

The challenge of change

John Dommers

ABSTRACT

The vision is simple: an unprecedented worldwide electronic communications network that connects everyone to everyone else and provides just about any sort of electronic communication available. It sounds like science fiction, but it isn't any longer.

Rarely a day goes by when we do not learn about amazing technological breakthroughs in the world of communications. Personal computers, multimedia notebooks, pocket-size digital telephones, camcorders and cameras, direct satellite TV and the ever-expanding Internet, have become integral parts of our lives whether or not we choose to benefit by them. Even virtual pet and baby games are by-products of our space-age technology.

Harnessing the potential of the technological revolution to benefit animals can present challenges of immense proportions to many people who conduct their business in a traditional way. This paper will address the issue of making the personal choice and taking the necessary risks to initiate or expand one's journey onto the information super highway.

INTRODUCTION

In keeping with the conference theme of providing insights into the technological revolution and ways to harness its awesome potential for the benefit of animals, my comments will relate to the challenges of change that affect the way we conduct personal and professional activities.

In 1990 Paul Irwin, the President of the Humane Society of the United States, asked me to set up and direct the first full-scale national trade show for people who rescue, shelter, care for and control domestic and wild animals. I was thrilled with the idea of being able to provide a giant showcase for the latest and most technologically-advanced products to help people like you do the best, most efficient jobs in your specialised fields of work. This was a big change for me and I knew it would result in big and positive changes for others. Up to that point there had never been a full-scale trade show that professional animal sheltering, care and control personnel could call their own. Animal Care Expo 92, our first show, was an instant success. Over 1200 professionals and volunteers attended the event in Las Vegas. The show set a record for the largest gathering of animal sheltering and protection workers in the world, one which it has maintained each year including the 1997 show in Orlando, Florida.

I am very pleased that Australia has been impressively represented at almost every Expo. Dr Graeme Smith, Chief Executive Officer of the Lost Dog's Home in Melbourne, and Paul Jowsey, Director of TagMaster in Yeppoon, have attended several of the shows. They have exhibited and spoken at education sessions. In 1996 they co-presented a major workshop on Pet Identification and Recovery Systems in Australia that was of great interest to our attendees. At the same show in Las Vegas we were proud to be able to recognise Australia's Animal Control Officer of the year, Ms Terri-Ann Pert, and learn about her innovative programs.

We have had leading edge technology products at Animal Care Expo including computer programs, microchips for animal identification, CD-ROMs for grant writing and direct mail projects, electronic search and rescue products and dozens of other items that most attendees never dreamed existed. While many of the exhibits opened both my eyes and those of many attendees to the latest technology, it was a real surprise for me to see how many people bypassed the hi-tech exhibits in favour of the more familiar, traditional products that are popular with animal control personnel. While I recognise the value and importance of tried and true products, some are beginning to show their age. These products are quickly losing ground to a new generation of user-friendly products that employ space-age materials and technology to accomplish the same tasks more quickly, efficiently and economically.

Psychologists and psychiatrists can easily provide dozens of reasons why individuals choose to ignore or avoid contemporary products and procedures. I am certain much of the resistance has more to do with complacency than the cost factors. A complacent person often says "I am happy and productive doing what I am doing with the equipment I already have, so leave me alone". I am certain, too, that risk taking is not everyone's favourite past-time. Rather than looking into new and improved technology some people put on mental blinders and convince themselves that their current method or device is the best available, because they could fail at mastering high-tech products or programs. If you often hesitate to try out new technology because of perceived risks, reflect on these thoughts:

RISKS

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.

To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.

To reach out for another is to risk involvement.

To expose feelings is to risk exposing your true self.

To place your ideas and your dreams before a crowd is to risk their loss.

To love is to risk not being loved in return.

To live is to risk dying.

To hope is to risk despair.

To try is to risk failure.

But, risk must be taken, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.

People who risk nothing and do nothing, are sheltered.

They may avoid some suffering and sorrow, however they cannot learn, feel, change, grow love and live.

Chained by their attitudes, they are slaves who have forfeited their freedom.

Only people who risk are free.

Author Unknown

The challenge of change, along with the risks involved, comes easily for some people. For others it is not-so-easy. It is interesting to watch young people in Southern California where we live go from surfboards to keyboards to snowboards with freedom and ease, just as I am sure they do in Australia. The keyboards I am referring to are computer keyboards. Some of these young people may go to musical keyboards as well. It's all in a day's recreation for them. I don't think they consider it work.

But what about others who do not find it so easy to master the instructions and controls of new products and feel a 'technological' anxiety attack coming on every time they are confronted with new 'gadgetry'? How many times have you needed help or assisted someone in setting an electronic watch, eliminating the flashing '12.00am' light on a VCR, or setting the VCR timer to record a show? These may be user-friendly products but all people may not be product-friendly users. In addition printed instructions are not always clear to the reader. Many people need practice and a lot of encouragement to master today's technology. Others, who are already knowledgeable and skilled at using computer-driven products, still need time and space to master the ever-evolving details of new product operation.

I am pleased that the UAM 1997 Conference organisers have recognised the great importance of providing realistic, practical, hands-on sessions designed to get attendees up to speed on using technological equipment and resources. I am certain your efforts are welcome by all in attendance and will be appreciated.

Reported technological advances in the past decade, the past year and the past month are mind boggling. Computer technology alone has reshaped and changed our lives in ways most people could not have imagined five or ten years ago. While some individuals remain computer illiterate for the moment, others have become cyber hermits who seem to be travelling on an information super highway without any exit ramps. These people appear to be superglued to a chair in front of a computer screen impervious to the happenings in the immediate world around them. If you are like me then you fall somewhere in between these two extremes.

I have enjoyed the challenge of learning how to use computers ranging from hand-held games and ATM machines to PCs that rule the workplace. But, because I like face-to-face meetings like this one today here in Adelaide, I have proceeded along the information super highway with calculated patience. I am fully aware that I might have been able to address you from a videoconferencing centre in San Diego, but it wouldn't have had the same personal effect. I like to use new technology but, when it comes to my work, I also like close encounters of the personal kind that allow me to meet and speak with young people and adults. One important challenge I face in this world of change is balancing the time that it takes to benefit from both areas.

In preparation for this presentation I spoke to dozens of people in our line of work and asked them how they handled the challenges of change, especially those related to the technological revolution we experience daily. Their responses were probably not much different to ones that you might provide if you were similarly interviewed so I won't bore you with statement details. However I will focus on a 'mindset' of several persons who believed that, because of their present knowledge and skills and advanced level of achievement, they were the only ones who could get their particular job done correctly.

Some felt their pioneering and developmental work allowed them to 'write the book' for their particular position. They compiled all the data and information that was needed to get their jobs done and they didn't seem very excited about new technology options. When I asked them how secure they felt in their present positions I was surprised to learn that several believed they were actually indispensable. I could hear it in their voices and statements. One person said "They won't fire me because, if they did, this place would fold up.". Another person felt that her job was secure in a local government agency, especially in view of her specialist position and longevity of service.

There is nothing wrong with being very confident in your knowledge and abilities at work. It can be a real asset. A self confident leader can engender self confidence in others by example alone. But, when self confidence is elevated to the level where the 'mindset' of indispensability begins, it can affect one's ability to realistically accept the challenge of change and envision how the changes can offer new advantages.

One of the most successful and respected leaders in the business of audio visual technology, Mr Mackey Barron, President of H.B. Educational Systems has a poem titled The Indispensable Man prominently displayed in the employee area of his large factory in Hamden, Connecticut. I copied it because it made an impression on me. I would like to share it with you.

THE INDISPENSABLE MAN

Sometime when you're feeling important,
Sometime when your ego's in bloom,
Sometime when you take it for granted,
You're the best qualified in the room ...
Sometime when you feel that your going
Would leave an unfillable hole,
Just follow these simple instructions,
And see how they humble your soul:
Take a bucket and fill it with water.
Put your hand in it up to your wrist.
Pull it out and the hole that remains
Is a measure of how you'll be missed.
You may splash all you please when you enter.
You may stir up the water galore.
But stop, and you'll find in a minute
That it looks just the same as before.
The moral of this is quite simple ..
Always do the best that you can.
Be proud of yourself, but remember
There is no indispensable man.
Anon

Keep in mind that every day on the job is a series of results or a series of rationalisations. It all depends on the design of your program, the equipment you use, your knowledge and skills and your attitude. Sometimes luck plays a role when things go right, but not very often.

Whether simple or complex, today's technology will offer you the challenge to change and improve. It is really up to you to accept the opportunity and take the risks to make things happen.

I wish you continued success in all your special endeavours to help make this a better world for animals and people. Your work is greatly appreciated.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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John J. Dommers graduated from Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana with a degree in Biology.

He was employed by the New Haven (Connecticut) public schools from 1966-1972 as a special assistant to the Supervisor of Science. He was based at the city's West Rock Nature Recreation Center and developed the country's first full-scale park-school environmental education program for elementary level students.

In 1972 John went to work for The Humane Society of the United States as the Director of Education for the New England Regional Office, covering a six state area. He later became the Society's National Director of Education and he headed the National Association for the Advancement of Humane Education, now called the National Association for Humane and Environmental Education. Later he became the New England Regional Director for the Society. In 1991 John became the Director of Animal Care Expo, the world's first full-scale trade show designed for animal rescue, sheltering, care and control personnel. The show holds the record for the largest gathering of animal sheltering and care professionals and volunteers in the world, averaging well over 1300 participants per year in its seven years of operation.

Before moving to San Diego, California from Madison, Connecticut in 1989, John taught a graduate course for teachers, Environmental Education 404, at Connecticut College in New London, CT.

John wrote and photographed a four colour book series for young people titled Focus on Pollution that was published by Xerox Education Publications. He has also written and photographed articles for the national Wildlife Federations' Ranger Rick nature magazine and several professional teacher magazines.

John's wife, Gail, is a full-time middle school teacher in La Jolla, CA. Their four sons all reside in the San Diego area.

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