

# Re-imagining the people profession

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Upwards of 35% of market value resides in hearts and minds, not on the balance sheet. This value isn't realised until people find work meaningful enough to bring their whole selves to work. But can work be meaningful if it ignores wider ecological and social concerns? Making this connection is the 21<sup>st</sup> century agenda for HR professionals.

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In our action-and-results oriented workplaces, reflection isn't privileged. It's more 'pc' to be busy climbing the ladder than pausing to check that our ladder is placed against the right wall.

The promise of a new year however, tends to prompt reflection and resolutions for change so perhaps this is a good time to take stock of the territory in which HR and Training and Development professionals serve, and think about the future in which this important work must make sense.

There's good reason for engaging in such evaluation at this time. T&D has to justify its existence to secure its budget allocation and while the need has probably never been greater, the argument for support and investment has to evolve beyond traditional boundaries and embrace important changes in the global context if it is to truly serve its masters.

The changing context has many dimensions. I'd like to talk about three that seem not only relevant, but pivotal.

## GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

First, the bigger picture. Look beyond the factory gates and institutional walls, towards the 'real world' in which we are all situated, and we see a world under great pressure from many sources. In particular, the fragile and narrow space that supports life on this planet - our environment - is over-stressed, and although there's scarcely anything more important, this growing systemic weakness has a hard time making it to mainstream consciousness.

As 2005 dawned, a natural disaster of epic proportions struck. The Asian tsunami wiped out communities in ten countries, reverberated in many other lands, and parachuted into our tinselled living rooms the stark reality of those who struggle to survive on what we call "the margins of the global economy". Not long after, the death of Pope John Paul II prompted an unprecedented global outpouring of emotion that surprised even the Vatican in its volume and religious diversity.

Sandwiched in between these two massive media events, a landmark study of immense consequence to all of life, slipped into the world almost without comment. The UN-Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA), the work of 1300 scientists in 95 countries confirmed that the ecological destruction of the last fifty years is greater than all of the damage caused by humans since our emergence on Earth.

## Life-support system degraded

Approximately two-thirds of the eco-system services that make life possible are either significantly degraded or being used unsustainably. Furthermore, the MEA report confirms, because of the complex connectedness of everything the negative spiral is both worsening and accelerating, increasing the probability of abrupt changes including sudden shifts in climate patterns.

As if to underpin this warning, during the past year, weather extremes played out all over the world. Severe drought caused more forest fires in Europe, the impoverished people living in India's trash-filled dumps in Mumbai battled the worst rainfall in decades, and hurricane Katrina provided dramatic proof that even the richest nation on earth can be ill-equipped to respond to nature's raw power.

This may concern you on a personal level, but you may quite reasonably wonder why you should be concerned as a human resource professional. Here's why.

## Challenge and opportunity

The environmental destruction parallels a period of unprecedented global economic development, in which the level of production of goods and services exceeded any other period in history. Clearly, this can't continue, and there is one other factor on the radar that is going to change everything utterly, and that is the end of the Oil Age. Oil has been the basis for our economic model and the driving force of business for over a century and the gradual closing of this chapter of human evolution will affect everyone, every institution, every business and every walk of life - bar none.

Widespread environmental upheaval and the end of oil, together, signal the end of business-as-usual and the beginning of new ways of working in harmony with the natural world. This presents both great challenge and great opportunity for those concerned with the development of people and organisations.

## BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Wherever you plug in to this tiger economy, you hear the familiar mantra: we must be 'more competitive', and indeed the central role of training in delivering value is frequently acknowledged. Economist Paul Tansey's analysis in this journal last year, was that training and development was the clear route to enhancing productivity growth in a high-cost economy. "Training," he said, "is no longer an

optional extra, it's an imperative".

Comforting words for the training and development community. Simple and straightforward. But something deeper and more complex is going on that is not inherent in that unambiguous and no doubt well-meant observation.

Being ever-more competitive in a globalised world, means continually squeezing extra value from the tube, and that means doing more with less - including less people. This can and does create extraordinary pressures internally, and externally. A recent UK study shows that trust in corporate institutions has plummeted from 2:1 *in favour* in 1970, to 2:1 *against*, today. People don't trust banks, governments, hospitals, or business - especially big business - and only 5% trust business to tell the truth about pollution.

## Pattern emerges in Ireland

A similar pattern is emerging in Ireland. According to futures research company *Amárach*, three-quarters of Irish adults feel that organisations are selfish, and that they become cold and impersonal as they grow. Recent data shows a marked decline in trust across the board - in government, the gardai, the church, the legal system, the health service and the media. Just 1% "trusts business to be honest and fair a great deal" - which means a whopping 99% doesn't trust business a great deal.

There will always be a need to improve practical how-to skills, of course, but is this really the golden key to improved performance in an environment where trust has evaporated and ethical behaviour can no longer be taken for granted?

There are limits to what training can achieve. All the things organisations say they want today - the enhanced productivity Paul Tansey points to, innovation, creativity, flexibility - are totally dependent on the nature and quality of relationship in the organisation. In a word, the culture. Culture is the heartbeat of reputation so it's one of the most vital sources of corporate value. It seems to me there is much development work to be done in this area, and that too presents both challenge and opportunity to human resource professionals.

## WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

Thirdly, the workplace. Time was when a mid-life crisis struck people in their forties or early fifties. Now it seems a "quarter-life crisis" is a reality for

many young people who don't feel fulfilled at work. In a study of 1000 young high-fliers, identified by their organisations as tomorrow's leaders, Common Purpose (UK) found that half of the 25 to 35 year olds feel caught in a career trap, a majority feel their lives lack meaning, and more than half are currently looking for a different job.

Nine out of ten said they want their work to add purpose to their lives, most admitted they weren't performing to their full potential, and almost half had the feeling their organisations didn't care about them as individuals.

And the empty feeling about work isn't confined to young people. The Management Agenda annual survey of 600 UK managers, finds an astonishing 70% of the respondents lack meaning in their lives... more than half admit to tensions between work and personal values... Management consultancy Proudfoot, calculates 37% of all working time is wasted... a Mercer-Gallup survey finds 73% of workers are 'disengaged' from their organisation... and 19% would happily sabotage it...

The same story, survey after survey. Just what is going on? Why is there apparently so little satisfaction in the workplace? So little meaning?

### Language provides a clue

There may be a clue in the way we perceive organisations. A call to address social issues and the culture of specific organisations in particular, has gained momentum in recent times, however the commentary, even at the most senior level, reveals an understanding of culture as something separate and 'out there', that can be adjusted or 'fixed' by the addition of a few more controls and regulations, like a machine.

This is far from the truth of course. Culture is not separate, it's what we are. It's what we *create* moment by moment, through a myriad of individual choices and decisions that translate into the behaviours we add to the cultural soup.

The mechanistic mindset, the product of a scientific reductionism that's rooted in the middle ages, takes things apart in order to understand, predict and control them. Though it goes right back to Isaac Newton, it remains at the heart of modern organisational practices, and as we have become more and more narrowly focussed on financial performance, it seems we've boxed off organisations from their wider environment, separated the organisation from people, and in the process, lost the

essence of life: the *relationship between things*. People increasingly feel like cogs in a machine, because they are increasingly treated as such.

### WHAT CAN WE DO?

Nearly forty years ago, Abraham Maslow predicted that efforts to mechanise the human organisation would alienate the people who form the core of the organisation. Leaders are on shaky ground, he said, when they forget that business is fundamentally a human endeavour.

Generally, organisations see their relationship with the outside world as one of 'separateness', or tangential, at best. This is a comfortable Story, because it allows managers to really believe that the business of business is just business, and other matters, while they may be important, are not core.

It legitimises other practices too, such as 'externalising' costs as far as possible in the interest of maximising the return to owners and shareholders. And it allows philanthropy to ease the corporate conscience while the Story remains the same.

But the story of separateness, is an illusion. The true relationship between business and that outside world, is one of 'nestedness'. All institutions, including business, are wholly owned subsidiaries of the community, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, and their health and wellbeing, success and longevity - *and profit* - depend entirely on the health and wellbeing of the wider system.

The concept of separateness or nestedness also provides a clue to the loss of meaning and fulfilment found in the Common Purpose research and elsewhere.

People today, frequently have to leave their personal values (and therefore an important part of themselves) outside the door when they go to work. When an organisation's purpose or mission isn't inspiring, or even clear - beyond enriching owners and shareholders - or when its values are the values of self-interest, *work has no meaning* for the employee. And beyond a certain level, it makes little difference how generously they are compensated financially - because long-lasting meaning doesn't come from money. It comes from fulfilment at a much deeper level. And it comes from work and workplaces that make a real contribution to the wider system. Work that makes a difference. Ask any nurse or doctor.

In systems terms, the subsystem has to work constantly to maintain a dynamic balance with the supersystem it's part of. Like meshed wheels, when one changes, the others must adapt or there'll be friction leading to break-down.

Switching from a separateness mindset to one of nestedness, would be a *profound* change of story - like accepting that the earth isn't after all, at the centre of the universe. But if we could achieve this shift, the entire value system of business would change, leading to behavioural change, with far-reaching benefits for all of humanity. That's neither a dream, not impossible.

### A new agenda for people professionals

As the wider environmental challenge begins to bite, I believe the primary objective of professionals in the people business, will be to cultivate a new relational worldview and revitalise the relational space.

The first step is to overcome the mindset embedded in traditional management training and cultivate a whole-systems sensibility throughout the organisation, but especially in key decision-making areas. To free the mind. This would return to centre-stage the primacy of relationship as the basis of all value: relationships within the organisation, between managers and staff, between departments, with society, with the environment.

There is a need to engage everyone in a programme of learning in order to understand the new context in which their organisation must succeed, how it is contributing to the context, and the implications this holds for the future. Armed with this new understanding, there's a need to journey inwards to reconnect with a deeper vision and guiding values founded on systemic truths. This would provide a new framework upon which to reshape the purpose and direction of the work people do, in service to real needs.

This end-of-year reflection sketches an ambitious territory for people professionals. It's not for the faint-hearted, but for those of us who wish to see personal and organisational development and our contribution as central, it is the necessary way forward.

Securities analysts now say that upwards of 35% of market value of the stocks they follow isn't found on the balance sheet. This is not because it's not there, but because there's nothing in their kitbag to tell them where to look. Overcoming the blindspot of mechanistic thinking, reconnecting with the wider system, and making work truly meaningful again, is

the only way to access the missing 35% that's available in hearts and minds, if we respect that work is essentially a human endeavour. ||| dya

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### About the author

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He is a qualified Cultural Assessment Practitioner and co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic - 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*, a desktop companion of practical communication tips and inspirational wisdom. [Oak Tree Press, 1998]

He helped create *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

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