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# How Indispensable Should You Be?

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Is your technology getting in the way of good management?

After World War II, the vacuum cleaner began its meteoric rise as an American household appliance. It was sold as an amazing labor-saving device to liberate women from the dreary chore of rug beating. And with that promise, it quickly became a fixture in the homes of the rapidly growing middle class.

For years afterward, it was assumed that vacuum cleaners did just what we expected: saved labor. But more recently, scholars have reinterpreted their true effects. It seems that rather than saving time for other pursuits, vacuum cleaners merely raised the standards for home cleanliness. Women didn't spend less time on household chores; they were just expected to tolerate less dust than before. If they saved time, it was devoted to other cleaning tasks or vacuuming more frequently.

As I watch the march of personal communication technology, I imagine scholars 50 years from now coming to much the same conclusions. We may not be getting exactly what we expect when we adopt these appliances, especially as tools of management. I'm not saying that these things are useless, but that we don't really appreciate what's happening.

Let's think about it for a moment. First, there were pagers that allowed us to notify people who we were trying to reach. Fairly quick, but very little information, and response was problematic. Then cell phones made it possible to reach someone directly. More immediacy, more information, two-way, but only voice. Then came e-mail. More information, more types of information, asynchronous delivery, storage, but no mobile delivery. BlackBerries offer the advantage of asynchronous communication with the immediacy and mobility that e-mail didn't have. Different types of information with storage. And don't get me started on instant messaging. Progress. Yeah, right.

We buy these things based on the ideas that more communication is better and increasing immediacy is essential. We live in a round-the-clock, hypercompetitive, globalized business environment. And, of course, most of us in IT management are technology people first and foremost, so we like to leverage (read "play with") new tools of the managerial trade to meet these competitive pressures.

So, as with vacuums, we incorporate them into our daily routines, and before long, they become seemingly indispensable. And managerial style adapts to the communication devices available, just as cleanliness standards

adapted to housework tools. Now we can be in the loop anytime, anywhere, and because we can, we must.

But is this progress? I'm not so sure. I've sensed that as managers have increasingly leaned on these gewgaws, they forget to ask whether the resulting "benefits" are really valuable. Should managers be available all the time in any place? Is this good for managers? Their staffs? Their organizations? I'm not sure that it serves any of the stakeholders particularly well.

It strikes me that these tools are encouraging a cyclical co-dependence. Managers, in a well-meaning attempt to be responsive and available to their staffs, glom onto a tool. Then the staffers start to use it, expecting the boss to be there whenever they need information, decisions, protection or comfort. And the more immediately and regularly the boss responds, the more they come to rely on that availability. Before long, a staff member's taking initiative means contacting the boss right away with something rather than analyzing the options and making decisions close to the action.

Often, staffers like this setup. It's lower-risk for them and requires less work. Whenever something comes up, just contact the boss. And bosses both love and loathe this sort of arrangement. On the positive side, they feel needed. Crisis environments are engaging and exciting. The seeming urgency of everything offers quite a rush and protects them from the difficult, slow and ambiguous nature of long-term managerial work.

But on the negative side, bosses feel needed. They begin to recognize the burden of having a staff that delegates even the most mundane details back up to the boss. But having set the expectation, they're already in the trap. So the more they're available, the more they must be so.

It's important to reflect carefully on how you use these powerful new tools of management. Train yourself and your staff to respect the boundaries of your roles to ensure that the tools serve you, and not the other way around. Otherwise, you'll end up vacuuming up everyone else's work and ignoring your own.

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