

Part One

Impact of Technology

Background

When someone talks to us about the impact of technology on people, our expectations are that they will discuss negative impacts. We have adopted technology to increase productivity, reduce routine repetitive workloads and create the leisure society. Our preoccupations are with cost over-runs, systems that don't work, low employee morale and union concerns. Clearly something is wrong. We have adopted technology without learning how to manage it.

Organizations still exist for many of the same reasons for which they were created. They are not necessarily doing exactly the same work and they probably are not doing it the same way. Planning systems are different, communications have been altered, different people with different skills are running things, and decisions have new factors to be considered.

There is a need to define and communicate where the organization is going, who the clients of the systems are and what their needs are. This results in systems that are in tune with the direction the organization is going; clients whose needs are being met; and managers and employees who can use technology as an effective tool.

Care must be taken to avoid false assumptions about the technology replacing people, creating savings in time and money, or people accepting the technology without question. Too often projects are justified on the basis of savings that do not really exist. There is sometimes an optimism that does not deal realistically with the need systems can create for people with different types of skills, or the amount of training that may be required for current employees. There is also a reluctance to take the time to involve people in the project which may result in a greater degree of resistance to change.

In all the changes that take place, managers may feel like the proverbial meat in the sandwich. They must deal with their own reactions to the technology, deal with other peoples reactions to the technology, manage the technology and even help create the systems. If managers feel like the meat in the sandwich, employees often feel like the crust. They often feel helpless, overlooked, and threatened. They are sometimes not given any input into the design or implementation of systems. At worst, they are not even consulted on the reorganization of their own work space. They become part of the machinery.

Strategic Solutions

In today's period of restraint, we may believe we do not have the money or the skilled people to solve all of the problems. This is not true. First of all, we cannot afford to leave the problems to grow. Second, by using resources strategically through the identification and sharing of expertise, we may be able to help one another to solve many of the problems.

External Affairs and International Trade Canada is taking action to manage the expanding use of technology in the Department by establishing Guiding Principles and a Management Strategy for People that will recognize and respect people.