

February 2018

A NEW PHRASE FOR YOU - PREMIUM MEDIOCRITY

## *Premium mediocrity – what is it?*

It is a new expression produced by Venkat Rao in America. I was excited when I first saw it in print. My reaction was that it is just so useful to have a few words to describe a thing that we have all experienced but found it difficult to find the right words with which to express our feelings. Venkat tried it out with friends and it resonated with all of them. I have had the same experience.

Gerald Ratner famously admitted that what he sold was ‘crap’, premium mediocrity at its best and once recognised was a disaster for his business.

Premium mediocrity is so useful because one can recognise what it means and use it immediately. For me this is like using ‘hiraeth’ a Welsh word to describe a feeling about home that is difficult to define in less than perhaps 10 words in English. Premium mediocrity is a concept that once pointed out one can feel and recognise instinctively. Unfortunately one can use it every day because, sadly, we are constantly experiencing premium mediocrity. But do not let it get you down, most days in business can be sunshine days if you try hard enough and ignore the doomsayers otherwise known as economists.

Venkat exemplifies premium mediocrity as table cloths and proper cutlery in fast food restaurants, it can also be anything described as ‘signature’ or perhaps as extra legroom in economy class seats on an aeroplane, oh, and menus in French in a restaurant in England.

Premium mediocrity is what you get when you choose the lowest price for a service. Didn’t John Ruskin say something about not getting a lot if you pay only a little, he called it ‘the common law of business’. Current practice in the public sector leads one to despair.

In my world a mediocre service will leave you with at best an ‘average’ design or report when you were looking for some enlightenment. It will be something less than ‘the full monty’, it will be advice that produces two problems when you started with one, is delivered late when time is of the issue or is simply written in poor English. One of my early clients said that engineering reports depressed him but he looked forward to receiving mine. I did my best to please him by caring about my choice of words, sentence length and shape and report structure. Believe me, this attention to detail paid off. ‘Premium’, ‘world class’, ‘grand tourer’ and ‘free range’ come to mind as words misused on a great many occasions. When misused ‘prime’ and ‘Triple A’ destroyed very big businesses in and around 2008 and the lives of millions of individuals.

Kind regards

**Ivor**

Managing Director  
Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd

## 'School maths - is it the main thing?'

Last month Tite Times reported that the skills gap will hold back a construction boom. Well Mr. Quin at Balfours has told that a tsunami of work d lies ahead of us so we had better be prepared and get down to teaching and learning mathematics and at least basic science

Way back in 2012 I presented to education professionals my thoughts on what business skills were needed by people entering the construction industry. Here are a few slides from that presentation which were received with general dismay but my slides about fauna and flora were well received.

**BUSINESS SKILLS**

The square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides

Ivor Richards OBE  
Business skills

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**BUSINESS SKILLS**

General knowledge that is applied everyday...  
...several times a day!

- Lengths, areas, volumes
- Angles, orientation, gradients
- Percentages, fractions, proportions
- Weights

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**BUSINESS SKILLS**

General knowledge that is applied everyday...  
...several times a day!

- Programmes – days, weeks, months, years
- Daily work timesheets
- Travel logs
- Maps
- Drawings
- Records
- Understanding the past, research and assimilation

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Business skills

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**BUSINESS SKILLS**

General knowledge that is applied everyday...  
...several times a day!

- Orders
- Purchases
- Delivery notes
- Invoices
- Costs and profit
- Giving and receiving notification

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Business skills

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Some skill in maths is a key requirement for so many aspects of a working life. My German friends think that 'the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing'. In my experience as an engineer and a manager, foundations are the 'main thing', and my personal story about preparing for the world of work in April 2016 underlined the point. In many cases foundations are relatively simple and uncomplicated but this can mask their value and the overwhelming need to get them right. One of our recent commissions was to examine why a building had suffered serious cracking. The most likely reason seems to be that back in the 1920's the builder skimped on the foundations. We cannot afford to skimp on basic mathematics. Time spent catching up on sloppily taught arithmetic is hardly good for business. I think that it is important to recognise the problems that young people have with maths, even simple maths like arithmetic.

Perhaps I can help just a little by discussing a few examples from real work.

I mentioned some months ago our experience of working with a young landscape architect who could not recalculate the number of plants required in a particular area of a construction site because the spacing between plants had to be changed.

As an answer to my opening question, yes, maths is the main thing since it can solve problems. Many, many years ago in my early days as an engineering assistant in the City of Cardiff Waterworks Department I wanted to calculate the distance required between bends that had to be rotated in order to accommodate changes in line and level for water mains. The angle of rotation of the bend changes the angle of deviation provided by the bend in both its vertical and horizontal planes. In the water department staff had previously aligned bends on site as best they could before measuring the distance between their open ends and then cutting a piece of pipe to fill the gap. I was dealing with pipes typically 750mm in diameter where cutting intermediate pipes between the rotated bends had to be known accurately if the work was to be done efficiently and safely. So I looked at the problem in 3-dimensions. I was able to calculate the angle of rotation of the bends and the length of the intermediate pipe which would provide the change in level and direction that was required.

Incidentally do you know the joke about the 'squaw and the hippopotamus?'

Kind regards

**Ivor**

Managing Director  
Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd

#### THINGS MUST GET BETTER

The current mood (early February 2018) seems to be that we need to refresh our ideas about procurement in construction since the current popular models, seeking 'best possible price and highest quality' have fallen down quite dramatically in the case of Carillion. Many engineers have felt that this dubious approach has been in use for far too long and lessons have been ignored. It has failed to produce the required result so many times. By that I mean it has frequently failed to produce well designed and constructed projects for which the promoter/client has paid a fair price and the industry made stronger as a result.

My old Chinese friends used to say that if we don't change direction then we'll end up where we are going. I do believe that a few parties on our world are feeling that there is need for a change of direction.



Ivor said only recently in a newsletter that we cannot turn the clock back but if you have gone up a blind alley then turning back is the only option if you want to make progress.

Recent events involving Carillion and several others have indicated that we have gone up a blind alley in respect of acquiring public works.

How often do we have to remind people of the common law of business, that if you only pay a little then you cannot expect to get a lot?

It is time for people to arrange their construction projects with a sensible and clear enunciation of the known unknowns that a tenderer faces so that a sensible understanding of the risks is available to

him/her. The days when contractors have been obliged to assess and take on unknown risks should be long gone.

What we are talking about is two distinct phases, design and construction.

Promoters should base their choice of design teams on reputation and resources as well as their own experience of the work that has to be done under their direction. Past records of performance have usually been a good guide but even this well tried model has been dropped even banned in the public sector.

The current approach was introduced in 1984 when Mrs Thatcher decided that the professions had had it too easy. This is when the idea that engineering design work should be won on price first came to light. Engineers were an easy target because the engineering institutions took no interest in commercial matters that might affect their members. Of course the engineers at the time fell for it and finding someone to do some work for 10p/hour less is so easy isn't it? Then someone thought that bringing construction know how into design teams was a good idea, implying that engineers in design offices did not know anything about construction. So contractors were asked to design and build on the basis of competitive pricing. This involved taking on the risks, even the implied ones, in work that they had to design as well; all in the name of saving public money.

We are all paying the price for this sloppy approach by way of poor service, company failures, job losses and personal calamities.

We have also seen many small to medium-sized experienced specialist firms being drowned out or taken over and their specialisation lost or diluted.

I do remember hearing that a study on behalf of the Welsh Development Agency sometime in the late 1980's did confirm that their "old fashioned" methods of procurement had delivered value for money. But it was a small voice and the advice was discarded by politicians who thought that they knew better.

Kind regards

**Idris**

Chief ranter and problem solver  
Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd.

DON'T SETTLE FOR WHAT'S EASILY ATTAINABLE.

### *A man's reach should exceed his grasp – Robert Browning*

Leading from the front is a reflection of the principle that endeavour rewards those prepared to think the unthinkable and act accordingly.

Working with and taking advice from people who weren't engineers was unthinkable in civil engineering circles at one time. I have often spoken about this mistaken attitude. Some of us grasped that particular nettle early on in our careers. We introduced the idea that multi-disciplined teams were necessary in both design and construction if projects were to be built showing respect for nature and be pleasing to the public. I was one of those who thought this way and perhaps that was because I was a 'back door' engineer. I entered civil engineering by accident after meeting up with an old school friend. For personal reasons I took the opportunity to change direction as he suggested. But I was then determined to make the best of what



presented itself, it was an emerging future and I had no idea what lay ahead of me. I am firmly of the conviction that having an open mind is an important element in reaching out to opportunities.

“You want to do what?” is a frequent cry heard from those who have closed minds or stick to ‘facts’ that are not facts at all but rigidly held beliefs.

Exceeding your grasp can be interpreted as going beyond what you have learned or experienced by using emotion and innovation to extend your impact on the world around you. This indeed is a challenge and there are many, many examples of people behaving in this way. Just reflect on what Brunel, Stephenson and John Snow achieved in the middle of the 19th century. The legacies of both Brunel and Stephenson are all around us and are easily recognised.

Not so obvious is the impact of John Snow, a particular hero of mine. John was a physician who traced an outbreak of cholera to the London water supply in 1854. Many of his neighbours were dying and he felt driven to act. His emotional response to was to shut the water pump in Broad Street in Soho by removing the handle of the pump. He did this despite the water companies telling everyone that cholera was not waterborne but airborne. John was convinced that the problem was in the water because he had plotted on a street map the distribution of where the deaths were occurring and the pump was the source of water that those people were using. People drawing their water from a different source were not so susceptible. John shut the pump in Broad street in Soho and the cholera outbreak declined. John Snow was one of the fathers of epidemiology which has saved countless lives and improved living conditions as the science has developed from those early days in Soho.

In his 2012 ‘Pump Handle’ lecture to the John Snow Society, Tom Friedan said that even with some modest effort one can make a large impact. “That is what handles are for” he said. Tom is a highly regarded scientist and a specialist in public health.

My question in 2018 is what pump handle does the professional civil engineer need to operate in order to make our actions more sustainable and generally acceptable? Don’t be afraid to think of modest changes they could lead to great advances as Tom Friedman suggests.

Kind regards

**Ivor**

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