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YOU HAVE TO INVENT THE FUTURE



Steve Jobs was a hard man to please and most of the designs produced by the Apple team went through innumerable phases and reviews because Steve just wanted everything to meet his very clear ideas of what would people would buy. Steve was not a designer but he knew what was required. In most cases everyone agreed in the end that 'Steve was right' what they ended up with was what was needed and right for the job. (I am sorry, but this pun was intended). Steve was difficult, so, so many times items carefully produced were described by him as s**t and had to be re-thought. And that's why Apple is today worth about \$900billion, not bad you must admit, from a standing start in 1977 and what amounted to a re-start in 1997.

I have talked about learning and leading from the future, commenting a week or so ago about the ideas of Otto Scharmer. We all invent the future every time we design something and RML are designing things all of the time by putting thoughts down to pen and paper or screen. Now I really am showing my age. Do you remember when we had drawing offices full of drawing boards and dust produced by electric erasers and ammonia fumes from the printers? Words as well as new physical things are the future too. Words convey ideas and emotions between people and unless you are quoting from something already written then any words that you write will be new and will have some effect on the future. I Am a fan of connecting-up people, places and things.

I also keep saying that the future is here immediately ahead of us just waiting for us to recognise it, but recognise it you have to, and then react by doing something. I only appreciated this aspect of my working life when I read about Otto Scharmer's view of how 'emerging futures' are important.

This is how they work;

you see an opportunity to make a difference,

you connect personally with what wants to emerge,

you then acting quickly to gain momentum.

To help you along in addressing the future it is useful, even important, to have found a thread onto which you can place your emerging futures, but be warned, these threads are dependent on you having already identified 'your highest future possibility' (according to Otto). In other words, my words, you have to have some idea of what you want to do with your life. It is clear from the things written about Steve Jobs that he knew exactly where he wanted his future to take him. It was not an easy path, he was tempestuous to say the least, but overall a wonderful communicator-salesman

which meant that he could carry people along no matter how scornful he was of their efforts. And the results carried him along.

I was fortunate in identifying what I wanted to do. I set about improving the performance of civil engineering by developing a respect for the environment as a way of creating new landscapes and new lives for people who lived in communities which were decaying. In truth I did not see my efforts having an industry-wide impact but that is what seems to have happened.

Kind regards

Ivor

Managing Director

Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd

RED TAPE VERSUS THINKING ABOUT THINGS

More and more frequently we are hearing from people complaining about the deadening impact of red tape, well I am any way. I read in the Sunday Times only this week, in early July, that Luke Johnson, one of my favourite contributors to the paper, was telling us that fear of prosecution is leading managers to rely on IT systems rather than their own technical judgement. 'Dodgy metrics' as he calls them have replaced judgement based on experience or common sense. Box-ticking seems to hold sway over thinking about the best way to do things.

At RML we have been here so many times. I have been saying for years that regulations are holding back people with an entrepreneurial spirit that is fed by emotion, technical knowledge and the simple desire to get on with things. I worry that this blind adherence to 'the regulations' goes against any fresh thinking that young scientists or experienced ones could conjure up.



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Luke goes on to comment about the impact of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on people's effectiveness. KPIs measure what is produced or supposedly so and are easy to manipulate. It seems that recent business failures, when metrics (forecasts and spread sheets) were used to show businesses in a better light than they really were, just underline this last point.

We are all probably familiar with the heavy increase in the work load involved in management over and above design that is now involved in building anything. So many aspects of public sector management in respect of town planning and environmental issues seem to be little more than obfuscation. Obfuscation is one of my favourite words because it has a 'ring' about it, but its downside is that it describes a particularly negative and unthinking approach that I come across so frequently. A current client has plans and permission to demolish and rebuild a garage, but because there is a little bat in residence the planning authority and the regulators are at loggerheads over who should do what and sign things, despite the regulations being perfectly clear about these matters. This simple project is suffering from months of delay. Multiply this example across the country this week, say a

thousand times in total for scale and a few orders of magnitude. Is it any wonder that activity in the construction sector is said to be low?

I have no problem with the bat and hold nothing against him/her. The bat causes no real problems and only comes out at dusk, no, it is the regulators who are giving us all nightmares.

Kind regards

Idris

Chief ranter and problem solver

Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd

PIONEERS MUST BE TOUGH AND RESOURCEFUL

*The grass, forerunner of life, has gone
But plants that spring in ruins and shards,
Attend until your dreams are done.*

To Ironfounders and Others. - Gordon Bottomley

Gordon Bottomley lived in the north west of England and was familiar with abandoned ironworks and other industrial relics. He was certainly a keen observer of nature too and these few lines in his poem about ironfounders and their legacy struck a very early cord with me when I became involved in land reclamation in the 1970s. I had just started work on abandoned lead mines where grass had certainly fled but metalliferous plants were surviving. Gordon was evidently much struck with the performance of plants in the most inhospitable of environments and how grass had left these sites because of the physical or chemical conditions.

RML has developed a confidence in the ability and resourcefulness of things natural.

In our experience nature is very forgiving and accommodating of most of man's misdemeanours and we have been aware of this for some time. We recognised it many years ago. How so?

Well, many of our early projects involved land reclamation which I would now prefer to label as 'land rehabilitation'. In many projects we were changing the condition of the land from disfigurement and neglect caused by the careless disposal of mineral wastes to new landscapes where biodiversity would be encouraged. What we have found is that nature just needs the space and the opportunity to do her own thing. We were also seeking ways of improving the quality of life for communities that had been neglected. Removing dangers was the number one priority followed by increasing the opportunity for new infrastructure and commercial development for example and creating new landscapes on industrial wastes that would provide some valuable open space. Learning by doing was



important for the industry and new green areas were important in providing learning opportunities for schools and pupils.

Our early projects involved dealing with coal mining waste which was not too difficult to spread and level in dry weather, then re-vegetate and plant-up with appropriate trees as long as the surface layers were not over compacted. Trees would survive quite happily with the minimum of fuss provided that the planting holes were free-draining. Just a little fertilizer and management such as grass cutting, grazing and dealing with tree ties and stakes along with effective sheep proof fencing was quite sufficient. When working with slate wastes the problems were a little different, wet weather was of no concern, in fact the contractors liked wet weather, they thought that the slate 'moved a little easier'. One problem that we did have was that tips of slate waste were very porous and only 3 cubic metres of compacted waste came from 5 cubic metres measured in the tip. In the case of metalliferous wastes metal tolerant grasses were the only ones that would survive, evidence of resourceful nature at its best. We used the metal tolerant grasses first on Parc lead mine in 1978. Alders and willows are quite resourceful trees too, Alders fix their own nitrogen supplies and Willows can absorb oxygen even when the ground is saturated.

In very many cases our initial 'walk-over' of a derelict site had indicated that in some form or another nature was already beginning the process of winning back these damaged sites. Nature does work slowly however. Our clients were looking for quick and 'low cost' techniques and we found them by working with Professor Bradshaw at Liverpool University and learning that many plants were adapted to growing in difficult environments. Shortage of moisture, a lack of nutrients and poor soil structure that inhibited root development were things that we felt civil engineers could address if we looked outside the industry for advice. We called the approach 'Working with nature' and my report with this title was published by the Welsh Development Agency in 1982 when I was with Robinson Jones Ltd and revised and republished by RML in 1994. It was a best seller. In 2017 we printed a selection of our early newsletters under the title 'Why work with nature'.

The plants that spring in ruins and shards were what we based our designs on since they are the pioneers that start the whole process of colonising bare ground and inhospitable environments.

Kind regards

Ivor

Managing Director
Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd

ARE YOU STRESSED UP? TRY BEING AN ENTREPRENEUR

"What's the French for entrepreneur?"

George Bush, President of the United States.

James Routledge, a well-known entrepreneur, was telling people how he had struggled with mental health when he was winding down a business that he had started. But he is up again now and started another new company Sanctus, which is focussed on helping people with mental health issues.

That's life, isn't it? You can be up or down or somewhere in between. You have to be strong, if not actually tough and then strong-willed to survive in business, even more so in a small business. But this is the only experience of running a business that I have. I have seen Ivor face many problematic issues, such as;

We need some new equipment, - OK if it improves our performance;

You want us to go where - what's Estonian for bulldozer;

Is that what they bid - they are welcome to it for those rates;

Who has gone bust now - thankfully not too many of our clients.

The fact that Mental Health Awareness Week and Heads Together are recognised as being vital in today's world just shows at long last that people, well known people, are talking and doing something about these stress-related issues.

Of course there are times when all is well in the world in any business and one can see the funny side of things and celebrate the winning or completion of a project. By way of contrast, recently a client won planning permission for some work after 3 years of us being persistent in dealing with the planning authority, not so funny really but worth celebrating. If the planning system seems to be getting you down, and it can get people down, then give us a call.



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One event that did create a lot of stress for us was when we were working with two lichenologists who had totally different views about how we should be doing some work. All Lichens are important but those on our site were especially so. The lichenologists drove our clerk of the works up the wall. We could laugh about it afterwards but at the time we were all stressed up, at one point we could have been involved in a court action. We were very happy to accommodate the lichens but given half a chance the site staff would have buried the lichenologists. Funnily enough I haven't heard from them since the contract was completed. I wonder where they went.

We sent a tender to Brussels, just on the off chance, and won a £250,000 contract to write the guidelines for the EU on the rehabilitation of abandoned coal mines and steel works. Two groups, one French, the other Italian were involved on other associated projects, now that was a laugh too. We all met on the launch day in Brussels. They asked for extra time and money on day one and they got it. On another occasion which wasn't funny at all our international team submitted what we later learned was the best bid for work in Hungary that was worth millions. Despite our bid being judged the best a Dutch official refused to sign the letter of appointment and guess what, a Dutch team got the job. That really hurt us and our German and Hungarian partners.

Being emotionally involved can have a positive or a negative impact but without any emotion then life would indeed be hollow. One of life's little pleasures is to return to projects and see how things like landscapes have developed, especially since one can learn from these visits too. Ivor has mentioned before that John Ruskin thought that being able to look back on things was richness indeed.

If you are stressed up, try taking John Ruskin's advice and reflect on some 'sunshine days' that you experienced in the past or look up James Routledge.

Kind regards

Idris

Chief ranter and problem solver

Richards, Moorehead & Laing Ltd

It's that time of year again, on RML's 34th anniversary, when I indulge in reminiscences and wrap them up in a few gentle phrases that I hope will set your minds going. There is no point in being sad or nasty, both of those conditions will do one no good at all. Be prepared though, I may fall from this high endeavour further on.

A personal note first. I was in our eye hospital again in July, it must have been my fourth or fifth visit since January. I have been attending for years because of Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD). Believe me being told that you are both aged and degenerate does one no great good. I did complain at the time that I was not aged or degenerate, "There, there Ivor, have a cup of tea" the nurse told me. The bad news is that I have injections in my eye quite regularly, as treatment for the AMD. It was my 32nd injection in July, it's not that I count them, the nurse told me.

Now the good news, the specialist said that my eye was stable and with just a few more injections my vision may stabilise for good. If that happens I will not degenerate any more, vision-wise that is. Hey, that is progress, so feel pleased for me. Incidentally, around the country thousands of people must have this same treatment every day so it is no big deal no matter how it sounds to you and the nurses are lovely in Abergele.



Ivor, circa 1984, soon after starting RML

As usual the last 12 months have thrown up a few humdingers what with Carillion going bust and a really important client still waiting for approval of his plans. When this approval does come all hell will break loose because it will release a lot of work. He will want to make up for lost time, but we will be up for it.

We are learning new skills as we rise to technical challenges and changing legislation.

Clients keep extending their briefs which is a delight.

We are busy and are already looking forward with enthusiasm to 2019.

Bidding for highway work with the Welsh Assembly has changed, previously price and quality were both considered in tandem. From here on we will first have to actually demonstrate our ability to deliver on promises and price will become a secondary aspect of the assessment.

One thing that I do find frustrating is that employers regularly ask us to accept 45 days payment terms, blimey even Carillion paid us in 21 days without fail until January. When we raise an objection to a 45 day period they tend to agree and accept what we are asking for, i.e. 30 days maximum. The message here is that if you are valued then it shows in relationships with clients. But this is a celebration not a dirge so let me turn to brighter topics. We have one client who pays in less than 2 hours, yes really, he pays on the day we send him an invoice. This is not all down to on-line banking of course, but because he appreciates our services.

On-line banking saves us hours going up to the bank and improves/simplifies our records and book-keeping. Our branch of Barclays has closed anyway, perhaps they have done us an unintended favour. They most certainly have not done Ruthin any favours.

We have not used a fax machine for years. It does not seem all that long ago that Marj and I sent a fax to Arizona and were staggered that our booking for a conference was actually there in an instant, 'just like that'.

We have bought our first all-electric car, I am sure that more will follow.



Nowadays we only print drawings for our in-house use. My colleagues still like to look at a real drawing on occasions. I do believe that the day of the page is coming back; booksellers have been doing well I hear. Certainly the written word via email is so important. I still have to remind people about the 'yours faithfully' and 'yours sincerely' rule when it comes to letter writing. We do write many letters in which 'yours sincerely' is the appropriate way to finish, that's nice.

So be resourceful and persistent like nature is. Do drop us a line occasionally if you can find the time.

Kind regards

Ivor

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