

Equality through e-Quality

In my first article for xxxxxx, entitled *A Crystal Ball: The future of management in the 21st Century*, I set out to identify some of the major influences on businesses in the new century. The list included greater stakeholder involvement, adaptation of the science of complexity to businesses, integration and revision of standards such as ISO9000 and ISO14000, global adoption of models of business excellence, etc. I also identified two that, at first glance, are not obviously related – diversity and technology. In this article I want to show how one is enabling the other.

The Economics of Diversity

We are all different. How many of us believe this? If we do, how do our business processes reflect diversity? For several years I worked in the UK developing a model for achieving equality within organizations called The Equal Opportunities Quality Framework. It was based on the European Foundation for Quality Management's Business Excellence Model. We started from the premise that diversity makes good business sense. We had many well-documented case studies. The Automobile Association has secured new business by developing services for single women stranded by car breakdowns. Revlon has developed beauty products specifically for African American women after pressure from activists and research, which showed that this market segment spent significantly more than their white counterparts on makeup. Lloyds TSB Bank has developed services for African Caribbean people in the UK and has made every effort to have a more representative workforce. Time and time again companies are learning that it pays to have diverse customers and diverse staff. The stick is equally real as the carrot. Most developed countries have strongly enforced laws making sure that employers take the subject seriously. However, it should be economic benefit that drives the implementation of good practice not threat of legal action.

Quality

Only an "e" separates the subjects of quality and equality. Many of the underpinning principles are the same. Quality is about meeting and exceeding existing and future wants and needs of customers. But customers are all different. The history of manufacturing has been one of greater and greater segmentation. Ford started mass-producing cars in any color as long as they were black. Now automobile companies offer so many options it is rare that two cars are the same. Most still use mass production techniques but they have learnt to be very flexible. The same revolution is driving the service sector and the enabler is the technology.

e-Quality

Everyone seems to be adding small "e's" to traditional business terminology. We have e-commerce, e-government, e-mail, e-business, etc. However, the Internet, and all its supporting technologies, is enabling a greater quality revolution than many of the quality programs popular in the Eighties. Most businesses have long since past the point of seeing their websites as solely promotional aids. E-commerce provides the means to reengineer the whole business. Operating on the web creates unforeseen business opportunities, new partnerships, previously unobtainable market and customer information and diversification of services. The technology is enabling companies to differentiate their products and services to individual wants and needs. Their information enables them to predict customers' needs, sometimes before the customers themselves. We are moving to the point where every customer can be treated as an individual in a mass market. If everyone is treated as an individual their skin color, sexuality, gender, age, nationality, religious beliefs, physical differences, etc., become strengths.

Utopia?

The Aquarian part of my nature sees the development of the technology as a means to breakdown many of the barriers between groups that have been divided by gender, ethnicity, sexually, class, physical abilities, etc. Employees and customers will have access to services that can start to treat them as individual human beings rather than extensions of a machine. However the early access to the enabling technology has been very divided. For several years the Internet was dominated by white males under the age of forty. Thankfully this has changed as others have staked claims on cyberspace. However the utopian vision for the Internet is challenged when one discovers that over 50% of the world's population has never made a telephone call!

Direction

The journey of a thousand miles always starts with the first step and it is very apparent that e-commerce is enabling new levels of service quality and provides the means to achieve greater diversity in customers and employees, if organizations so desire. The old arguments for avoiding diversity are no longer relevant. There is the economic case, the technology and basic humanity for getting on and doing it.

If you would like to explore this subject further or have any other subjects you would like to see covered please email me at john@marshj.demon.co.uk or visit my website at <http://www.tqp.com>.

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