

## NEWSLETTER

ISSUE 75

11/12.2006

wireless • internet • work • work place  
education • healthcare • retail • leisure • home

### Threats & IT Etiquette: Time to Play Them Down



*Professor James Woudhuysen is Professor of Forecasting and Innovation at De Montfort University. In his first contribution to UNWIRED, he argues forcefully that fear has become our dominant work ethic. This fear is taking the emphasis off leadership & stifling innovation:*

Gregory J Ferris is managing director of global business continuity planning at US investment bankers Morgan Stanley. He's also chairman of the US Securities Industry Association business continuity planning committee.

One of the things on his mind is what type of hygienic supplies, such as surgical masks, should be kept on hand in case of an attack of Avian flu.

<sup>1</sup> In November's *Harvard Business Review*, Michael Roberto, Richard

<sup>1</sup> Statement of Gregory J. Ferris, on behalf of the Bond Market Association and Securities Industry Association, House Financial Services Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, U.S. House of Representatives Hearing on Pandemic Influenza Preparedness in the Financial Services Sector, 29 June 2006, on [http://www.bondmarkets.com/assets/files/SIABMA\\_pandemicTestimony.pdf](http://www.bondmarkets.com/assets/files/SIABMA_pandemicTestimony.pdf)

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Bohmer and Amy Edmondson make generalisations based on another, rather specialised case of business continuity. They analyse the series of misinterpreted signals and decisions that led to the break-up of the Columbia Space Shuttle, on re-entry to the earth's atmosphere on 1 February 2003. From that episode, they argue that the organisation must have a means of amplifying early, faint and ambiguous threats, and must build experiments to see how it will react to them. <sup>2</sup>

Britain too is already preparing for the worst. The Bank of England, the Financial Services Authority and the Treasury



TERROR REHEARSALS IN LONDON

<sup>2</sup> Michael Roberto, Richard Bohmer and Amy Edmondson, 'Facing ambiguous threats', *Harvard Business Review*, November 2006.

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perform regular rehearsals of financial collapse and terrorist outrage. Indeed, Bank of England deputy governor for financial stability Sir John Gieve has called for the global extension and coordination of this approach.<sup>3</sup>

In fact the Groupthink of Apprehension goes further still. In some Welsh schools, WiFi facilities have been dismantled for fear of the radiation hazards they may present. And in a striking synthesis of our fears, the Government-funded Carbon Trust warns that companies face a sudden collapse in brand reputation if they are found to be behaving irresponsibly in relation to climate change. Perhaps £20bn of brand value is supposed to be at risk, much of it concentrated in food and beverages firms, as well as airlines.<sup>4</sup>

Threats, data about threats, and simulations of what one might do when confronted by a threat: are these things a proper focus for those concerned with innovation and the workplace? Elsewhere in the *Harvard Business Review*, knowledge management experts Al Jacobson and Laurence Prusak rightly suggest that using IT to go *searching* for or *mining* information – including, in my view, information about future threats – is not the main issue facing organisations nowadays. What is important, rather, is to make an example of the CRM manager, say, who has a knack for understanding how the new information he has acquired about his company's products will be relevant to people. Gaining

“GAINING KNOWLEDGE IS IMPORTANT, BUT IT'S HOW ONE ADAPTS THE KNOWLEDGE GAINED THAT REALLY COUNTS”

<sup>3</sup> Peter Thal Larsen, 'Bankers "should rehearse for global crisis"', *Financial Times*, 17 November 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Carbon Trust, *Is your brand at risk from climate change?*, 15 November 2005, on <http://www.carbontrust.co.uk/Publications/publicationonde tail.htm?productid=CTC514&metaNoCache=1>

knowledge is important, but it's how one *adapts* the knowledge gained that really counts.<sup>5</sup>

Well said! 'Awareness' of putative threats, and exercises that go through the motions of dealing with them, are not at all the same as developing new faculties actively to deal with the new – whether the new is threatening or not. Indeed, an obsession with disastrous risks can all too easily distract companies and public sector agencies from the much more profound business of technological innovation.

For example: it's all too easy to say that we should adopt *remote working* because of today's threats to *work-life balance*. But it might be wiser to lobby government, outside the strict purview of the workplace, for a *transport system based on the latest innovations* – the building of major new roads, cars that do up to 250mpg, or maglev trains.



MAGNETIC LEVITATION TRANSPORT: MAGLEV, IN CHINA

It might also be wise to make our main argument for remote working not the threats of employee stress, employee greenhouse gas emissions, or an Al Qaeda attack on ones HQ, but rather the utility of working from home in space where one can often find space to read and perhaps

<sup>5</sup> Al Jacobson and Laurence Prusak, 'The Cost of Knowledge', *Harvard Business Review*, November 2006.

achieve some great conceptual innovation.

Similarly, it's all too easy to be concerned about whether we can develop a *new etiquette* with which to handle the *new media* at work – Blackberries, VoIP, IM and all the rest. But are we really that worried about making the mistake of texting someone a message that's written entirely in capitals? Do we really believe that we should emulate the Victorian middle classes, and the modern American campus, by having formal and informal codes of conduct to govern every aspect of personal behaviour? Surely the story of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is how well human beings have adapted to, and adapted, the information thrown at them by the tickertape, the neon sign, the motorway signage system and all the rest. Human beings have proved able

to cope, without a whole lot of worries about etiquette.

SHOULD WE BE CONCERNED ABOUT 'NEW ETIQUETTE'?



Either we are impotent victims facing Donald Rumsfeld's known and unknown unknowns, or we uphold agency, innovation and leadership. It is a hard choice; but the Chinese already seem to have made it, and in the right way too. But what does leadership consist of now, in the West? Listen to Mike Roberts, former president of McDonald's. "I know", he has said, "that vulnerability and hurt – and ultimately, loss – contribute to leadership in ways I can't articulate".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ron A Carucci, *Leadership divided: what emerging leaders*

Once threat and loss becomes the dominating ethic at work, the West will be left only making rhetoric about innovation, rather than doing it.

*What do you think of Professor Woudhuysen's views? If you would like the right of reply, contact the editor at [richard.leyland@unwired.eu.com](mailto:richard.leyland@unwired.eu.com)*

### Innovative Workspace at Vodafone

At Vodafone in Auckland a very different approach to workplace provision has been achieved, through a new workplace for 1300 people. A move to a new building presented the opportunity for change. And with a recruitment challenge where a dearth of young graduates was proving a major challenge for large employers, a new workplace solution was required that would attract the net-generation.

The result has been innovation, with the majority of the population provided with no fixed desk, office or 'home'. Social space that looks more domestic or in some cases collegiate, is punctuated with shared desking in zones that are heavily themed and personalised by the people that inhabit and share them.



VODAFONE AUCKLAND IS TRULY THE OFFICE AS BRAND EXPERIENCE

*need and what you might be missing*, Jossey-Bass, 2006.