

BUSINESS IN THE NINETIES

by Bernard Delapalme

One obvious thing, on which most observers agree, is that the business world will be, in the nineties, far different from what it is now.

It is very probable that the most important factor in these differences is the so-called "electronic revolution" which is not yet correctly appreciated in all its possible consequences. One may cite, for example, factory automation, which is in itself one of the biggest revolutions industry has ever known and which includes the possibility of having big units (such as off shore platforms, refineries, car factories) operated remotely, and far for being less safe than the present installations, these could be, on the contrary, safer, as a result of the progress not only in electronics, but also in material sciences.

Another example is the completely new way in which information will be created, diffused, and analysed with the results of better knowledge of industrial and social processes.

It is also possible in this new world of industrial operations and processing of information, that in lots of cases the very big units which were the fashion in the past thirty years will be replaced by centralized small units, more flexible according to their products, and in the very improbable, but always possible case of an accident.

There will be nevertheless some remaining cases (for instance, in off shore platforms, air transportation, nuclear plants) in which big units will remain the best solution from the point of view of economics and in which there will remain a doubt about the ultimate safety, not for material reasons, but resulting from human behaviour. Terrorism belongs to that category but is not the only factor to be taken into account: human errors due to illness, tiring, drunkenness and so on must also be taken into account.

There will be also a specific class of risks due to misuse of sophisticated technology in underdeveloped countries. Something, *mutatis mutandis*, like Bhopal. But this kind of risk may be counterbalanced by the progress realized by modern companies which will be able to produce perfectly safe equipment even in the case of misuse (such types of equipment do already exist).

Another tremendous consequence of modern electronics and communications could result from a very much increased flexibility in work time and work location, with a relative disappearance of peak phenomena whose consequences are far reaching.

And finally it is also very probable that the entire organisation of business will change very much in the direction of decentralization, responsibility, and collaboration of all sorts. It will be specially the case for the role of what can be called small companies, the links between these ones and the big organisations being far more important than at the present time.

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