The New Work

I think the new world of work is going to be fantastic. I mean, really exciting and fun. I think the breakthrough of the microcomputer, the appearance of a new personal technology that empowers us all, is going to create potential and opportunities for new kinds of work, for new ways of doing business that are going to be transforming in character.

Many people may look at a new technology and simply evaluate it in terms of the old work. As an example, when radio first appeared, if you listened to radio programs, it was kind of like news stories or magazine stories. Then when television appeared, it was like radio, with people. When computers appeared, it was kind of like newspapers and mail. In fact, we even call it electronic mail. It's mail, but it's electronic, because we don't know what it is yet. We always use the content of the old medium in the new medium. We always look backward. Do you remember when cars first appeared? What did they call them? They called them horseless carriages. Does that make sense to you? Well, if it does, you're in deep trouble! It is as if you are running your life while looking in a rearview mirror. They were looking backward before the breakthrough. Cars appeared, and all of a sudden horses went away. They looked backward and they said, "What we have here is, it's like a carriage, but it has no horse," and because they were all familiar with horses and carriages, they said, "This is a horseless carriage." Now, if that makes sense to you, that's like saying the meeting will be held in the swimming poolless ballroom. Go and find a ballroom, and if it has no swimming pool, that's probably the one. That's all looking back. It is as if you are running your life while looking in a rearview mirror. They were looking backward before the breakthrough. Cars appeared, and all of a sudden horses went away. They looked backward and they said, "What we have here is, it's like a carriage, but it has no horse," and because they were all familiar with horses and carriages, they said, "This is a horseless carriage." Now, if that makes sense to you, that's like saying the meeting will be held in the swimming poolless ballroom. Go and find a ballroom, and if it has no swimming pool, that's probably the one. That's all looking back. It's looking at the old paradigm. It's looking at the old, comfortable rules.

What has to happen, is that you have to create a new paradigm, new rules, new ways of working so that when a breakthrough occurs – remember me telling you about the four minute mile? The world often changes its mind about something. Literally, it changes its mind about the speed of four minutes, the distance of a mile. Like when the Wright Brothers flew, and everybody said, "Oh yeah?" In fact, articles were written, "Well, if they flew..."
an airplane, it had a balloon attached!” because people were familiar with balloons and 200 years before, they weren't even familiar with the balloons. They said, "We're going to get in a basket and then we're going to go over the mountain, or over the ocean, in a basket." People said, "That's a good plan you have there, Montgolfier, let me know how that works out." but then they became familiar with balloons, and so they say, "Well, if it flew, it had a balloon." No, no, it didn't have a balloon. "Well, then it had little balloons under it!" They can only conceive of the new world in terms of the old world. The Wright Brothers believed that what made planes fly was air flowing over the top of the wings and they did research, based on a man named Cayley. They thought, "Oh, what happens is that the air goes over the wing and that makes you fly." Most people think, no, no, it goes under the wing. Have you ever heard the song Wind Beneath My Wings? You leap off and you get wind under your wings. That doesn't make you fly at all. That'll let you glide about 20 feet, but what makes you fly is wind over the wings. In fact, if 85% of the people who fly commercially everyday knew that they were only flying based on one-quarter inch of vacuum over a four-foot stretch of the leading edge of the wing, they wouldn't fly! They don't even believe it now, after we've been flying for 60 years! The key is, you have to change your mind about the future.

Have you heard of 'office automation?' We're going to have office automation here, we're going to have the office of the future today. What does that mean, office automation? You take the work we do, and you automate that. You take our current files, and you put them on a computer. You look around the office and you say, "Boy, this garbage over here that I hate, put that in this computer, and this trash over here that I'd like to get rid of, put it in this other computer," and so what you're doing, is you're automating the old way of working. I'm here to tell you, that's a mistake. You have to start somewhere, and you'll undoubtedly automate something you're only familiar with, but the challenge for us, the breakthrough, the transformation, the quantum leap, is about looking to the future and designing a new way of working. Now what am I talking about? That sounds great, doesn't it? Let's all get together and let's design a new way of work. What is that?

One concept that I have is that I believe that you should leverage your leadership. Leverage your leadership. Now, what does that mean? Many of you, when you go to look at a computer, you go computer shopping. You can either do that, or you can pound your thumb with a hammer for four or five hours. They will both have about the same result for you. Both are just exasperating. You go out and the people will start comparing the computers for you, "Oh, this one's really good, this one's got a hard disk," and you think, I wonder if that's good? What will I do to soften it? I don't know! You can't tell whether that's good or bad. This one has 256 K and you've never had any K before, so you don't know how many K you want or need. It's just crazy. So, you start, and you ask, "What's this?" and they say, "Oh, that's a big one." Then you say, "Oh, good. Okay, well, certainly I want to get big one. Oh, that stores more? Oh, good." Have you even bought luggage to go to Europe? When I go to Europe, I carry a little silk bag. I throw in a couple shirts and socks and I go. Some people say, "If you get this over here, this steamer trunk, you could take your piano! You could take everything along with you! It's big luggage," and you say, "Well, let me have it!" But you don't want big luggage to go to Europe, you want something that's mobile so you can walk all over the place. A lot of people think big is better, so they get big technologies, and they're comparing the technologies. That's a mistake.

You need to identify what you do best. Do you know what you do best? I talk with a lot of executives and I say, "What do you do best?" and they immediately start joking and say, "Well, I think – grade school kids – I'm best at recess," and the chairman of the board says, "I think I'm probably best at going to the east conferences." That's fine, you have fun with it, but you need to know what you're best at.

Personally, what I'm best at is speaking before 4,000-5,000 people. That's what I am best at. I am a speaker and a communicator, and this is what I do best. If I take a step down to what I do next best, like correspondence, bring a parachute because that is a big step down! I am not so good at that. So, you must find what you do best, then find some kind of software, a computer program, which will help you do that thing better, so that you become better at what you're already good at.

Many training programs are abortively conceived or a mistake. As an example, when teaching how to use a spreadsheet, and the executive comes in, or the manager, or the secretary, or whatever, and they're having a problem with it. You ask, "What's the problem? Is it the Ks?" and they say, "No, no, I got that, but what is this thing?" because they don't use spreadsheets! They have never heard of a spreadsheet, and yet, that's what they're learning.

You need to handle that which is already handled. That may seem strange. A lot of people are buying computers to handle that which is unhandled. Their life is chaotic. You see the TV ads, the factory is falling apart and they say, "Well, get a computer," and you get a computer, and all of a sudden everybody is roller skating and happy and
it all works. You handled the unhandled. I think that's a mistake. I think you need to focus on that thing that you are best at. For instance, if you're a pole vaulter, you want to leap higher. You don't want to learn how sell cokes up in the stands. When you're a shot putter, you want to add an extra inch. You build on your strength. Similarly in using a technology, you ought to start with something you're already strong at.

Now, what are you best at? Most executives that I deal with have no idea. In fact, it's a strange thing to say, most executives don't really know what they do during the day. I ask them, "Approximately how many minutes, or hours, a day do you spend on the phone?" and there's a long pause. They have no comprehension. They know that they go to work, they know they work all day, they know they go home, they know they do a good job, but they don't know what they're doing best at. You see, you have to identify the critical success factors; what are the critical factors for you that make your life work and do those things first.

The way I run my life is that there are problems I have to deal with every day, and I try to address those problems first thing in the morning. Maybe there's a phone call and I don't want to make it. I don't want to make the phone call! Make that phone call by 8:30. Then the rest of the day is like a teardrop; it gets easy, it gets small. Do the hard part first. Focus on the thing that makes the biggest difference.

Athletes know this. World class athletes have broken their performance down into minute steps, and they know that at this exact point they pronate the wrist, or they shot-put, or do whatever. They can improve their performance in tiny incremental bits. They know exactly what they're doing. You have to know the same. You have to know what you're doing and find software that helps you do that better. Then, any computer that will run that software is okay. We're not in a race for whose computer is the biggest. We're in a race for who produces results and you need to focus on what your results are.

A friend of mine, named Dick Ainsworth, talks about the levels of use of a technology, and that whenever you encounter a new technology, and it can be a camera, a piano, a blender, anything, not just a computer, you'll always go through three levels. First, is the level of machine. That is, when you fi

The next level is the level of tool. You passed all that machine stuff, you know how to run it. You're now using it to do work. It's a tool. So, when you ride the bicycle, you deliver the newspapers, you go down to pick up the milk, you go to see Grandma. It's just a tool. You can always tell when somebody's learning to play a piano, can't you? When they're just learning to play the piano in the next apartment, you can tell. When somebody is playing, "Happy Birthday, to you," to get everybody to sing together, that's using it as a tool, it's a functional application. Using it as a tool.

The third level goes beyond that, a level to which you can aspire to and which you can reach with a technology like a computer. The level of instrument. Not machine, not tool. Instrument. When you hear someone using a technology as an instrument, they are expressing themselves. Have you ever heard anybody playing the piano, a really beautiful song? When you walk over to them, you do not say to them, "Say, this is quite a nice piano you have here! How many strings has it got?" A lot of people do that with computers. "A good computer here, so how many Ks has it got?" focusing on the machine. You don't do that. To a good pianist you say, "Oh, that was great! I love that!" or frequently you'll say, "I love you!" There's a direct communication from the performer to you, and the technology becomes transparent. It's just a medium through which the direct communication flows. Now, I think you can aspire to use a computer at the level of instrument, not a machine. You get way past that. Not a tool to write memos and send electronic mail, but a form of expression, where the relationship between you and the person to whom you're communicating is all that matters, and the computer becomes invisible.

How are we going to manage in organizations of the future? I have a concept I'll pitch out for you, and you can think about it. I call it dashboard management. Dashboard management. I think we need to run companies the way we run cars. How many dials are there on the dashboard of your car? Do you know? You probably don't have a clue. That's because you're a good driver, so you're unconscious all the time. Remember the unconscious competent? Most of us don't know, but we say, "I've got all dials I need, don't worry about that. I have plenty of dials." Well, what are some dials that you might need if you were going to design a car? What's the first thing you think of? Speedometer. Most people think of the speedometer. Now, if you rent a car that has a broken speedometer, will you be arrested for speeding? Think about it. If you rent a car with a broken
speedometer, will you be arrested for speeding? The answer is no. You won't, because you'll be conscious. You say, "Wait, I have a broken speedometer here," so you drive slowly enough that everybody passes you a little, so you won't be arrested. You probably need a gas gauge. What if you don't have a gas gauge, will you run out of gas? No, the minute you're in a tractor that does not have a gas gauge, you'll fill it up on every street corner. You will stop every three blocks and fill it up, so it will make you conscious. There are five or six dials to help you and you notice where they're located? They're right between you and where you're going. Many organizations are run by quarterly reports, that is you say, "Well, how'd we do last quarter?" Say, "Well, we didn't do too good, we really took it last quarter." "Oh, well, we better change something!" That's sort of like driving a car down a mountain road and you're looking in the rearview mirror, and you say, "Whew! I almost went off the curb back there, I think I'll pull over to the right." You can't do that. When driving a car, you're looking forward and what matters is real time data, immediate feedback on the system so you can plan for the next step in the future. You're looking forward, and the speedometer and the dashboard are between you and the future. How does this work? I think it's possible, with the technology that exists right now, computers and software that exist right now, for you to design a dashboard that will help you run your business. I believe that most senior managers need about 100 indicators, 100 different kinds of information in a year, about 35 in a quarter, and about a dozen a day. A dozen things you need to check on every day. It's true for almost everybody. How many people are at work? What's our cash flow? What's the inventory? Have the people shown up? Are there any lights in here today? There are certain things you need to check on. Those can all be fed into a personal computer, so that you could walk in, push button one and you would see, in a graphic form, all the quarterly sales. When you push button two, you see inventory. Whatever it is that you need to know, you could find it instantly in a personal computer with technology that exists right now.

Now, what's the problem? How come you don't have that? The problem is that nobody will agree what the dials are to be called. In organizations all over the world people say, "I believe the most important thing is X, Y and Z." Other people say, "Are you crazy? It's A, B and C."

The actual answer to the problems posed by the computer age is not computers at all... it's people. People need to agree on what's important and what's secondary; what needs immediate access. There are no line printers in an airline cockpit. Have you ever been in an airliner? A 747? Is there a printer spitting out paper and the co-pilot reads page 854 and says, "Hey, Bob, we lost a wing over Cleveland back here, I think maybe we ought to do something about that." No, they don't. They have a few little dials and they're running a $25 million enterprise from dials with little needles. Importantly, they have hammered out what dials they need, they have agreed which ones are important, and they actually look at them. That's called The New Work, and it can come to you.

References

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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.

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**Acknowledgment**

The *Journal of Biocommunication* wishes to acknowledge the late Mary Anne Byrne, who, prior to her own death in August of 2021, had graciously allowed us to publish the content from her late husband’s recorded lecture presentations.

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