

High Touch

She stood next to me while I awkwardly handled the scissors. First Miss Waters watched to see how I managed them on my own. They were not the same type of scissors my mother used. Instead of being large, they were closer to the size of my hands. That was pretty neat at first glance.

But they didn't seem to be very well made. They were very flimsy, actually. They had a little rivet in the middle where the blades rotated that was a bit wobbly. The blades tended to separate and, instead of cutting the paper, just wedged the paper between them. My mother's scissors were hefty and precision engineered. These scissors were very lightweight by comparison. And what was the deal with the rounded front end? How was I going to ram through the paper to cut out large holes?

She then came to me and formed the fingers of my right hand into the finger holes of the scissors. She held my left hand as I held the orange construction paper and pulled the paper tight against the blade. She had me put pressure on the scissors to cut. More pressure than I had to use with my mother's well engineered, heavy duty, precision blades. Together we cut out a pumpkin. Cool! Then another. Cool! Soon, I could cut them out by myself. Way cool!

When we try out new skills, we all need reassurance. Do you remember the days when your father or uncle or an older friend taught you how to ride a bike? How about the first time you caught a baseball or swung a bat? How did you do?

None of us is an instant expert. When we were young, we weren't expected to be. All of us fell down or missed the ball more than once. If we were lucky we had someone to work with us, to encourage us, and to be patient with us.

My father spent endless hours playing catch with me. At the time, I was sure he had better things he could be doing. Only when I became a father myself did I understand that there wasn't anything more important he could be doing. He did it because I needed it and asked him for help.

Why is it different in the eBusiness world? We all seem to want to be seen as experts. We don't want to show how little we know. We pride ourselves in being professionals. Yet, in our day-to-day activities, we mostly do things that don't hone our professional skills. We fill out forms and schedules, revise plans, and make proposals. As companies, in our short horizon thinking, we invest the minimal amount. And it shows.

Profitability, being measured as a ratio of income against expense, leads us to think in terms of getting profitable in the fastest way possible and not the best possible way. It never considers the long haul. It never considers that we could leap frog someone else. It doesn't easily think in terms of profitability for many quarters in a row.

The amount we need to learn in eBusiness is incredible. We face either a barrage of misinformation or a desert of non-information. So how do we learn? We get conflicting information and skewed viewpoints. For example, to speed up websites many vendors have pushed for placing business rules and master data out at the front end (on the website). This is effective in the one objective of speed. It is ineffective when considering quality and consistency that comes with an integrated solution. It introduces other factors that are equally important, such as new errors based on inconsistent data and complexity based on the need for replication of data. You certainly are not going to get real downside information from the vendor who has a vested interest in you seeing only one part of the problem. You only get those truths from others who have dealt with the issues and understood the tradeoffs. That gives us a depth of information and an independence that provides balance in our evaluations.

We need to get outside our own four walls to see what is happening in the world. When did we begin considering training and research as a necessary evil? We tend to have a skewed view of both that is directly portioned to its cost. The lowest cost training typically is "on the job" training. If we support that activity with adequate time and resources, it can be of great benefit. If we set aside adequate time to develop

training materials, orient mentors, and demonstrate management support, it can be very effective. It is only effective, however, when someone in your company has 1) a high level of expertise, 2) an ability to train others, 3) a love for passing along knowledge, and 4) management support, demonstrated in a willingness to commit the time, resources, and, in the short term, degradation of performance that will be necessary. All four are critical.

Usually “on the job” training is an excuse for not doing things correctly, either in planning or executing our training plans. On the job training becomes “catch as catch can” training.

Too bad we don't measure training against its value. We don't set up adequate or accurate measures of the effectiveness of training. Too frequently training is considered a luxury, treated as a non-essential. Too much training is considered a waste, but how do we know how much is enough? Too little training is somehow considered a prudent investment! Do we value just allowing employees the time to learn things that are not obviously connected? It happens, but it is rare. Do we fly them off to conferences and seminars without having done a highly detailed business case? Not normally.

At my company, we expect all employees to get forty hours of training, yet we count things like “learned to use the phone system” or “training on how our benefits package works.” All these things are important to know, but they will hardly create a sustainable, competitive advantage using eBusiness. And there is so much to be learned.

Only the wise set aside their egos and ask for help. I am expected to be an expert in my field. After all, doesn't my company pay me to bring forward the right expertise in my niche? However, my field is shifting so dramatically and so quickly that what I learn today may not be relevant tomorrow.

It is like a doctor a few years out of medical school. If he hasn't stayed engaged in learning, in a few years he isn't practicing the latest in medicine. Part of this is setting aside our need to be perceived as the expert and asking for help.

I used to work in a library. I learned wonderful things, but the best skill I learned was in knowing how to get information I need. This has served me well in eBusiness.

As the Internet has become a pervasion business tool, it has brought with it a mixed blessing...a plethora of information consisting of a wealth of good information and the curse of a similar volume of bad information. The key is in understanding “which is which.”

Part of that understanding is instinct and part of it is determining who can guide you. Generally, if it seems too good to be true, it is. I have had numerous occasions where people, generally in sales, have told me the dramatic savings I could achieve with their products or services, yet they haven’t taken the time to understand my business drivers or costs. They haven’t understood my issues before trying to solve my problems. They haven’t been watchful or patient to understand where I needed help. I have also had wise counsel on how to look at problems and understand the direction the world is going. These have been extremely valuable, but, unfortunately, also rare.

We need to set low expectations of ourselves as we learn skills or use new tools. There can be multiple levels of low expectations for us. We need to clearly anticipate and give ourselves adequate time for learning new things. Frequently we try to learn new skills while we keep the rest of our job running. This doesn’t do justice to either the new area or the old job. So plan for adequate time and attention; some of this is setting expectations with our bosses and some is setting expectations for ourselves. Expect that there will be two elements of any training-- the more formal component and the time needed to apply what you have learned to real life situations. This may not be particularly easy with eBusiness activities.

I attended classes about four years ago on Internet EDI. This was driven by a number of customer inquiries and my general interest in the subject. Having taken the training, I immediately did an assessment of what we would need to do to build this capability. Since that time I haven’t done much directly with what I learned because interest has waned. Ideally, I would have had one or more potential projects “in the pipeline” ahead of the trainings so I could have applied the training with the “doing.” This doesn’t mean the training was a total loss as I have been able to apply what I have learned to other aspects of eBusiness. What I learned that could be applied elsewhere had nothing to do with technology; it had everything to do with human nature.

We need to set low expectations of rookies. That isn't to say we set low expectations on the quality of their work nor the effort they put into their training. It is that we set low expectations on how quickly and how much they can learn in a particular span of time. We shouldn't assume that they would come back from a seminar or class and have the answers. We should expect that they would come back with new levels of inquisitiveness and new sources for research and answers. A diamond is not created by occasional pressure; it takes constant and consistent pressure. The same applies for rookies to eBusiness. Expect slow, but continual progress. This includes how we deal with our customers and suppliers.

Managers of B2B organization need to offer help, provide "space," and provide "blocking" where necessary. We need to learn the right level of involvement with others. The parable of "giving someone a fish" versus "teaching someone to fish" needs to be paramount in my mind.

We need to be models of patience with those who work for us and for those we mentor. But we also shouldn't confuse patience with the earnest desire to improve and accomplish.

All B2B workers need to seek help from those more experienced, both within and outside their organizations. They need to be patient with themselves and other they encounter. Their mindset needs to be: "We are all in this together." That extends out to our trading partners as well as our co-workers.

Fundamentally, we need to put on "high tough" thoughtware. We need to thinking "How can I help others along?" That's the way Miss Waters did it. She waited patiently to see how she could help. Then she nurtured us along until we could successfully handled things on our own. She had the heart to help us. High touch was her focus.

Patience is a necessary ingredient of genius. - Benjamin, Earl of Beaconsfield Disraeli (1804–1881)



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