

Review

Does the Future Work?

Future Revolutions: A Comprehensive Guide to Life and Work in the Next Millennium

David Mercer. Orion Business, London 1998 £19.99

Why Teams Don't Work: What Went Wrong and How to try Again – and Succeed

Harvey Robbins and Michael Finley. Orion Business, London 1998 £9.99

Why Change Doesn't Work: Why Initiatives go Wrong and How to try Again – and Succeed

Harvey Robbins and Michael Finley. Orion Business, London 1998 £9.99

David Mercer has led an extensive project at the British Open University, working with over a thousand organisations internationally to predict the future beyond the Millennium. His book is a somewhat anodyne distillation of the findings, peppered with quotations from think-tanks and futurologists. The result perhaps confirms the view that Business Strategy is about driving with the rear view mirror, viewing the present in terms of the past. Mercer goes further, and presents an optimistic, almost complacent, picture of the years ahead, extrapolating from the consensus of his focus groups. He sees the reality of the future as derivable from the wishful thinking of those who will participate in it.

The book was published in 1998, and already looks of historic interest. Nowhere in the book do we see predictions of the collapse of the Asian economies, or the implosion of Russia. The tendency is to assume that the system, or technology, will find a way round problems that currently appear insuperable. There is an almost naive faith in rational conclusions. On this basis, the Year 2000 Software Problem (also known as 'The Millennium Bug') is given cursory treatment, although many

economists are now predicting serious economic consequences, whose details will not be known until after the event. Surprisingly, there is no account given of chaos theory, according to which a young Washington intern can flutter her eyelids and cruise missiles are dispatched to Sudan and Afghanistan.

The book may have practical uses, in that it provides a check-list of assumptions against which reality can be checked in the coming years. The reader may wish to know more about the future of the world of which we hope to be citizens.

David Mercer identified the growing significance of the European Union, and the separate, at times apocalyptic, path being followed by many in the United States. By contrast Harvey Robbins and Michael Finley are unashamedly American, with backgrounds in training, psychology and business writing. They have endeavoured to produce international editions of their two successful books, but with an unmistakably confident and informal style. Writing about teamwork, they use the style of the football coach, but with references to the conventional literature. Their work has won awards, and provides an accessible introduction to the major business cases, seen from the perspective of aspiring gurus.

The three books provide a context for vigorous academic and professional debate about the present and future of business, what business should expect from technology in the coming years, the differences between cultures, and areas of ongoing controversy. Robbins and Finley argue that “The most important skill of managers and leaders in the years to come will be conversation”. It is not just a matter of talking, but of “walking the talk”. Setting this in historical context, they quote St Francis of Assisi “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless out walking is our preaching”. Making the link with technology, they quote graffiti on the Internet to ask “If one synchronised swimmer drowns, do the rest have to drown too?”

Robbins and Finley conclude with the words of Henry Ford “Failure is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently”. For Mercer, failure seems unthinkable. He concludes “I can offer no better advice than that you optimistically hope for a better future, it will come about!”.

RICHARD ENNALS

Review Editor

Organization Communication

Emerging Perspectives V: The Renaissance in Systems Thinking

edited by George A. Barnett and Lee Thayer. Ablex London 1997 £27.25

Computers and Technical Communication: Pedagogical and Programmatic Perspectives

edited by Stuart A. Selber. Vol 3 in ATTW Contemporary Studies in Technical Studies in Technical Communication. Ablex, London 1997 £25.00

Convergence of information and communication technologies is being followed by a convergence of previously separate debates in the area that is the focus of attention of this journal. We should be talking to each other. We need to understand the research traditions of our interlocutors. Apart from talking, we should be taking action. This has implications for research, the workplace and education. The two books under review help develop the international debate.

The collection edited by George Barnett and Lee Thayer is the fifth in a series drawing on North American contributors, but with a clearer thematic focus than its predecessors. It draws on the metaphor of the organisation as an information processing system, and offers the emerging perspective of systems thinking, which is presented as a means of filling what is seen as an intellectual vacuum following the end of the Cold War. The opening chapter by Barnett sets out the intellectual foundations for the approach, with a wealth of references useful to both students and lecturers.

Interestingly, there is an account of why the systems paradigm fell into repute, ascribed to the excessive quantitative emphasis and reductionism, and earlier neglect of the cultural dimension of communication. Barnett argues for a revival based on the absence of naturalistic organisational research, and the increased attraction of systems approaches in the context of modern communication and information technology. The framework is set out by Poole in a paper originally presented in 1990, highlighting what are presented as the limitations of interpretive-critical research. He offers higher order systems theories, drawing on the work of Giddens and Mitroff, and Banerjee's modelling of class conflict in PROLOG.

The chapters that follow set out a debate that is relevant to all systems analysts and AI practitioners. It demonstrates how the social sciences and information systems communities have come to overlap, how extensive the joint literature has become, and, possibly, how post-Cold War American researchers are coming to appreciate some of the outcomes of European work during the Cold War period.

Stuart Selber's edited volume is concerned with technical communication, and the initiation of a disciplinary conversation about the possibilities for technical communication in the academy: a discovery process that, as the foreword notes, was described by George Bush as "the vision thing". The North American authors argue that being a professional in technical communication involves combining a knowledge of theory with skilled application, involves combining the ability to think critically with effective execution, and involves making decisions based on the social implications and consequences of what we do and what we teach others to do. They seek to locate computers and computing activities within the richly textured cultural contexts of a technological society, focussing on the technical communication instruction issues that remain most important as old versions of hardware and software are endlessly replaced by new ones.

British and European readers will find much that is familiar in the accounts of North American case study experience with computers and education. North Americans have had richer technical environments for longer, and support for a range of research projects and advanced courses, often supported by major IT companies. As European universities begin to take hypertext and the World Wide Web seriously as means of course delivery, this collection is a valuable resource. The reader is introduced to cyberwriting, legal aspects of the Internet, electronic copyright, and updated reflections on ethics and responsibility in the context of liberation theology.

Across these two valuable volumes the most frequent references include works of Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault and Paolo Freire. For those who have seen the technological dimension of computers as their focus of concern, this poses challenges. Computers have become ubiquitous communication tools, and need to be understood as such. Sherry Turkle is quoted as describing this period as a “liminal age”, when “old structures have broken down and new ones have not yet been created”. Indeed, we live and teach in interesting times.

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