

When Industry Got a Bad Name

The re-branding of the Department of Trade and Industry after Labour's re-election last month produced so much derision that the decision was rescinded within days. "The Department for Productivity, Energy and Industry" hardly rolled off the tongue, produced unfortunate acronyms, and evoked associations with the command economies of the former Soviet bloc.

Business has also altered its language with regard to productivity. We now speak of "cost optimisation" rather than "cost cutting", and "smart sourcing" instead of "outsourcing". Do these euphemisms mask a deeper issue - that we are unsure of where we can make the next productivity gain, after all the possible savings have been made?

Ten years ago, Charles Handy described the critical future challenge as "half as many people ... paid twice as well and producing three times as much"¹. However, once the staff reductions are over, it is difficult to see how higher output per person can be achieved, given the increasing demand for a better work-life balance and the continuing debate about Britain's opt-out of the European Parliament's limits on working hours.

Perhaps the answer lies in generating higher value per person instead. To develop individual capacity not only for increasing effectiveness but for increasing innovation, not only in marketing departments but in all business processes, in order to excite customers, strengthen their loyalty and boost the top line.

Unfortunately, according to Professor Guy Claxton, "the actual practice of much of office life, when under pressure or when 'unobserved' is often fundamentally hostile to creative people". Maybe our drive for productive efficiency has been at the expense of being creative. Indeed, Glaxton goes as far as calling today's working environment "creaticidal", hindered by constant distraction, an institutional lack of co-operation, and high levels of stress and fear.²

To improve the quality of our thinking, it is obviously important to address the challenging climate that Glaxton describes. In addition, a wide range of findings from research on creativity has emerged in recent years. Among these, the pivotal studies undertaken by the psychologist Howard Gardner³ who discovered that a greater number of types of intelligence exist than the verbal and analytical skills rewarded in education and business today.

Gardner explains that individuals have a variety of preferences for learning and working, and that we can build our intelligence in different areas. Some people enjoy working in the visual and spatial dimension, others need to experience things through their body. Some are exceptionally gifted with people, others are

"What moves men of genius, or rather what inspires their work, is not new ideas, but their obsession with the idea that what has already been said is still not enough".
Eugene Delacroix

particularly attuned to their own thought processes and intuition. Some respond well to music and rhythm, for others the connection to nature is very important. We observe and admire these different types of intelligence in our out-of-work interests, such as music and sports.

Our experience bears out that the rational logic of business is not always best suited to the challenges we face, for example, in understanding relationships. And the complexity of today's world means that our cause-and-effect models sometimes fall short of finding solutions. Gardner's research suggests there may be further ways of improving creativity and problem-solving in the workplace, including

- Creating environments that stimulate all our senses, including representations of nature where possible;
- Regularly introducing novelty and variety to expand the brain's pattern-finding facility;
- Acknowledging the need for private reflection, taking a break and giving time for answers to emerge;
- Using metaphors and stories as channels to express our unconscious intelligence;
- Deliberately creating opportunities to mix teams, so we can teach and learn from each other's approaches.

The dangers of neglecting corporate creativity are clear: many well-known brands have focused on efficient production but slipped out of fashion for want of ideas to stay abreast of market trends, such as Rover, M&S and Kodak. However, companies like IBM that are renowned for their innovation, continue to maintain high investment in staff and partner development despite extensive cost-cutting.

For in seeking new sources of growth for business in future, we may agree with Government that productivity does not always say it all.

¹ Charles Handy "The Empty Raincoat"
² Guy Claxton & Bill Lucas "Be Creative"
³ Howard Gardner "Frames of Mind"

Mind for Business is holding an evening workshop on improving personal creativity in September 05. For more information about this event, please contact us at workshops@mind-for-business.com.