysis

The early models of business and economic analysis focused upon the production of goods as a requisite of three factors of land, labor and capital, and to a degree this is still true albeit with a plethora of conditions and constraints. Labor historically was comprised of faceless, nameless, atomistic individuals toiling at their appointed tasks. They were not really people but hominoid robots or at least that seems to be what was implied from the business school literature and management's concern was simply how to get more out of these individuals and do it more efficiently no matter what level of dehumanization took place. With the advent of the information age, technology and electronic miniaturization, there are now true robots welding, painting, assembling, boxing and shipping. The production process has evolved to the point where human labor is almost superfluous. Yet we still teach labor economics, demand unions, excoriate the weak and lazy, while the world is slowly moving to a position where labor as we have traditionally viewed it as an anachronism. In fact the real question may be how to distribute goods and services when labor is of minimal importance.

Traditionally, trees were viewed as a simple factor of production defined in board feet. But, all of a sudden, they have taken on aesthetic qualities, sources of oxygen, habitats for dwindling endangered species or important segments of complex environmental systems. All of a sudden forest managers are being confronted with a change in the rules of operation, and with the idea that the forest management isn't so simple and there is more to it than optimizing board feet.

These two examples of changes in the traditional analysis of factors of production may be vehemently contested, but the point remains that spaceship earth has taken on expanded importance and the other factors of production are no longer just "things" to be put into production equations. It is of importance that these expanded spheres of various factors be accorded their current dues by the business school because if prospective managers are not sensitized to human rights, ecological concerns, and ethical norms they may find themselves "coming up short" and being viewed as the problem—a phenomenon that has become very common.

Communicating in New Ways

Business schools have been teaching various aspects of communication for a long time. Business writing has been the mainstay with some interpersonal communication skills taught from time to time. However, in the new information age, communication skills play a large part in the paradigm. Communication takes place on four different levels: (1) person to person, (2) person to machines, (3) machines to person, and (4) machines to machines. Person to person communicating has been in the form of memos, reports and interpersonal skills. The person to
person skills need to be continued and enhanced. The person to machine communicating is the person learning the skills necessary to work with information technology, usually the computer. The person to machine communicating has been less emphasized in the traditional business education and needs greater enhancement with the information age. The machines to person communicating skills is a new one. The prominent role of machine to person interface has had limited exposure and is one of the least understood issues. The machines to machines communicating has been limited to the technical areas and has not been part of the business education but really needs to have great exposure. Thus, new communicating skills need to be developed that focus upon intermediary transmitters and communicative barriers and hurdles.

TOWARDS THE FUTURE BUSINESS SCHOOL

The tradition of the monolithic business school housed within the hallowed walls of academia is rapidly losing currency and credibility, and it is happening at such an increasing rate that some schools are already trying to adjust, such as Harvard and Stanford. But even at these schools much of the change tends to be of a limited nature. What the authors have tried to do is point out that the information revolution has generated a pervasive alteration to the process of modern management which requires a reevaluation of business management schools and concomitant curriculum.

In order to facilitate this process, the following framework developed from the preceding analysis is presented as a commencement point for further discussion and evaluation of courses of action for business schools in the information age.

Figure 1. A Schematic for Revitalizing the B-School
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The business school for the last several decades appears to have had as its hidden goal the monolithic objective of maintaining homage to a white "organizational man." But as the information revolution has become a juggernaut of change and chaos the organization man must try to maneuver his/her industrial canoe up the proverbial rising river of technology. The elegance of the industrial model begins to overwhelm the traditional manager with people working at home, refusing promotion, continual fears of the coming pink slips, more work hours, less pay. Simply put, the system we all were inculcated into and nurtured by is coming apart. Clearly the business school must regroup, rethink its mission and clientele and reappraise its role in the universe of academia and industry. The schematic in Figure 1 is not a solution, but rather it is a place to commence the revitalization of the business school and its role in the world of business.