Breakthrough - Championship Living in a Computer Age

Getting the Word Out – Presentation 4

Richard B. Byrne

Dr. Byrne was the featured Keynote Speaker at Bio'76, the combined annual meeting of the Association of Biomedical Communications Directors (ABCD), the Association of Medical Illustrators (AMI), the Biological Photographic Association (BPA), and the Health Science Communications Association (HeSCA). His 1976 Keynote presentation was powerful, and was filled with his technical insight, personal reflection, and comedic wit.

In 1985, Dr. Byrne produced a cassette series of twelve professional lectures, which defined what he called, "Breakthrough." The concepts presented in his Breakthrough series are universal and are applicable today. In conjunction with Dr. Byrne's wife, Mary Anne Byrne, the Journal of Biocommunication is proud to include the first four of Dr. Byrne's lectures in JBC 45-2.

OPEN ACCESS

Dr. Richard Byrne

How can the computer age influence the way you live and work? I like to take a specific example from my own life. This series is philosophic and poetic, and some people say, "What's he talking about really?" So I want to get specific.

I'm sure you know that computers add numbers, handle words, do graphics, and so forth, but the most empowering application of a personal computer is how they can be used to reach out to connect people, what I call, "Getting the word out." There's a rapid rise in networks in this country, and all over the world, of electronic mail. You can call this network from your computer and through the phone lines. You can access other computers, big computers, little computers, and you can swap all kinds of crazy information.

Every day, I carry a little portable computer with me. It's the size of a book, weighs three pounds, runs on little penlight batteries, little AA batteries, and I just stick it in a little bag, and I carry it away with me. It almost fits in a pocket. My agent, Carol Fall, lives in Tiburon, California, on the north shore of San Francisco Bay. That's where her office is, and all of our phone calls and mail come in there every day. I guarantee you, nobody can reach me on the phone because I'm in planes, and I'm in cabs, and I'm in the hotel, and then I'm up on the stage or wherever. If people said, "Richard, Bill called, please return it," that's going to happen later, but when you call the office, you get an immediate response. Carol writes down what it is about, the request and she abstracts the mail and she puts all of that in a computer.

Have you ever received a piece of mail that you couldn't quite answer? Maybe part of it, but you couldn't answer all of it, or have you ever sent someone a request and you received an answer to paragraph one, but they never even mentioned paragraph three? I used to have a management style that was so chaotic, and I was a basket case! Are you disorganized? Are you in a mess? Is your office piled high? It was probably nothing, compared to my office. I used to get mail and I'd open the letter, I'd look at it and think, hmm, I better think about that for a while. I couldn't quite answer it in that moment, so I put it aside to work on later. I had a pile of stuff, and it was what I called the blender phenomenon, like a blender in the kitchen, you throw in wheat, butter and eggs or whatever you're mixing up and when you turn it on it all comes up

the outside and then goes down a hole in the middle. If you look hard enough, you can see the same thing again, and there it is again, and it keeps coming. That's the way my mail was; I'd look at the mail, then later I'd sort through the stack to find something else and, oh, here is that letter again. Oh yes, that letter! I had better study that and work on that, but it'd just get older and older and older, and I couldn't get out of the cycle. I just couldn't get out of it.

Let me tell you something: There's no difference between a slow decision and a fast decision except for how much time you take. This notion that if I think about that, work on that, consider that, then think about that again, is baloney. It's hogwash. Choose. Get the choice, consider the alternatives, be responsible – not frivolous – and then choose. That's the way it is now with Carol and I through the electronic mail. She abstracts the letter and if the letter has three requests, there'll be three items on my electronic mail: 1) Do you want to go? 2) Are you willing to have a picnic the day before? 3) Can you go fishing the day after? Those are different requests and I answer them Yes, No, No, Yes. I answer each item, and I answer when I see it. That is, I get off an airplane, I walk over to a payphone, I hook up the payphone to my little computer with some little rubber Mickey Mouse ears; little rubber ears that fit on the phone, and I call a local telephone number that calls a satellite, that calls a computer system, which happens to be in McLean, Virginia, at a place called, The Source. We're on many other networks, but that's the one we use. I say, "mail," I type 'M-A-I-L'. A lot of executives say to me, "well, it's pretty complicated using a computer, right? I mean, you know, it's probably pretty tough," and I say, "Yes, you have to type 'M-A-I-L,' or if you don't want to do that, you can type 'M.' 'M' means mail. So if you can press 'M' with your knee, you're online and the mail comes up and I read the mail and I either type 'read', or if you're in a rush you type 'R.'" What I'm trying to convey to you is that this is not that a big of a deal. I'm letting the secrets out. Some of you think, "Boy, I thought he was really smart doing what he does!" It's actually not true, I read the mail and there will be 14 items, always prioritized with the most important thing first.

Carol and I have agreed; I've explained to her what my priorities are; this is what I want to do and these are the kinds of meetings I want to address and this is the kind of book I want to write, etc. She understands all of that. She knows my priorities, and I have also delegated to her the

responsibility to do it, the accountability to me to do it, and the authority. She has the authority to take action, so she abstracts the mail for me, I answer it swiftly and if I have only one minute, I'd like to answer the most important things first. When I read my mail every day, which I usually do a couple of time each day, at noon and five, if I can, the most important things are at the top and I just reply, 'Y, N, N, Y, Y, N, Y,' and then at the bottom, we schmooze. You know, the high-tech high-touch, where we say, "How are you? Did you have a good dinner? How was Houston? How is your husband?"

You have to have that high-tech high-touch, that the relationship. Some people think that computers are going to grind out our aliveness, that we are all going to sit in the basement and program, or eat junk food, and be really white and pasty. Give me a break! That's not what's going to happen. You're going to do whatever you do now, but more so. A computer is like a particle accelerator. It's like an amplifier in a stereo system. The amplifier doesn't change the tape; it just makes it better. So, if you're disorganized and you get a microcomputer, you will become disorganized at computer speed, it's just going to do whatever it is you do!

When the priorities are clear, that instantaneous access, 24 hours a day to my mail and my telephone calls is a transforming phenomenon, a different kind of working. Now, when I call Carol, if I call her at the office, she's probably on the phone with a client and what am I supposed to say to her, "Client? Hang up! I'm the boss! Let's go here!" Of course I don't want her to hang up, so we have this intimate, complete, detailed, documented – get it, documented – communication. After a month, or two months, or three months, we go back and have all of our phone calls, all of the correspondence, all of the agreements, all of the airline schedules all in printed form, and it is absolutely invaluable.

A second reason this electronic mail is so valuable is that it is completely different from mail on paper. Now, when electronic mail comes off, I store it in my computer. When I get ready to write a response, I just pull up the mail or frequently, when I talk to a client, I'll say to the person, "What is it you would like to have us talk about? Who is going to be there?" All the time I'm talking on the phone, I'm typing on the computer. I just prop the phone on my shoulder, and I say, "I see," and I'm just taking notes. "I see, uh-huh, fine, fine, fine," And then when I write the response back, and I say,

“Well, here’s what I’m thinking about talking about,” and I just feed back to him what he told me on the phone and he says, “That’s fantastic! I mean that’s a fabulous understanding of our problem!” and it’s because I’m telling him what he told me, but isn’t that really what the business of communication is about? You say, “What is the problem?” and then you say, “I’m going to talk about this problem.” and it’s specific, because it was done at the time. The key is, you have to do it at the time. You’ve got to do it, ‘online.’ While you’re talking, do it right then. You don’t want to take notes by hand, then later on, have to type those, and then have those proofread and retyped. You don’t want that. You want to do it in real time.

That’s why you need to have the skill. If you’re an executive, if you’re a manager, if you’re a parent, you need the skill. It’s not enough to have a skilled person. Recently, I was in Chicago and I was meeting with the president of a major bank. He was so proud, and he wanted me to know that he was very hip, as he said he was, “surfing on the third wave.” He was feeling like he was way out in front, and he said, “We have this new automated executive communication system.” It was a system that I was already familiar with and I said, “Oh, that’s wonderful! What a wonderful thing you’ve done here! It’s a great step forward.” He replied, “Oh yes,

every executive is in intimate communication with every other executive 24 hours a day.” I said, “I understand that, I do the same thing, I think that’s phenomenal, I’d love to see it in action.” He said, “No problem. Brenda, come over here and get my mail!” and just then, a secretary came in from another room, turned on the communication system, booted it up, pulled it up, printed it out and handed it to him on a piece of paper! He thought he was way out in front. Let me tell you something: There’s no difference between having someone else take it off a computer and hand it to you, and having them walk up to a wooden file cabinet and pull it out for you from files that were written by hand with a quill pen 200 years ago! There is no difference. The empowerment is only if it’s personal. You are empowered. You are online.

Amazingly, many of my clients are coming online. Many of my clients now are in electronic mail, which is when you begin to have genuine leverage. For instance, I write a column for a major magazine, a personal computing magazine and I write the columns at home, or on the road, or wherever, and I simply hook up to the telephone and I send the entire column; 2,600 words at a time through an electronic mail system, which is then delivered immediately to their editorial offices. They make their editorial comments, they send it right back to me. I make my comments, I send it right back to them, and 20 minutes later, the type is set. The entire transaction takes place in maybe 30 minutes, and it’s already been edited three times, and it took no energy, and no effort. That kind of mutual empowerment, when you’re empowered with the technology and your ring network, that is you, your close associates, and people who are with you, are all similarly empowered, then you have genuine leveraging.

I’ll give you one comment on the kind of services that are available to you. Communication is the most powerful, in my opinion, but there’s also information. One of the problems some of you will have is that you say, “Hey, I don’t type, I don’t plan to interview people on the phone and type. I mean, I’m big time! I’m important!” I’d say, “Well, good, but there is an amazing amount of information available to you.”

As an example, I was recently in Lubbock, Texas and I was supposed to fly to L.A. When I went to the gate, I didn’t see a gate attendant or any people, and I couldn’t figure that out. It was almost time for the flight, and I

went and asked at the airline desk, and the young man was very helpful, saying “Oh yeah, that flight was canceled.” I asked, “Why? Mechanical failure?” He said, “No, hardly anybody wanted to go!” He didn’t even explore if that was actually the explanation, but the flight was simply canceled. There were people standing there at the gate saying, “Well, why was it canceled? And when it is going?” While they were huffing and puffing, I walked over to a phone, I hooked up my little computer, and I call up what is called Air Schedule. You type ‘AirSched-D,’ which means domestic, United States, and I simply typed in ‘Lubbock, Texas [space] Los Angeles’ and it immediately listed all of the connecting flights for me. I actually flew to Oklahoma City and then to Los Angeles, but it listed all the flights for me, when they go, which airline, what days of the week it goes, what kind of plane it is, what classes are available on that plane. You can carry around the entire OAG flight schedule, if you like, in your back pocket, if you have a big back pocket, but you can have online access to that information and make your reservations on the spot.

You can also do electronic shopping, just by logging on to the network and saying, “I would like the lowest price on a barbecue grill with white sidewall tires, available this afternoon,” and it comes back with, “The lowest price is from Agent X,” and you say, “Good, buy it.” It buys it that moment, at that price, and charges it to your credit card. Let me stop and say, there is good news and bad news in that scenario! It’s flexible, it’s accessible, it’s empowering and you could be broke soon!

The last example I will share is how we can reach out and touch one another. A major corporation that I have done a considerable amount of consulting with and speaking in Los Angeles, has recently built a video teleconferencing network. They have linked all their corporate headquarters together with video teleconferencing. It is computer based. You walk into a room, you sit at a curved table and in front of you is a large screen that looks kind of like the viewing screen on the Starship Enterprise. There’s a big window in front of you and through that window, you see other people coming in and sitting down at a similar table. You’re in L.A. and they’re in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, or they’re in Philadelphia, or wherever. You say, “Hello, how are you?” and they say, “Fine, fine.” They are thousands of miles away, but you have this real time communication with people who are in color and life sized. If you have a document you want to show them, you say, “Can you see this document well

enough?” and they say, “Well, no, I can’t see it that well,” you say, “Fine,” and on the table top, there’s a little flat plate and you put the document down and you press a button which activates a laser scanner to scan the page and it’s shipped to the satellite and shipped back down, 4,000 miles away and a laser printer reconstitutes it. Then, they have the same piece of paper, five seconds later, 4,000 miles away. It’s the closest thing that we’ve got to “Beam me up, Scottie”! It just rematerializes someplace else.

What are the advantages to that? Well, one advantage is that there’s a lot of trash travel in the world. A lot of people have to go to meetings. Why? Someone says, “We’ve got to talk this over.” So, you fly seven hours, you take a two-hour cab ride, you stay in the hotel for 12 hours, you spend \$1,000, you have the meeting, and they decide to have another meeting. That’s called trash travel. Teleconferencing and electronic mail can eliminate trash travel. That doesn’t mean it’ll eliminate travel. Some people say, “Hey, wait a minute! The only benefit I get out of my job is I get to take a flight fight once in a while,” so we don’t eliminate all travel, but the key is that you ought to get to travel, not have to travel. That’s the empowerment of reaching out through electronic mail.

The last thing I’ll tell you is that there’s a new neighborhood. I live in a new neighborhood. It used to be that your neighborhood included you, the guy across the street, and the guy next door. Now, there’s now an electronic neighborhood and I’m a member of a number of networks. There are five of us and we’re in 12 countries, and there’s seven in another neighborhood and six in another neighborhood. This means that special interest groups are assembling; not physically but intellectually. They can exchange detailed ideas and write a report. You can put it in a conference so that everyone has access to it. You are going to see some phenomenal leaps forward, genuine breakthroughs, in areas of special interest from people who live in the electronic neighborhood.

References

Bryne, R. *Breakthrough - Championship Living in a Computer Age* (Audio Cassette Series), Springboard! 1985.

About the Author

Richard Byrne was a former professor and dean at USC's Annenberg School of Communications. He was known for making computers less intimidating for all of us. In 1982 Dr. Byrne founded one of the first consulting firms of its kind, called Springboard! His company was devoted to acquainting executives with high technology. As president, Dr. Byrne traveled as far as Europe and Thailand presenting as many as 200 lectures a year. He enlivened complex computer terminology with humorous wit and common-sense explanations. Dr. Byrne, who had previously taught at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Texas, left his position as a full-time professor at USC in 1984 to devote himself to an increasingly lucrative lecturing career.

Licensing

Mary Ann Byrne has chosen to license this content, on behalf of her husband, under a Creative Commons Attribution, NonCommercial, NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The *Journal of Biocommunication* Management Board and Editors believe that transparency in academic research is essential. Our *JBC* authors are now required to disclose any possible conflict of interest when submitting a manuscript. In accordance with the *Journal of Biocommunication's* editorial policy, no potential conflict of interest has been reported or declared by the copyright holder.

Acknowledgment

The *Journal of Biocommunication* wishes to acknowledge Mary Anne Byrne, who graciously has allowed us to publish the content from her late husband's recorded lecture presentations.

Dr. Byrne's portrait was provided by Mary Ann Byrne.