

¹The future of work in Ireland:

Looking beyond the myths toward the Big Picture

By James Woudhuysen

Paper to the 25th anniversary conference of Industrial Relations News

Dublin, Ireland, 24 February 2005

1. Certainty in the face of multiplying myths

Six years ago, the *Guardian* newspaper in London ran a substantial news report on the spread of Mad Cow disease in Europe. It described how the EU's most senior scientists had just said that, in some member states, up to 400,000 people in a national population could be exposed to infected material from a single cow. The *Guardian* did some sums and came up with the headline 'Millions at risk from CJD, say EU scientists'.ⁱ

Yet you who are gathered here today are very much alive. So, as a professional forecaster, the first lesson I have to bring to you today is this: *in the future, it will be important for you both to collect and to suspect all the forecasts you can.*

After all, the sheer range of health panics in Western society today must deserve scepticism:

An ABC of Health Panics

Alcoholism, Anorexia, Avian flu

BSE/CJD, Computer games, Disco TB, Deep Vein Thrombosis

Falling sperm counts, Gambling, Gases emitted from seats of new cars

GM foods, Kitchen sink-bowls

Moles, Mobile phones and masts

Obesity, Orthorexia, Passive Smoking

Phthalates in rubber ducks, the Pill, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, too much or too little Vitamin C

Panics apply not just to physical health, but to the mental sort, too. In January 2005, the *Harvard Business Review* devoted a special issue to the sorely-neglected subject of 'Managing yourself'.ⁱⁱ There, Edward Hallowell, founder of the Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health, Massachusetts, reminded readers that Attention Deficit Disorder afflicted one in every 20 Americans. He went on to argue that, in the workplace, Attention Deficit Trait (ADT), symptomatised by 'distractibility, inner frenzy and impatience' and caused by overwork, brain overload and IT, was now of 'epidemic' proportions.

'Addicted to speed, we demand it even when we can't possibly go faster... As the human brain struggles to keep up, it falters and then falls into the world of ADT....

'Employees underachieve, create clutter, cut corners, make careless mistakes, and squander their brainpower. As demands continue to increase, a toxic, high-pressure environment leads to high rates of employee illness and turnover.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Do we believe the hallowed doctrine of Hallowell – or is he just another quack, peddling his own mythoe?

2. Resist the medicalisation of work

Like the traffic jam, Hallowell says, ADT is ‘an artifact of modern life’, and it makes our minds ‘fill with noise’. He certainly believes that *psychosis is intrinsic to the modern work process*. And we can be certain that if this is the case, no workplace should ever be free of third-party experts in the management of mental health at work.

Another thing is certain, too. Hallowell and others like him show that our old friend, a ‘holistic’ perspective on both body and mind, is more in vogue, perhaps, than at any time since the Romans. Informal biweekly buffets and espresso bars are useful, we learn, because *food* is ‘one of life’s great connectors’. Hallowell also has recommendations on sleep, diet, exercise, vitamins, clearing your desk, not working in physical isolation, and gymnasia. There is room, he holds, for ‘unlimited sick days; and much more’.

In Ireland, too, we find that the holistic approach to body and mind is the dominant one. As usual, *Industrial Relations News* put its finger on the subject. In an interview with Tony Killeen, Minister of Labour Affairs, *IRN* pointed out:

‘Increasingly, stress in the workplace is viewed as a health and safety issue, mental or emotional damage being often viewed as seriously as physical hurt’.^{iv}

Killeen himself observed that Ireland’s Task Force on Bullying is ‘operating in parallel with its Health & Safety legislation’.^v That’s important, for Ireland’s new Safety Health & Welfare at Work Bill provides for on the spot fines, for maximum fines of up to €3m, and for up to two years’ imprisonment.^{vi}

So, having warned about forecasts, let me make a second one. *You will need to resist the growing medicalisation of the Irish workplace. A focus on the workplace as an arena for ‘wellness’ means also a focus on it as an arena for risk and fear. Multiplying myths about the damage done to individuals will take precedence over certainties. That will do the cause of productivity and innovation no good. It will also not help employees.*

Thankfully, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso has promised to lay the accent on jobs, growth, and R&D, rather than on social policy and the environment.^{vii} Happily, too, Ireland’s National Centre for Partnership and Performance, in its call for a comprehensive national innovation system, has put in a word for new technology – even if it may, in practice, prefer to concentrate on the more touchy-feely domains of training and development, organisational re-structuring, and work design.^{viii}

There is no need to panic, yet, about the spread of medical panics in the workplace. But one way to act upon my forecast when you are back in the office is to draw up tables, for yourself, of scores for real risks vs perceived risks, to body and soul, in your workplace.

Real risks vs perceived risks: scores out of 10

Risk	Perceived significance	Real significance
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Alcoholism	4	2
Attention Deficit Trait	5	1
Back pain	3	2
Bullying	8	2
Flooding	4	1
Harassment	8	3
Management directionlessness	4	9

Obviously you can contest the scores I have arbitrarily given. To stay ahead, I have also added a natural disaster – flooding – to my list. Naturally, too, you should add your own final column outlining what you should do in the event that perceptions outrun realities, or in the event of a real and likely incident. What is important is the difference between real risk, and perceptions of risk.

Grasp that, and a whole lot of counter-intuitive actions follow.

3. Political correctness – or leadership, innovation and productivity?

As I hinted, the special issue of the *Harvard Business Review* devoted to ‘Managing yourself’ really is rather special. For perhaps what it, and the mood of tomorrow, should really be called is the Fake Rise and Real Fall of the Self. A lot of fuss is made, no doubt in Ireland too, about political correctness at work. But behind the occasional over-the-top incident, political correctness in the workplace has as its substance the relentless diminution of the individual, autonomous, innovative Subject.

As early as 1980, the American leadership guru John Kotter began to redefine the Self in the workplace by co-inventing what is now a familiar theme: ‘how to manage your manager’. Kotter’s emphasis was on human *fallibility* of bosses. Rightly protesting that ‘we are not referring to political manoeuvring or apple-polishing’, he warned against being too stropky (‘counterdependent’) or compliant (‘overdependent’) in relation to your boss. Most significantly, he argued that an inability to manage one’s boss was ‘just as strong’ an error as an inability to manage a subordinate. And his argument is reprinted in January’s *Review*.^{ix}

Not for the first time, we find here a liberal relativism that looks as if it will empower us, but turns out to do nobody any favours.

First: of course people are fallible. *But, too often, relentlessly dwelling on faults and character defects, which is what our culture likes to do today, turns potential innovators into damaged victims in need of therapy.*

Second, in the doctrine that staff errors with managers are as significant as manager errors with staff, we find *a complete denial of the principle of leadership*. In Britain we know quite a lot about abdications of leadership. Make sure you don’t follow our example!

Third, if you were to adopt Kotter’s advice to any serious degree, your *staff would have to drop doing other, often vital things in favour of the less vital task of massage*. Here they would spend time each day massaging – ‘managing’ – their boss. Is that what you want?

I put the question boldly not because there is no such thing as an impossible boss. There is such a thing, and no doubt, as Kotter would recommend, he needs a bit of managing. But we also know from the idea of *displacement activities* that it is often an easier option to attend to a colleague’s fallibilities, or one’s own, than to get out into the hurly burly of the real world and change it for the better.

Take the myth that *self-esteem* is really important to the workplace. Well: today’s burgeoning searches for personal growth and self-esteem might look inviting. But in the end Marcus Aurelius and his quest for *achievements* might prove a more worthwhile option – as well as the only one likely to build genuinely durable self-esteem. To pursue self-esteem on its own account, to seek counselling and support for that pursuit – the results of all this may be evanescent. You would spend your life in third-party, expert, counselling institutions. That would distract you from the task of getting on with doing good work.

No less a figure than Peter Drucker proposed lots of displacement activities in 1999.^x Modishly invoking many different ways of learning, he sharply distinguished between listener and reader managers, insisting

that, to improve oneself, one should follow John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola in conducting ‘feedback analysis’ – measuring one’s performance, and often one’s performance under *stress*.

So one must, it appears, both manage one’s manager and track one’s own performance against expectations. And among Key Performance Indicators here, Drucker felt that *manners* were very important. However, ‘the ultimate test’ for Drucker in 1999 – and for all of your organisations, unless you are careful, tomorrow – will be *values and ethics*.

Not leadership, innovation or productivity, but values and ethics. Losing the plot, Drucker went on to propose that, to manage your executive life after the age of 45, you should, *long before you turn 45, plan to do stuff very different from the work in front of you*. Manual labourers would most likely retire exhausted, but knowledge workers got *bored* in later life. Everyone, anyway, was for Drucker always subject to *serious setbacks in life or work*; so to be *respected*, one must manage oneself by preparing a different career, or a parallel, usually non-profit one, or a role as a non-profit ‘social entrepreneur’.

Instead of doing real work, executives should track their values and ethics. And well before they are 45, they should spend time planning to diversify their conventional career. Yet in fact all this amounts to little more than daydreaming, and the amassing of *yet more checklists of massages to give to oneself*. It is a species of what the Kent sociologist Frank Furedi calls *therapy culture*.^{xi} It absorbs far too much time at work. So my third forecast/recommendation is simple: *prepare for a New Age Ireland, by getting a rationalist grip on what not to do at work*.

Do not follow INSEAD’s Herminia Ibarra. She wants you to develop Narratives at work. ‘Creating and telling a story that resonates’, she and a colleague attest, ‘helps us believe in ourselves’.^{xii}

Do not pretend to your workforce that you can end their alienation at work through playful activities there. Nor will play magically unleash creativity as a cut-price alternative to solid investments in R&D. Remember, too, that it is successful projects that build teams, not play. Your workers need more pay, not more play.

Do not measure things obsessively. Sure, measure not just project implementation, but also graduate retention. But you will never be able to measure your organisation’s much-noised ‘human capital’.

What about managing diversity? No doubt, because of globalisation, a more diverse workforce is coming to Ireland. Yet I find it hard to get too excited about other nationalities in Ireland – a total of 224,000 in 2002, against a national total of 3,585,000, or just 6.25 per cent.^{xiii} There is some diversity to be had in gender issues – indeed, a study of US multinationals in Ireland found that, in contrast to practice in the US, gender issues were more prominent than ethnic ones.^{xiv} For Dublin Bus, which has 500 non-Irish nationals working its 364-day, 24-hour service, religious holidays and fasts clearly need accommodating.^{xv} Yet it is certainly debatable whether the Central Statistical Office’s recent *Population and labour force projections* really do mean, as they seem to imply, that a growing dependency ratio after 2016 is a big problem, and immigration the main solution.^{xvi} Whatever happened, in all the fear of a demographic timebomb, to old-fashioned innovation and productivity? Couldn’t they help Ireland out?^{xvii}

No doubt a more diverse workforce will lead you more often to try to convey the ever-more diverse rewards available to employees – from banking services to help doing the shopping.^{xviii} However, the

more you problematise work as ‘work-life balance’, and the more you try to pamper your employees’ Selves as a consequence, then the more your employees may become supplicant, spoilt children. The more you follow Britain’s Prince Charles, defender of the *faiths*, in the plural, and the more you celebrate workplace togetherness, teamwork and diversity, the more you may lose strategic direction. Indeed, diversity policies, like those of multiculturalism, can bring the opposite of what is intended. Can we really look forward to unity among Ireland’s 96,000 health workers when Gerard Barry, chief executive of the Health Services Employers’ Agency, said that his Equal Opportunities and Accommodating Diversity Training package would enable employers to ‘harness differences’ among their staff? ^{xix}

So don’t treat workers as infants who need stroking and telling that they’re special. Treat them as grown-ups who get bored only when there is no sense of leadership about. The Self needs to be able stand up for itself, not be condescended to and mollycoddled.

You need to develop a continual focus on productivity – not so much in the sense of cutting costs, as in being agile enough to anticipate and make a pre-emptive strike on opportunities. ^{xx} So you should work with the IT department and develop killer intranets, complete with programmes of E-learning that are never dumbed down. Don’t measure the results! Don’t issue certificates of self-worth! Just write some great content, and see if it builds a word-of-mouth reputation – the only one that counts.

4. HR exemplars and the role of IT

Which organisations use IT well in the service of better workplace practice?

If you look at *Microsoft*, and go to the ‘About Microsoft’ section of the software giant’s website, you will find that this non-union American multinational, renowned for its rapaciousness, is very much into diversity, corporate citizenship, corporate mission and corporate values. Its site is much less concerned, I fear, with how Microsoft uses IT in Microsoft offices.^{xxi} The company’s ‘Careers’ section is in many ways exemplary, but its careers newsletters, like entries on its laboratory-like Centre for Information Work, are out of date. The same is true of the international Information Work Productivity Council, which, along with Cisco, HP, Intel, SAP and Xerox, Microsoft helped found.^{xxii}

I like Microsoft. These defects are a pity, for we cannot doubt that IT firms like it are pretty good at keeping very different kinds of skilled people reasonably happy. They also know what IT *can't* do, which – especially in Britain’s public sector! – is a thing worth knowing. And IT firms should do a much better job than they do in explaining the benefits of IT at work. Microsoft UK, for instance, has creditably arranged for employees’ incoming calls to be routed to wherever they may be in any particular building.

Nokia’s HR practices also reveal much. The Finnish firm cares a lot about work-life balance, health, and the Nokia Way of working. Still, on its website there is a useful public discussion of what it calls ‘performance based rewarding’.

Nokia’s internal communications really impress. *Nokia News Service* is its daily Internet bulletin on global, business and local news from around Nokia. Readers are able to customise and personalise news to suit their interests and needs by business area, function or geographical location.^{xxiii} But the firm also takes hard copy communications seriously. To reach employees, it publishes more than 50,000 copies of its *Nokia People* magazine – eight times a year, and in English, Finnish, Chinese and German.

You do not have to be in the IT sector, however, to use IT to good effect with your employees. You can be in manufacturing. Take, for example, *Glenmorangie*, a remote Scots distiller, in shifts, of pure malt whiskies. It set up a centre for *e-learning* in August 2002, and by the summer of 2004 had put about 250 of its 340 employees through compulsory, one-hour-a-week courses, conducted in work time, in fields such as customer care – as well as allowing them to do courses of their choosing during their own time. Cost: about €35 a completed course, courtesy of provider Thompson NetG, as against perhaps €85 for a course completed through conventional, non-electronic methods.

Accidents at work dropped by 38 per cent. Productivity rose. Then, in October 2004, LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton paid £300m for *Glenmorangie* – nearly \$1m per employee. The French giant feels so confident about its purchase, it plans to double the firm’s profit in the next few years – by being agile enough to attack Asian and US markets.

Let’s take a different example: *Adecco*, the French employment services agency. It boasts a great website – a website that does not so much sing the praises of Adecco, as contribute genuinely educational, third-party comment and analysis on the issues facing its industry. In other words, Adecco uses IT to establish *thought leadership*. It puts IT to work not for its own sake, as a *cult*, but in the service of enlightening content.^{xxiv}

Altogether, my fourth forecast/recommendation is that, *in the future, you will need to experiment more with IT – whatever sector you're in.*

Experiment with telework. Experiment with Voice over Internet Protocols (VoIP) – cheap, long-distance, one-to-one voice calls, with better and better sound quality. And prepare for global agility by taking a look at instant videoconferencing, using simple PCs, over Internet Protocols. Through links to speech applications such as Microsoft Speech Server 2004, videoconferencing could help the productivity of the global, agile enterprise. It will not be long before we all get used to the simultaneous, secure, multiplayer use of voice, instant messages, videoconferencing and data over IP.^{xxv}

In the future, premium, by-the-minute rates for voice and video will go. Instead, organisations will pay just €35 a PC user a month to have up to 100-200 users on one call, with screens that show six faces at once. Staff without videocams will be able to call in for free by voice.

These services are coming. Prepare for them!

5. The models muddle

Ireland, it has been put to me, is more influenced by the relationships it has with America and Britain than by its relationships to continental Europe. No doubt this is true. But as we know, trade unions are more influential in Ireland than in Britain – at least they have a seat at the table in Ireland.

More importantly, the whole discussion about the relevance of the ‘US model’ to Ireland, as against the so-called ‘European model’, misses the point that I have tried to make about changing, yet often unnoticed perceptions of the Self. New estimates of the Self operate right across the West. They pay no regard to ‘models’. Moreover, 22 years after Richard Pascale and Anthony Athos first popularised what they felt was the remarkable distinctiveness of Japanese management, the West’s new etiquette has begun to operate in Japan too.^{xxvi} There, legislation is now in place to protect whistleblowers. In 2003, too, it was decreed that that companies should offer equality in paternity as well as maternity leave.

Obviously, with the diminished Self at work, there are national differences in form: few Japanese fathers, for instance, have so far chosen to take time off work for parenting. But even in George Bush’s oh-so-unregulated US, there are informal codes of conduct on workplace behaviour, not firing people by email, and all that. You may remember that, before 9-11, the CIA itself had succumbed to *angst* about its unfairness to homosexuals. The CIA felt it wasn’t pro-gay enough!

The compassion in George Bush’s compassionate conservatism is out there among US employers. Indeed, it was California and Massachusetts that first elaborated therapeutic visions of the Self at work, not Europe. It was those highly individualistic places that were first to pioneer the whole religion of teams.

If I have correctly caught his drift from the blurb accompanying this conference, Martin King is right. The marketisation of Irish workplace practice has not meant and will not mean ‘voluntarism’ between employers’ and employees’ organisations. Rather, it will mean something more like Kevin Duffy’s ‘explosion’ of legislation and regulation. It means next month’s Information and Consultation of Employees Bill, version enactment of the 2002 EU Directive on the same subject.^{xxvii}

These changes do not represent narrowly economic matters, as our treatment of the Self shows. If the Self is more and more apprehended as inherently vulnerable, then third-party intervention will more and more be the rule – even in Ireland’s 80 per cent un-unionised private sector.

Prepare for that intervention properly, ladies and gentlemen. Develop your IT so that it is agile enough to help you anticipate and deal with regulation. Do these things, and you can look forward to the next 25 years with optimism, not fear.

i James Meikle, ‘Millions at risk from CJD, say EU scientists’, *The Guardian*, 8 January 1999.

ii ‘Managing yourself’, special issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005.

iii Edward Hallowell, ‘Overloaded circuits: why smart people underperform’, *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005.

iv Kyran Fitzgerald, interview with Tony Killeen, *Industrial Relations News*, 18 November 2004.

v Quoted in Kyran Fitzgerald, interview with Tony Killeen, *Industrial Relations News*, 18 November 2004.

vi Kyran Fitzgerald, interview with Tony Killeen, *Industrial Relations News*, 18 November 2004.

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- vii See Andrew Gowers and George Parker, interview with José Manuel Barroso, *Financial Times*, 2 February 2005.
- viii Tony Dobbins, 'Partnership centre wants to boost workplace innovation', *European industrial relations observatory on-line*, 26 November 2004, and on www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2004/11/feature/ie0411203f.html
- ix John J Gabarro and John P Kotter, 'Why smart people underperform', *Harvard Business Review* [1980], January 2005.
- x Peter Drucker, *Management challenges for the 21st century*, HarperCollins, 1999.
- xi Frank Furedi, *Therapy culture: cultivating vulnerability in an uncertain age*, Routledge, 2003.
- xii Herminia Ibarra and Kent Lineback, 'What's your story?', *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005.
- xiii Central Statistical Office, 'Persons, males and females, usually resident and present in the State on Census night classified by nationality 2002', on www.cso.ie/statistics/persclassbynationality2002.htm
- xiv Patrick Gunnigle, David G Collings, Michael J Morley, Catherine McAvinue, Anne OíCallaghan and Deirdre Shore, *US multinationals and human resource management in Ireland: towards a qualitative agenda*, Working Paper, University of Limerick, 2003, and on www.ul.ie/business/research/USMNC.pdf
- xv Kyran Fitzgerald, 'Diversity now fact of life at Dublin Bus', *Industrial Relations News*, 21 October 2004.
- xvi Central Statistical Office, *Population and labour force projections 2006-2036*, 2004, and on www.cso.ie/releasespublications/pr_pop.htm
- xvii Phil Mullan, *The imaginary timebomb: why an ageing population is not a social problem*, I B Tauris, 1999.
- xviii See Sarah Murray, 'A neat package of choice and flexibility', *Understanding people management*, *Financial Times* supplement, 17 June 2004, pp4-5.
- xix Quoted in Brian Sheehan, 'Health service – new equal opportunities & diversity initiative', *Industrial Relations News*, 20 March 2003.
- xx On agility, see for example James Woudhuysen, *The globalisation of UK manufacturing and services, 2004-24: toward the agile economy*, UK Trade and Investment, July 2004. See www.invest.uktradeinvest.gov.uk/media/feature_articles.cfm?action=viewArt&artID=109
- xxi See www.microsoft.com/mscorp/default.msp
- xxii See <http://iwproductivity.org/>
- xxiii See www.nokia.com
- xxiv Go to www.adecco.com/Channels/adecco/human+resources/default1.asp. On the importance of content in IT, see James Woudhuysen, *Cult IT*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1999.
- xxv See James Woudhuysen, 'IP-Technik lässt auf eine gute Zukunft hoffen', *testticker.de*, and on www.vnu.de/testticker/netzwerk/article.asp?ArticleID=20040624013&Ref=testticker
- xxvi R T Pascale and A G Athos, *The art of Japanese management*, Penguin, 1983.
- xxvii Tony Dobbins, 'Consultation law already raising contentious issues', *Industrial Relations News*, 10 February 2005. For a useful overview of labour market trends in Ireland, see also Tony Dobbins, 'Labour

market challenges debated at Labour Relations Commission forum', *European industrial relations observatory on-line*, 22 December 2004, and on www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2004/12/feature/ie0412203f.html