

Nomchong Psychology P/L

The Specialist Centre 107 Marconi Cres Kambah 2902

It's all about the way you think

Web: nomchong.com.au

Ph 02 6231 2569 Fx 02 6231 3775 SMS: 0498 95 7777

Email: reception@nomchong.com.au

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If you would like a work shop or presentation run for your organisation, or you would like more information, you can contact us below:

Address: The Specialist Centre, 107 Marconi Crescent Kambah ACT 2902

Telephone: 02 6231 2569 Fax: 02 6231 3775

Email: reception@nomchong.com.au

Web: www.nomchong.com.au

The Changing Nature of Work

-Speaking Notes-

**A Two Hour
Experiential Workshop**

THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

And Your Work Style

This is an experiential workshop, so much of the focus will be on the learning through discussion rather than lecture. The following are summing of the main points of the workshop.

INTRODUCTION

History has shown that the nature of work is in a constant process of change. As civilisations grow and develop the requirement for labour grows and develops with it. This is obvious when we are talking about low technology civilisations such as ancient Egypt and the Mayan civilisation, but lets think a little closer to home.

At the turn of the last century there was still a reasonable sized population of people who were unable to read or write. Yet, they were still able to be gainfully employed. In fact, there was a whole class of workers, called a scribe, dedicated to this reasonable size population of people who were unable to read or write.

So how were illiterate individuals able to be employed? Nowadays if you cannot read or write you are virtually unemployable! What has happened that is different? What has happened in the last 100 years to make that different? The answer is obvious, and the nature of work has changed in keeping with the change of our civilisation. So, lets get even closer to home?

Who in 1980 would have considered the profusion of personal computers into everyday life as it is today? Who would have considered the development of the Internet? Who would have considered that our standard of living and quality of life is not determined by how hard we work, but the dollar exchange rate!

These and other factors all change the nature of work. We are all workers, but we can only work when we know what to do, and how we should do it, when we work.

So clearly the nature of work has changed. In fact, the nature of work is always changing. And that is the point of this course, coping with the nature of change in work. Lets do an exercise to identify the changing nature of work in our work today.

EXERCISE: 1. On the whiteboard, the list all of the examples of changes in work that you can think of, that have occurred in your office.

RECOGNITION

So, what do we do about the nature of work and how it changes? It is all well and good to discuss the nature of change in work, and to look at it from an historical perspective, but what can you do to see it coming? How can we recognise it when work changes for us? How do we see that change?

Obviously, there is no set answer. It is a matter of learning the skill to recognise subtle changes as they occur in the workplace, and unlearning the skill of habitually ignoring those subtle changes. Lets think about this because this is very important.

Everybody is very good at ignoring subtle changes. In fact, this occurs so much that in psychology we even have name for it. It's called habituation.

HABITUATION

Habituation is a person's ability to filter out repetitive, non salient stimuli so that the brain does not waste unnecessary processing power dealing with extraneous stimuli that are not pertinent to the task at hand. Habituation is the ability for all organisms with a central nervous system to be able to get used to a constant stimulus. In English this means you don't consciously notice those things that are the same everyday. In fact, this phenomena also stops you from being consciously aware of tiny variations in those same things that are the same everyday.

With habituation you get used to it.

And this is a problem, because it stopped you from seeing the subtle changes of work. When I ask people about their work I ask them to tell me about it, and they often say "oh, it's the same old thing", but in reality no two days are exactly the same! Yet we all fall into the trap of thinking that each day is exactly the same as the previous one.

EXERCISE: lets do a thinking exercise. Try to remember how you got to work today. Think about every minute step that happened from the moment you left your front door. Look at all the detail involved in your journey. Think about all the things that you saw. Think about how you felt at the time (tired, sleepy, hungry, rushed, anxious, irritable, numb). Tell the group how you got to work today.

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Look at all of that incredible detail. When you look at that from this perspective it requires an awful lot processing power doesn't it? Yet, before I raised this issue if someone had asked you how to get to work you would have replied, "I drove or took the bus".

So habituation performs a very real function in our life, but it can also blind us to very subtle changes as well. Who really does notice if we are using too much photocopy paper? Or are we getting more phone calls with long delaying enquiries? Yet these observations are very important to any business because they determine the nature of the work that the business does.

So to be aware of, and recognise, the changing nature of our work, we need to turn off the phenomena of habituation. The way to turn off habituation is to deliberately increase your awareness about a specific task, item or process. Let me give you an example.

In your dealings with clients have you noticed any change in their behaviour? Generally, what is their pattern in their reaction to you? Are they happier? Are they more depressed or cynical? Are they grizzling more, or more demanding? What is their behaviour towards you now compared to say five years ago?

Have you noticed change in the day-to-day tasks that you have to perform? What are your day-to-day tasks like now compared to five years ago? Or one year ago? If there is a change, what brought it about? Do you understand why change has taken place?

WHY BOTHER?

Then maybe some amongst you would say, "So I have noticed some changes. So what?". And my response would be that this is probably the same thing that was said by the scribes in 1900. If you ignore warning signs, do not see changes, and do not make the necessary adjustments (read hard decisions), then that there is a very high likelihood that slowly over time, as a worker, you will become redundant. Alternatively, if you are a businessman, or businesswoman, instead of becoming redundant you will simply become - broke! As far as money is concerned redundant and broke mean the same thing!

ADAPTABILITY & FLEXIBILITY

If the nature of work is continuing to change, then we need to be able to recognise that and be flexible enough to adapt to that change as we see it. So the important skill that labour, that is us workers, is to learn how to anticipate that change in our work and reskill to meet that change. This is important because, unfortunately, failure to do so produces dire consequences!

Again history has shown us examples of all classes and classifications of workers that did not adapt to the changing needs of work and therefore could not survive. For example, as I said earlier, a scribe was a person who wrote or read letters and other correspondence for people who paid for the skill. This was a class of worker that had been in existence for some hundreds of years, yet such a class of worker no longer exists because all persons now have had to have that skill.

But let's look at a more recent example of the same thing.

Desktop Publishing when first introduced in the early Eighties was a revolution to the printing industry. It provided a computerised way of doing highly effective artwork for printing while at the same time saving time and money. If you ever used this facility in the early Eighties, you paid a handsome price. But in 20 years the situation has changed, and now your local high school student can produce the same quality of output (and some would argue same level of creativity) on their home computer. And they would charge a lot less!

So what happened? The answer is that the nature of work changed, and in doing so it created a wonderful business opportunity and shortly after removed the same business opportunity! We can identify technology as the culprit here, but that is merely one part of the equation.

EXERCISE: Form into different groups of 2. Identify what you have changed in your work style in the last 12 months. Why have you changed it? Was it the right thing to change? Was it a carefully considered decision, or an impulse? Have you changed nothing in your work style in the last 12 months? Why? Is the approach you have to work at the moment the most efficient one? Where could you improve it? Explain your answers to these questions to your partner in this exercise. We will list them on the whiteboard.

SO WHAT MAKES THE CHANGE?

There are a wide range of reasons why work changes, and I am sure that you can think of many of them, but for fun let's discuss a few really obvious ones.

TECHNOLOGY: A rather obvious choice, would you not agree? Technological change has always been a significant factor in changing the nature of work. The most obvious example is computerisation in the office. You only have to think of how quickly the typing pool vanished off the face of the planet to understand how computerisation has affected things.

SOCIAL CHANGE: even more influential than technology, social change is the single most powerful influence on the nature of work. It was only a few hundred years ago that the occupation of wigging was one of the most lucrative businesses to have. The use of wigs in the courts of Europe and Britain was extensive. The cost of a wig was enormous and an essential fashion requirement.

Legislation is a factor in social change. Examples of this are EEO, Sexual Harassment, Occupational Health and Safety, and Unfair Dismissal.

PROPAGANDA: the writing of the book, *The Female Eunuch*, was the beginning of the feminist revolution. In its day it was considered radical and risqué. Yet its publication led to a significant change in the thinking of the role of women in the workplace. This in turn, brought about a change in the nature of work. Prior to feminism, women entered the workforce temporarily before they had children and raised a family. Because of this, women were assigned menial tasks that did not require corporate knowledge and skill development was not invested in them due to the transient nature.

Now, this situation no longer applies. Career development is based on the individual rather than their sex. Although, some may argue the opposite.

ECONOMIC

Sometimes there can be economic factors that affect the nature of work. Forty years ago in the single income family was extremely common, if not the norm. Over the last 40 years, according to propaganda produced in the media, our standard of living has improved to the point that now dual income families are common if not the norm. In other words, in order to maintain standards of living, usually both partners have to work. This has brought about a change in the culture of work and expectations of work.

Sometimes the nature of work changes when we have the cumulative effect of several factors happening at once. Today we have more people working part-time than ever before. Today we have less people working and those people are working longer hours. This is the effect of economic change, social change and governmental policy.

But lets look at the Micro level. What happens on a day-to-day basis that affects your work?

EXERCISE: Form into groups of two. Discuss the following questions. What are the factors that influence your work and how you do it? Do you have any control over those factors? If yes, why? If no, why? Explain your answers to these questions to your partner in this exercise. We will list them on the whiteboard.

WORK STYLE

-Your Life Style at work!

So let's assume that I have convinced you that work is constantly changing and that there is a need for you to recognise it when it occurs at your work and therefore understand it. What is the benefit of understanding that work is changing and that we need to recognise it?

Well, let me tell you what happens when you don't understand it and you don't recognise change in the workplace.

Humans like consistency. We like having a place for everything, and everything in its place. When this does not occur it has certain effects upon us. We began to feel that we do not have control. When humans don't think they have control, in their life, in their work, in their relationship etc, they begin to experience a range of psychological phenomena.

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They begin to become stressed. They begin to feel depressed. They become sensitive to more stress. They do not cope as well. As time goes on the symptoms become more widespread. They begin to become moody. They start to become unmotivated. They start having difficulty concentrating and they become more forgetful. There is an increase in vagueness.

These symptoms spill over into every facet of their life, not just work. It affects their relationships, their dealings with their children and their ability to make decisions.

Over time, the symptoms increase in intensity and become increasingly incapacitating. In fact, psychologists even have a name for this -- it's called Burnout.

Symptoms of overstress, or Burnout are one of the single most contributing factors to sickness at work. Stress is an immunosuppressant. That is, it lowers the efficiency of your immune system enabling you to be more readily incapacitated by infection. When you are under great stress you fatigue more quickly, you catch more bugs, you don't cope as well, and you are sicker for longer.

Of course, do not forget the things I have discussed with you in the past, Health, Stress Management, and Coping. Also, don't forget the role of:

- (1) Perception
- (2) Skill Development in the work place
- (3) Skill Development from outside training

EXERCISE: Form into groups of 4. Each if you take a turn in addressing the following questions. What is your work style? What can you identify as a weakness in your lifestyle? What can you identify is a strength in your lifestyle? After the discussion list on the whiteboard what different kind of work styles you could identify and their strengths and weaknesses.

PROTESTANT WORK ETHIC: some people have a particular style of working that is dictated to them by the way they were raised. The Protestant Work Ethic is a very good example of this. Some people work to be simple contract that if they simply do their job they have fulfilled of their commitments and their job will look after them appropriately. This is a very naive approach to work.

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Of a similar vein is the ostrich approach, where you bury your head in the sand and hope for the best.

In order to be successful in your work, and to cope with changes in work as they occur, both at micro and macro level, you must be aware and forward-looking. Taking a naive approach to work in today's modern working environment is foolhardy.

WORKSTYLE VS LIFESTYLE

EXERCISE: What are the differences between your work style and your lifestyle? Why are there differences? Should there be differences? What are the common factors between your work style and your lifestyle? What does this say about you as a person? Lets discuss this in the group.

I would suggest that workstyle and lifestyle should be the same thing, just different tasks. That is, your approach should be the same. You should be the same person in what ever role you are playing. You live your lifestyle, you should live your workstyle. The important thing is to be aware of them both.

SUMMARY

The nature of work is constantly changing and that is even more so right now with the advent of technology and globalisation. Whether we like it or not it will affect our lives. How you live and the quality of your life is now determined by your work, more so now than ever before. But the rules have changed. The world is different. And now we have to see it in a new light, in our day to day life. So, be alert to your work, be flexible and adaptable, be forward looking, and proactive, and you can continue to have an enjoyable, successful and profitable working life.

EXERCISE: Tell me one thing that you learnt today. Tell me what you already knew.
QUESTIONS.