

Practice Makes Perfect

I guess I was the typical boy in kindergarten. I was lazy and there was nothing that couldn't distract me.

Miss Waters gave each of us "dittos" on which to draw. In those days the copier was still a long way from being introduced into the schoolhouse. These copies, which came out of some long forgotten, God-forsaken copying process, smelled funny and produced purple lines on a sheet of white paper. Really they were just outlines of pictures. They would have things on them like a boy wearing a striped shirt and swinging a baseball bat with a dog running alongside.

I took my sheet of paper and scribbled on it with blue crayon. I ran the crayon cross the page as fast and as furiously as I could. When the page was mostly all blue, I admired my work and went on to some distraction.

Scribbling did serve a purpose. We learned to hold a pencil from holding crayons. We wrapped our fingers around it in the same way. We rested it between our thumbs and index fingers in the same way. We learned not to put too much pressure on the crayon to assure that it would not break, and later we did the same with our pencils. When we transitioned to pencils, we had tried out many of the skills already.

But Miss Waters said to me, "Don't you want to color a pretty picture?"

What? Was she talking to me? Was she implying this wasn't a pretty picture? What was wrong with her? It obviously was some kid playing baseball and it was Dodger blue. What could be prettier than that? What could be more "baseball" than that?

She explained that it would be better if the dog weren't blue and the bat weren't blue and the grass weren't blue. That if I colored each item in the picture with its appropriate color, the scene would be more realistic and more beautiful.

Okay. I could see her point. She gave me a second sheet and I scribbled each item on the page with its appropriate color. I would rummage through the cigar box of crayons and select one that I liked. I ran the crayon across each item as fast and as furiously as I could. This was a bit harder, but it was fun selecting an interesting color.

When the page was nearly done, I admired my work. I was thinking to myself the dog is black, the bat is brown, and the grass is green. Perfect. Has there ever been any more realistic and beautiful ditto? It is time to go on to another distraction.

But Miss Waters handed me a third ditto and said, "Now try staying within the lines." She pointed out how, when I colored the stripes on the shirt for example, the orange color got on the boy's arms and face and grass.

Okay. I could see her point. I tried it. Hey, it was hard work. It took physical skills, dexterity, and determination to learn to color between the lines. It also took a great deal of concentration (and I didn't have much to spare). Most of all, it took a lot of practice.

We don't think of it as such, but coloring between the lines was a skill we had to learn. It was bringing multiple abilities together to do something new. Like anything we need to learn or seek to do, it starts with determination.

You have to "want it." This is the starting point of any eBusiness program. This goes far beyond the lip service we hear at so many companies. This is not management pontificating the eBusiness "phrase of the day." This is not pacifying someone's performance expectations that your company have some eBusiness project.

In B2B, it is not a matter of having options; it is a matter of which options to pick. It is making a conscious decision concerning what to develop and what to implement. You have to determine "why" you need to do something, not just what to do. It is in discovering why you are desperate for B2B that you sow the seeds of success.

In my company, we identified more than 200 projects in eBusiness when we surveyed activities around the globe. In a world where we want to foster

entrepreneurship and experimentation, this may not sound bad. However, these are non-connected, disparate efforts that bleed away resources and don't leverage our learning. It is hard enough to marshal the right talent and abilities, but doing so without some corporate-wide benefit was throwing away money.

We hadn't asked ourselves the foundational questions that we needed to know for each project: "Why do we want this?" and "What are the business benefits these projects will derive?" and "What were the root causes that need to be ferreted out, instead of doing these specific projects?"

To be more than just marginally successful with B2B, you have to want it so badly you can taste it. They say that the best reengineering projects are those focused on the nearly hopeless causes. There is a similar truth to that with B2B.

You need to know who you are and what you are about. eBusiness is table stakes. Using eBusiness to take out cost is not.

However, typically, managers believe eBusiness is mostly about taking out cost. They may say otherwise, but the conversation always draws back to cost. In fact, eBusiness is about "faster, better, cheaper." My experience has been that if you go after "faster and better," reduced cost will take care of itself. Usually, far more cost is taken out than if you go after "cheaper" as the principle objective.

It is not surprising that most companies try to use B2B to cut cost. But unless your culture is driven by operational excellence, these efforts will only be marginally successful. You may also cut your own throat by giving a conflicting corporate message.

If your company is a product leader, be a product leader with B2B.

If you are a customer-intimate company, use B2B to be customer-intimate.

If your company's focus is on operational excellence, so be it. By definition, you have to be the low-cost model. Work on return on investment, nearly (but not quite) at the exclusion of product and customer focus.

Our corporate mindsets prevent us from viewing the world from other angles. This contradiction plays out in front of our customers' eyes in B2B. Don't try to make yourself, or your company, something you are not. It brings to mind the adage about not trying to teach a pig to sing; it doesn't sound good and it aggravates the pig.

My company is paranoid (it's okay; most companies are). Some days we think of ourselves as product leaders and talk about the price premium our products can command. Then we turn around and drive out research and development that would have kept us as a product leader. The next day we pat ourselves on the back on the costs we have driven out and make no correlation to the market share we are losing. This also prevents us from presenting a crisp message to the marketplace.

You also need to know your position in the world. You need to understand your competition and where they are situated in their B2B developments. Use that understanding to define what you will be and how you will position yourself.

It takes perseverance and determination. B2B projects can be hair-raising. There will be setbacks. Count on it. There will be things you hadn't considered. Don't worry about it. Your assumptions and estimates will be wrong. Deal with it.

What gets you through these difficult times?

- Remembering that you still “want it so bad you can taste it.”
- Remembering how desperately your company needs this.
- Remembering how you can knock your market on its ear.
- Remembering you are bigger than the problems before you.

You need to focus, not fidget. Concentrate on the task at hand. Set the dates of your project *today*. Take no excuses, from yourself or others, concerning why the dates cannot be met. Having said that, you also need to balance this with a realistic view of what can be accomplished during any particular phase. When in doubt, cut it down. Divide, divide, and divide. Break projects that cannot be completed in 120 days into small, deliverable chunks of functionality. Maybe your first project is just to investigate something you don't know. Maybe your first project is to get the right management commitment.

Plan for a series of projects. Plan to re-do a good portion of your work.

Practice Makes Perfect. Think in terms of many short-term projects. Then think of these projects as “warm-ups” to what you really want to accomplish. They are practice sessions for what you want to be. These should be 90 to 120 day projects from start to finish. Don't worry about whether the functionality you are going to deliver is too small. It is. You can deal with it in the next project, if it is relevant at that point. You may

not, because you may have learned something different than you had expected with your first project.

Don't over-design, spending so much time getting everything so perfectly laid out on paper that you shorten development time. Time-box and "crunch" your design. Get the essentials covered, but don't kill off your project before the design gets passed over to the programmers. Use an interactive process between the designers and programmers to work out voids in your design.

Take your first project and do something small. Learn from it. Take your next project and build upon what you have done and what you have learned.

My father used to say "Do something, even if it's wrong." Practice is about doing *something*. Do what you think is right, and when it isn't, don't fret-- learn from it. My boss once wrote to me, "You delivered exactly what the business units asked for and they immediately wanted to change it. How did that make you feel?" I wrote back, "Par for the course."

Patiently accept the fact that you will have to do everything multiple times for two reasons: first, to clean up what functionality you may have missed and, second, to keep your web site fresh.

I never think of B2B functionality as being "done." It is always in the process of getting to where I want it to be.

Just keep practicing and keep getting better.

Practice is the best of all instructors - Publius Syrus (42 B.C.)



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