

[redacted]

Elegy on the death of the manager

Embrace lifelong learning or get busy writing your epitaph, says SAM SWAMINATHAN.

At a seminar in June, I proposed the formation of the “Society for the Prevention of Managerial Death (S.P.M.D.)”. The term “manager” was ceremoniously heralded in at the advent of the industrial era. Now, a quarter of a millennium later, we are beginning to hear a worldwide cry that the manager is an edifice of the past. Why? Well, roughly speaking a manager, be it a he or a she, shuffles information and tells others what to do. Let’s take a closer look at the job of the manager:

1. The manager constantly shuffles information backwards and forwards, upwards and downwards, gathering it from subordinates and superiors, perhaps adding a viewpoint here and an opinion there. It makes greater business sense today, to use network computers to shuffle and deal from the information deck. There is some awesome software out there that is becoming easier to use and cheaper to buy. We are reaching a point where computers are simply *everywhere and easyware.* Thanks to this revolution in information technology, papers need not sit on desks for days on end, awaiting action. Electronic mail makes it possible to instantaneously send and receive information and decisions at ridiculously low costs. Distance, time zones, and availability of people-this triad of decisional delays has been dismantled for ever by E-mail. In the global context, this has obviously changed all the rules of the game and hammered the first nail in the managerial coffin.

2. The job of the manager also involves telling subordinates what to do. In a world where a new kind of civilization is erupting, where brute force is fast being replaced by brain force, the knowledge worker will be the superman of the twenty-first century. The Superman of yesteryear's comics derived power from the element Kryptonite. The superman of tomorrow will derive power from knowledge and the ability to learn. The knowledge worker is a super-specialist in a specific field. The manager no longer understands enough of what these super-specialists do. So how can be or she tell them what to do? Little wonder then that Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric (GE), remarked that the job of a manager is to provide people the tools to do their jobs and then get out of the way quickly. The knowledge worker's tool box is in his head and so, all that a manager can do is to quickly get out of the way! Here is a tale of two companies where hundreds of managers' jobs simply evaporated.

The IBM Imperative: Nine out of 18 board members who hired Lou Gerstner as CEO in April 193 have stepped down. IBM had a work force of over 400,000 in 1985. At the last count it had pruned 170,000 jobs. Gerstner's goal to eliminate another 30,000 by the year end.

The ABB Antidote: In 1980, Percy Barnevike moved to ASEA in Sweden. In 100 days, he cut central staff from 1700 to 200. Again In 1987, when ASEA merged with Brown Boveri, he torched bead- quarters staff from 4000 to 200- yes 200 not 2000.

The list of corporations which presided over managerial death that resulted from the crushing force of economics during 1993 alone, is sickening-GE, Digital, Apple, Amdahl, Wang, General Dynamics, Leslie Fay, Seagram. Union Carbide Occidental Eastman Kodak, Clorox Managers didn't add a cent's worth to these businesses.

The message is clarion clear- add value or die. Forget lifelong employment. Don't depend upon your employer to pay for your con tinuing education and training. Be prepared to spend your own money and time learning new skills Attend night school and ex ternal courses to maintain your marketability, and remain on the cutting edge of the corporate workforce What else can one expect in a world where everything that one has learned threatens to become obsolete in five or six years?



Tomorrow’s corporations will have to learn to peg a financial number to their knowledge assets. Knowledge will then appear as a distinct and stand-alone item on company balance sheets. Skandia, Dow Chemical, and Hughes Aircraft have already embarked on this Grail quest while the rest gaze upwards waiting for the Muse to appear. If the accounting fraternity could drum up monetary values for goodwill, surely it will have the ingenuity to drum up numbers for the knowledge base of organizations. When such organizations decide to change hands, their price tags will include the knowledge base they possess. The only people who will then matter in the organization will be the carriers of that knowledge. It is entirely likely that the monetary system of nations in the future will be based upon knowledge instead of gold. Are you among those who add to your organization’s intellectual capital?

The superman of tomorrow will derive power from knowledge and the ability to learn.

When we begin our careers we are young, smart, lean and mean. Thanks to these attributes, we- work our backsides off and begin to taste success. Soon enough, the twin sis ters of success-arro- gance and apathy take charge of our lives. So, we begin to eat and drink too much. Slowly but steadily, the layers of fat start to appear. Now, if we are smart, we will quickly step on the fitness machine and get rid of those layers of fat. That's fine for the individual, but what about the corporation? Corporate fat consists of layer upon layer of managers, collected during profitable periods. Take your pick from the many brands of corporate fitness machines available in the market today- Reengineering. Downsizing, Rightsizing, … These machines help you fry the fat and mould the muscles. How do you avoid the ax? By adding intellectual value.

The board of the S.P.M.D. will have to devise lifelong exercises for its members not only on the individual fitness machine, but on the corporate fitness machine as well. In effect, the manager of yesterday and today will have to become a lifelong learner if his/her elegy has to be delayed. Tear a cheque and send your subscription to the S.P.M.D. Any takers for the post of President?