

Trends We Must Not Ignore

By Maya Townsend,
Barbara Christian,
Jo-Ann Hague, Deb Peck,
Michael Ray and
Bauback Yeganeh

OD Gets Wired

“Computer-based technologies and the evolving internet are not just tools. They are attributes of a new world... a new frontier... in which we must move and live. Living in cyberspace requires the marriage of the human and computer... the human and the internet. Cyber-OD must evolve to address human collaboration within the cyber-realm.”

Sandy Speake and Jo-Ann Hague presented this manifesto for our intensely wired world at the 2007 OD Network conference. The Cyber-OD concept is an acknowledgement that OD practitioners cannot simply apply the Internet and other computer/web-based technologies to OD activities. Instead, practitioners must recognize that cyberspace is a unique world requiring the uniquely-designed integration of cyber-resources with OD strategies, thereby creating a new discipline: Cyber-OD.

Speake’s & Hague’s concept of Cyber-OD pulls us into the world of science fiction, imagination, and possibility. What will our organizations look like when we merge human and computer? What must we as OD practitioners do differently to get organizational results? How will we, as a group of highly-trained people who care deeply about integrating humanistic values in the workforce and making companies better employers and neighbors, continue to bring who we are into this different world?

The challenges we will face in the wired world are foreshadowed by email, a technology that most practitioners

now find essential to our clients and our practices. Email usurped the jurisdiction once held by letter writing, memos, and fax and has transformed how we communicate. Most OD practitioners have adapted, albeit some with reluctance, to the reality that email performs a critical service in the business world and our practices. But technological change is accelerating and the challenges manifested by radically connected technology will only increase. How prepared are we as OD practitioners to evolve along with our wired world? What are the implications for our tried and true methodologies? How must we shift in order to maintain our relevance and value?

In this article, we touch on several issues that arise for OD practitioners in the wired world. We identify three new facts of life in this world and propose roles and responsibilities for OD practitioners.

Three Facts of Life for the Wired World

To journey effectively in the wired world, OD practitioners need to consider the facts of life in this domain and their implications for our practices. Three facts of life in the wired world are:

- (1) *People are radically connected,*
- (2) *Collaboration trumps control, and*
- (3) *We live in complex and constantly changing ecosystems.*

Although each topic is deep and rich, we explore these issues only briefly and examine what they mean for us as OD practitioners.

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People are Radically Connected

Today, people are radically connected. Over 400 million people worldwide are broadband subscribers (Kelly, 2006) and, as of 2002, there were 631 million internet users (Worldmapper, 2007). The extent of technological connection, plus improvements in travel and the globalization of business, has reduced the distance between people of different backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities.

This deep and pervasive connectedness causes multiple challenges for our clients. They must link across language, geography, time zone, experience, and other boundaries. The obvious tool for organizations is technology. It's cheap and easy to connect people via web conferences, *wikis* (collaborative web spaces), discussion boards, and social networking applications.¹ Yet, companies have not yet learned how to develop the rich conversations and deep trust that can be achieved through face-to-face engagement. And, as Dr. Karen Stephenson asserts, trust-based relationships are essential for complex initiatives to succeed (2007). In fact, winning projects are run by people with a more balanced and positive network of trust (Stephenson, 2006). As we become more wired, our focus turns to the sexy technology and away from the imperative to build trusting relationships on, around, and amidst technology.

Dr. Barbara Fredrickson's (1998) *Broaden and Build Theory of Positive Emotions* reveals that positive emotions lead to a broadening of momentary thought-action repertoires. This broadening enables discovery of new and creative ideas and actions, which in turn expand personal resources, intellectual resources, and/or social resources. Inversely, as fear increases, our ability to think and act in new ways decreases.

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based relationships and help them build trust in the wired world.

Collaboration Trumps Control

Today's organizations deal with knowledge more than ever before. Manufacturing jobs have been shrinking since 1970 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1994). Replacing these jobs are services, which account for more than 75% of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product and knowledge-based work, which comprises more than 50% of the world's

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Gross Domestic Product (Kelly, 2006, using OECD data).

In a manufacturing world, it's possible to exert a fairly sophisticated level of control over products and intellectual property. In a world in which knowledge provides competitive advantage, it's much more difficult: the knowledge is too complex to house in one person or organization. And it's too widely dispersed to control.

Organizations have begun to engage in radical methods of collaboration in order to pool knowledge, innovate, and reap the benefits of creative tension. For example, pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly supported the incubation and launch of Innocentive, a highly successful organization that allows companies to post scientific and research challenges. Anyone from a Siberian biologist to a Chilean software developer can submit potential solutions to the challenge. Winners can receive monetary awards of \$100,000 or more (Burge, 2007).

In a more public example, Will.i.am, a member of the Black Eyed Peas pop group, collaborated with stars such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Scarlett Johansson,

Tatyana Ali, Amber Valetta, and Herbie Hancock in early 2008, to create a video that overlays music on a speech given by then-presidential candidate Barack Obama. The resulting video has been watched millions of times on YouTube.com and gained significant attention for the Obama campaign.

In this kind of world, transformation of knowledge and creativity into results differentiates successful organizations from struggling ones. This calls for engaging and collaborating with customers, innovators, and subject

matter experts in different ways than in the past. It also means reaching across organization and role boundaries to create new opportunities, encourage connections between synergistic but dissimilar entities, and transform creative tension into results. We can help by supporting individuals and organizations to leverage, share, and transform knowledge.

Organizations are challenged to create the social, environmental, and technical environments needed to foster collaboration, innovation, and growth. Larry Huston, who for many years was responsible for knowledge and innovation at Procter & Gamble, spots future competitive advantage for organizations in nurturing innovation networks (Knowledge@Wharton, 2007). These networks consist of people, institutions, and companies inside and outside an organization that can be tapped into to help solve problems and find new ideas. In order to involve the outside world, focus has to be put on creating architectures for participation.

Our role as OD practitioners is to help our clients create spaces in which they can exchange knowledge, both inside and

outside formal organizational boundaries, and transform ideas into results. Our role is also to help create conditions in which knowledge can be shared and transformed from tacit and discrete data points into overt and synergistic innovation.

We Live in Complex and Constantly Changing Ecosystems

Today's organizations are deeply connected through complex webs of interdependencies called ecosystems.² 90% of CIOs surveyed by *CIO Magazine*

As conglomerations become more complex, organizational behavior becomes less predictable since their components are not only connected to each other but influence systems separated by time and space. Through interrelation of elements or connectivity, a system emerges that can't be explained sufficiently by analyzing its parts. We are compelled, as OD practitioners, to help our clients shift their thinking away from mechanistic models to other ways of thinking about organizations.

outsource some percentage of IT labor, creating multi-national relationships in order to complete daily work and mission-critical projects (CXO Media, 2008). Other evidence of deep interconnection abounds. This integration goes far beyond outsourcing to innovative alliances, cooperation between competitors, and blurred boundaries between organizations.

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In the process, we need to update our thinking as well. The time of unfreezing-changing-freezing is long gone. Our client

organizations are in constant flux. Multiple change initiatives occur simultaneously. Rapidly changing market conditions require agility, flexibility, and the ability to change from samba to rumba mid-dance. We believe our role as practitioners will be to help our client systems find coherence amidst change and levers to enable effective change. Three of the many methodologies helping us find coherence emerge from complexity, positive deviance, and network analysis.³

Our role as OD practitioners is to help people name patterns within their

systems and their impact on the efficacy of organizations. It's also to help people find levers: the people of influence and the energy for change within systems that can be used to redirect, motivate, and focus attention where it is needed.

The Next Frontier

We can see the environment changing around us. We must change along with it. The role of the OD professional is to help lead our clients to embrace and thrive within the new organizational ground rules of Radical Connection, Collaboration Trumps Control, and Complex Ecosystems. Our responsibility is to encourage clients see beyond these challenges to their implications and promises for the future. Our charge is to steward them into the new, cyber-OD frontier and to understand the conditions that comprise this new and exciting world. As long as we can continue to evolve OD to meet the changing

demands of our clients and our world, we will have a place in the future. Long live OD!

Notes

1. This article used a *wiki* to communicate and develop ideas in lieu of in-person or phone meetings. To visit the wiki and see how the article evolved, visit partneringresources.pbwiki.com.
2. The concept of *ecosystem* (the idea that today's companies are embedded in multiple, complex relationships that make them interdependent on each other for success) is critically important to the wired world and to OD practitioners. Due to space constraints, we cannot do justice to the topic here, although we encourage readers to learn more about the topic.
3. The *OD Practitioner* has published excellent articles on these topics. We encourage readers to find them through a keyword search at www.odnetwork.org/publications/practitioner/backissues.php.

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Maya Townsend, MSOD, founder of Partnering Resources, builds aligned, focused organizations that achieve their goals more effectively. She helps leaders identify the hidden web of relationships that drive performance and reach across the white spaces to develop solutions that stick. Maya advises Gartner, the leading technology research company, on organization effectiveness; and teaches through Boston University Corporate Education Center. She graduated from AU/NTL's MSOD program and is a member of the NTL Institute. Maya can be reached at maya@partneringresources.com.

Barbara Christian, MA, MBA, combines executive coaching and organizational development consulting to help her clients find innovative solutions. She currently works with Robert J. Lee and iCoachNewYork, a premier Executive Coaching organization. Her academic research is focused on innovation and entrepreneurship. She is the winner of the 2007 SPPP of the Organization Development Network. She holds a Master's degree in Organizational Change Management from New School University and an MBA from Karl-Franzens University, Graz (Austria). Barbara can be reached at ba_christian@yahoo.com.

Jo-Ann Hague, MA, an employee of Triune Group, is an organization development strategist for Air Force Knowledge Now, the Air Force's web-based collaborative environment serving 250,000 members. Her task is to facilitate the healthy evolution of cyber-communities around the world. Jo-Ann earned her master's degrees in English and Secondary Education from the University of Cincinnati, and she studied Industrial-Organizational Psychology through Capella University. Jo-Ann can be reached at joann.hague@triunegroup.com.

Deborah Peck, PhD, President of Seity, Inc., provides organizational management consulting to improve organization effectiveness and employee satisfaction. The Seity methods emphasize a systems perspective using social network analysis to diagnose and improve organization effectiveness based on the underlying people resources. Deborah works with small to large organizations from numerous industries to emphasize how work relationships affect business results. Deborah is an ODN member and a board member of the IMC-AZ chapter. Deborah can be reached at dpeck@seity.com.

Michael S. Ray, PhD, focuses his OD practice on implementing collaborative approaches to strategic planning and organizing in education, social service, and business organizations. Michael manages the Human Resource and Organization Effectiveness team at the University of Arizona Library. The UA Library is a leader among research libraries developing participative and leading-edge human resource practices. Michael is a member of the first ODN cohort to receive NetForm certification. He can be reached at raym@u.library.arizona.edu.

Bauback Yeganeh, PhD, focuses on strategy and leadership development as president of B.Y. Consulting. He is also a managing partner in Everidian, creating wealth and environmental well-being through eco-innovation. Bauback has consulted in The Americas, Europe and Asia. He is an Adjunct Professor at American University. Bauback received a PhD in organizational behavior from Case Western Reserve University and an MS in OD from American University (AU/NTL). He is an NTL faculty member, guitarist, and music producer. Bauback can be reached at by@byconsulting.org or byeganeh@everidian.com.

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