Peter Burgess LinkedIn Blogs

The PC Paradox Revisited

Most millennials won't know about the PC Paradox.

The PC … personal computer … emerged in the early 1980s and for a decade has phenomenal growth. But at the end of ten years of this growth, the question of what had been accomplished started to be asked. After a slow start, the PC was embraced by the corporate world and soon nearly every office on the planet had a PC sitting on nearly every executive desk.

However, study after study showed little or no improvement in office productivity as a result of the purchase and deployment of PCs. This came to be called the 'PC Paradox'

Years before, in the 1960s, a company I worked for had been a WOFAC client. WOFAC used a consulting technique they called 'Work Factor' to measure office and factory productivity … a very basic system to get to know what was going on in the office or factory space. I still use a rather degraded form of this technique whenever I 'walk around' any workspace, but in the early 1990s, while the big studies were agonizing over what was going on with PC productivity, my views based on 'walk around' analysis suggested that it was very easy to understand.

In essence, by the early 1980s office procedures had been optimized quite well for the paperwork of the time and the big computers that were the workhorse for data processing. Male executives had female secretaries and personal assistants who were very competent, and served to make rather poor male decision makers and 'letter writers' appear to be really decisive and really articulate … and all of this ran pretty smoothly.

Then came the PC.

The promise of the PC was that it would make it possible to do a lot more 'work' with far less people. At some point the precursors of software like the Microsoft Office Suite became known as 'productivity' software, and while more words could be typed, the processes that had enabled office performance became more dysfunctional. A PC sitting on an executive's desk or credenza looked impressive … but it really was not doing very much. The 'girls' that had been making things run smoothly had disappeared!

It took about ten years before the PC started to add to office productivity … but the real breakthrough in the use of microprocessor technology for business productivity improvement was when the processing power was linked much more directly with real engineering and technical processes … and the background admin needed to make these processes work. The PC on its own never made this possible … but when PCs started to get networked together then all sorts of things started to change.

I see Big Data as it exists today as being in a rather a similar situation to the PC in the late 1980s. Big Data seems to be being used for a few things that are relatively easy, building on data that

are easy to get, but often not very well linked to real things, and in the end giving quite weak and not very useful results.

However, I see the potential for Big Data to be a real game changer when the powerful tools now used to make some sense out of quite stupidly disorganized piles of data get combined with a massive amount of better organized data about things that are really important.

Signs of this are appearing all the time, but there is a long way to go before this gets applied to everything that is important … at the moment, most of the deployment of Big Data Analytics are in areas where there are quick profits, and much less in ways that will optimize on the delivery of beneficial impact for society and the environment.

Exciting times. Great possibilities.

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