

If I use a computer will it save time? ...well No and Yes.

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One New Zealanders look at management - the role of computers and comparative attitudes in New Zealand and Japan.

New Zealand like Japan is renown for leading the world in many fields, for New Zealand such fields include Management ranging from the Goverment down to the private sector, Telecommunications, Sports rugby sailing etc, including the proliferation of computers both in business and the home.

One of the most surprising aspects of Japan to me coming here some 3 years ago to live, was entering the local City Council buildings and seeing more paper than I have ever seen before, the reason I thought was immediately apparent, I could not see a computer anywhere. I naturally assumed that Japan as a world leader in computers and related office automation equipment would themselves use the technology. In like manner at the school where I taught and companies I visited I hardly ever saw a computer, simply vast amounts of paper and hundreds of people working furiously to do all the right things with the paper. It reminded me of what New Zealand was like some 20 years ago or so. Where was all the excellence in management in Japan that I had heard of all my life? I had mentally assumed that it included amongst other aspects the use of state of the art automation, in the case of office work computerised office automation.

The usage of Computers in New Zealand

however unsurprisingly reflects the prevalent attitude of "give it a go" the enterprising spirit, and "she'll be right mate" meaning no matter what comes we can deal with problems should they arise. There is naturally a wide range of attitudes equaling the number of individuals that are represented, however speaking in very general terms and at risk of oversimplifying the matter and offending people, the New Zealander attitude is one of being willing to take a risk and venture into the unknown in order to constantly improve the way things are being done, that is in order to do things more effectively (ie doing the right things efficiently), as opposed to just focusing on efficiency (ie there is no point in doing what doesn't need doing efficiently).

Having worked for two of New Zealand's largest companies during times of significant restructuring, both of which reduced staff by 3/4 and at the same time increased productivity by up to 10 times, key aspects that I recall as being significant in the restructure process included the following:

1: Re-evaluating at a strategic level the core business. That is why does or for what purpose does this company exist?

2: Re-evaluating from the top down the aspect of effectiveness.. this is often where the aspect of computer usage comes to the floor. That is in effect taking a clean slate and re-evaluating how to achieve the above No.1 in the most effective manner.

3: Focusing on the work of the individual, asking the hard questions.. what do you do?.. and why do you do it?.. And matching as closely as possible the ideals in No.2.

The above and other aspects are of course always iterative. But perhaps the most surprising thing to me was many people had no idea why they did what they did, except for being told to do it, and that's the way it's always been done etc. and were very surprised to learn that what they did didn't actually need doing. This realisation of course in never faced passively, naturally everyone likes the sense of achievement, to feel needed, to be useful. Thus until such people are relocated to other roles where they are indeed useful is usually a very painful process at a personal level.

Many companies constantly work on efficiency (on a small scale) with no reference to the whole purpose of what they are trying to achieve, and not realising that what is being done very efficiently by restructuring the entire process doesn't need doing at all. It may sound silly to say but I do not encourage people to work efficiently at what doesn't need doing at all.

On this specific point that compares with a prevailing attitude amongst the Japanese of a comparatively greater desire to maintain status quo, to avoid risk, and while there is a desire among many to improve the way things are done, the amount of momentum required for any significant change is usually too great unless the need to change has been externally driven. By this I refer to Japan's world recognized achievements from the post war era to the present and the market driven private industry sector.

With regard to management while computers have played a significant part in the streamlining of paperwork, which has to date resulted in what I consider to be a vast waste of human resource there are other aspects that when comparing New Zealand and Japan must be considered.

One such aspect is that in line with the above points through much restructuring in New Zealand from the government down there has gradually come the realisation that much of the data that has been maintained is superfluous as well as the fact that by computerising providing just name or address is sufficient to access all the necessary information (non of this writing out the same information on 15 or more different forms which personally irritates me and my wife who usually gets to fill them out). For example in changing car ownership, in the case of a regular sized car, one typically calls on the services of a third party to deal with the 10 to 15 forms that require submitting to various offices around the prefecture, arranging site visits of the proposed car park etc, for which the fee is in the order of ¥35,000 to ¥50,000 (may take up to a week). In New Zealand you walk into any Post Office get the form "1 form" fill in a few lines name address etc pay ~¥2,000 and it's done, (5-10 minutes at max). I appreciate this is not an entirely fair comparison due to the car parking considerations. However I think it would be fair to say this is fairly representative of "procedures" in New Zealand versus those in Japan.

Another aspect which may be rather a sensitive point for many is the attitude surrounding what is considered a good, efficient or effective work environment. Some

20 years ago or so in New Zealand the amount of paper (clutter...junk?) on one's desk was positively correlated to how busy one was which was likewise positively correlated to one's effectiveness (achievement). However I believe now in New Zealand the reverse is considered so, of course whether it actually is so will vary for the individual. That is the ideal office being considered one in which only a computer and a telephone sit on the desk. The remainder of the office providing a serene environment considered to maximise one's working effectiveness (achievement). While attitudes in Japan may be changing in this respect from my personal observation Japanese attitudes still largely reflect those prevalent in New Zealand 20 years ago. At schools I still vividly remember most teachers work desk tops being 80%+ up to 60cm high with stuff other than what was being currently worked on, actually some desks were 100% covered not less than 30cm high and the recess where the chair would usually be being 100% full of stuff causing the teachers to have to sit at some distance from there desks working on there laps. To me I liken this situation to having a 200Mhz computer with a 1GB hard drive but no RAM available as it is being used for long term storage rather using an external 1.2MB floppy drive as RAM. I have of course painted two extreme pictures here for most people they will usually be somewhere in between. (for me personally I vary between the extremes, that is at work I usually keep a fairly clean desk but at home my work areas are usually in a state of chaos) Thus the reduction of stuff on a desk or in an office for many Japanese may be seen in a negative light, giving the impression that they are lazy and/or have nothing to do, far from being seen as working efficiently. Therefore for many the addition of a computer has been

exactly that "an addition", everything is still done exactly the same way it has been except a computer has been neatly nestled somewhere into the pile to look even more efficient, but usually unused or worse used to duplicate the paper work systems. At schools of late I have been very pleased to see a large number of laptop type computers starting to appear, I have always been an enthusiast for laptops over the larger types (dinosaurs being the exact word I usually use) they do indeed ideally suit the already occupied desk top however this is another issue.

In the usage of computers there are two aspects or more precisely "myths" that I think need further expanding on. One is that of if I use a computer will it reduce my work load? to which the answer based on my experience is No and Yes. Invariably the aspect of change in any field requires vast amounts of additional effort initially, which depending on the specific application may range from hours to years. In the case of automating large or governmental organizations the effort required is unbelievable and instances of "apparent" failures on the way likewise. Many involved in such efforts often become very discouraged and think all the effort is a waste of time. And that the ways that things were done previously were significantly more effective. This sense of disenchantment is often exaggerated by memories of the salespeople who originally came advertising the computer systems with there sales hype painting rosy pictures of living happily ever after with a fully automated problem free from the word go computer system. In the world of computers I do not think such a world exists, however a better way I think of looking at it is a sense of mission toward constant improvement and development to meet the

constantly changing demands being made. What I am saying here is that by the time a computer system is bug free (problem free) it is probably out of date and/or too slow lacking the ability to do anything required by the ever changing market place.

What tends to occur based on my experience is that while people are struggling with and complaining about the problems computers, or computer assisted automated systems bring they tend to overlook the fact that as time goes by the systems are becoming increasingly more useful and achieving increasingly higher levels of effectiveness and efficiency. So that when many companies take a look back to say 3 years before they cannot believe the difference, despite the ongoing problems.

I believe that for many reasons including the aspects of avoiding risk and desiring to maintain status quo, and inherent resistance to change that the usage of computers in Japan has been very slow in it's progression. However I believe that the gradual increase in computer usage in Japan will continue to accelerate for a number of different reasons including the following:

- The "Internet" is an increasingly talked about subject. Access to it naturally entails the usage of a computer.
- Comparisons between companies using computers well and those not, or at least using them poorly will continue to become increasingly embarrassing in terms of output for given numbers of staff.
- Computers continue to become more user friendly, as well as faster and more capable.

Naturally there will be variations to the above, for example people who use computers for the sake of using computers, I personally don't think this is necessarily a bad thing as this has usually been the beginning point of most major achievements in the computer world as in other fields, that is people discovering new applications through "playing with" their computers. In the more formal world it is termed "research", because if you submit documents at company or government levels for funding to "play with" your computers the response is usually less favorable than if you request funding for "Computer Research".

Today when I visit the City Council I am pleased to see computers here and there, although the paper is still around I assume the dependence on it will in time reduce. Likewise in schools the usage of personal computers is increasing rapidly as people realise the potential efficiencies as well as the the ability to produce much higher grade teaching materials. Although the sounds of "real typewriters" from the Meiji era I think can still occasionally be heard.

To date I believe Japan has become a world leader through extraordinary determination and effort at an individual level, this however has it's limits and I personally believe that by adding a little more "working smart", that is by reevaluating processes from government down assisted by computerisation, the need to work twice the hours (and almost never seeing one's family) will reduce. However this will not happen overnight nor is the necessary restructuring painless. But at the end of the day I believe it will be worth the effort. With regard to the aspect of the streamlining of procedures, based on my experience during the

very difficult process of planning how to computerise procedures that have been to date maintained by much paper work the aspect of streamlining is often surprisingly inherent. For example the instant something is stored on a computer it can be made immediately accessible by anyone anytime anywhere in the world that you permit to see it. Thus duplication of such information is unnecessary (except for backup purposes - this in the computer world usually only takes minutes to back up even years of data). Likewise anyone can change or add to the information held in the same manner, under your control of course.

Once processes are well re-evaluated from the uppermost level the need for forms almost disappears due to the ability of computing systems to centrally manage all the information, procedural complexity disappears and is reduced to simple requests. The form being simply a piece of paper to sign to provide documented evidence to making the request.

I am pleased to see the introduction of computing to children at a younger age in Japan, I believe this will given time reduce the hesitancy to make good use of computers on an individual basis, and ultimately on a national basis, and that some of the children today learning the value of computers as tools to manage information and processes that currently consume vast amounts of human effort will in the future be the people that change the workplaces and ultimately the face of Japan for the good of all.