

# The Whole World at Work: Managers Around the Globe Describe Their IT Experiences – Suggesting a New Framework for Global IT Leadership Development

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## ABSTRACT

*The foundation of this paper is research titled: “The Whole World at Work: Managers Around the Globe Tell Us What’s Changed and What Still Needs to Change in Organizations,” conducted from late spring 2004 through early 2006. The research included 160 interviews with managers and consultants working in multinational corporations on five continents, an extensive literature review, and client interventions. We find that the subject of technology is very much on the minds of managers across the organizational value chain. Nearly 47% of “The Whole World at Work” interviewees mentioned technology when asked what has changed most in organizations during their careers, and interview content analysis indicates that a majority of manager comments about technology were mixed or negative in tone. However, when asked to envision the ideal organization of the future, less than 15% of managers made reference to technology. In contrast, more than 90% described the best organizations of the future as ones in which “people” will be at the forefront, with organizations focusing less on mechanics (technology, process and profits) and more on communicating, collaborating, and building consensus. Based on “The Whole World at Work” findings, we propose a previously unidentified global yearning for more holistic organizations and leaders. We have coined a term – E-vergence(SM) – postulating an emerging convergence of manager experiences, views and aspirations around the world. We also propose a model of leadership necessary to foster successful future organizations - The New Hybrid Leaders - multi-dimensional managers developed to exhibit “transformational,” “transnational,” and “trans-cultural” competencies (Bass, 1998; Trompenaars & Woolliams, 2003). This calls for rethinking and reformulating technology management education within a framework that will achieve comprehensive IT leadership development. New competencies are required for technology managers who aspire to influence increasingly global organizations and achieve career success.*

## INTRODUCTION

### Technology: Promises vs. Reality

Technological change has been a key influencer of organizational strategies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, considered one of the five most important organizational variables in the future (Laubacher & Malone, 1997).

As globalization received increasing attention in the 1990s, it was also suggested that a dispersed enterprise is nothing but fragments without common cultural values, and technology is what makes “getting it all together” possible (O’Hara-Devereaux & Johansen, 1994). Also, for many industries, technology continues to be viewed as a competitive driver. In its identification of the top five trends determining future retail banking success, the IBM Institute for Business Value predicted movement towards IT investments focused on “improving responsiveness, resilience and enterprise-wide collaboration” (IBM, 2005).

Yet, there is also a countervailing sentiment that expectations of technology are often unrealistic. Gartner, Inc. analyses indicated that companies’ estimated

spending on hardware, software, IT services and telecommunications would total \$2.6 trillion in 2006. Yet, managers at the vast majority of companies making such investments complain that information overload actually slows down decision-making (Gantenbein, 2006).

So, what is it that happens inside corporations between the expressed hopes of technology and manager perceptions of suboptimal results? What is yet to be done differently?

“The Whole World at Work: Managers Around the Globe Describe Their Organization and Technology Aspirations and Frustrations – Suggesting a New Framework for Global IT Leadership Development” addresses these questions from the vantage point of qualitative interviews conducted with managers in multinational corporations (MNCs). The findings point to the efficacy of a more holistic IT leadership and development framework that can be employed on a global level. The envisioned “sweet spot” is an intersection between manager definitions of the best organizations of the future and a central role that technology managers could play.

## METHODS

### Research Design

The foundation of “The Whole World at Work” global research was conducted from mid-2004 through early 2006 and consisted of 160 semi-structured qualitative interviews with managers working in MNCs headquartered in North America, Europe, Asia/Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa. Thirty nationalities were represented in the sample.

As Hunter (2005) notes, “in situations where relatively little is known about an area under investigation, such as global research, qualitative approaches allow the researcher to conduct investigations to identify emerging themes” (p. 1). In the 1990s, only a small percentage of organizational and human resource management articles was international in outlook (Adler, 2002). A review of the literature also confirms that cross-cultural research specific to technology is sparse. We designed our multinational research to explore particular questions of interest across geography, industry and gender, as well as to see what emerged naturally from the interviews.

We relied on an open-ended narrative interview protocol of ten essential questions with optional sub-question prompts focusing on what has changed, is changing, and still needs to change in organizations. The core interviewee constituency was comprised of 107 people representing MNCs in three industries – Retail Products and Services, Financial Services, and Paper/Printing/Publishing.

The three industries all have a track record of cross-border experience and have publicly articulated “global” as a strategic priority and challenge. Their differences include internal structures, systems and cultures, as well as certain aspects of industry dynamics. Noting both similarities and differences, we speculated that it would be of interest if we discovered a common pattern across these industries.

The 107 managers included 65 men (60.7%) and 42 women (39.3%). Regional representation included 46 from North America (43%), 26 from Europe (24%), 20 from Asia/Oceania (19%), and 15 from sub-Saharan Africa (14%). In the Asian sample, Japanese represented the largest single concentration of interviewees. This was intentional, given that among Asian corporations the Japanese MNCs have the most tenured modern history of competing globally.

Manager positions ranged from one level below CEO to one level above supervisor, and spanned line and staff roles across the organizational value chain. Few interviewees were in roles directly related to or responsible for technology functions. Many, however, had been indirectly responsible for and/or largely affected by innovations and change initiatives involving technology. Collectively, 29% reported active involvement in a roll-out such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) or Customer Relationship Management (CRM). The same percentage described involvement in a major restructuring with a required technology implementation. Nearly all had been involved in a major change initiative such as a new product or service introduction, merger, or acquisition that involved use of a new technology.

From the results, we were able to articulate the experiences, views and aspirations of managers across regions, industry and gender regarding:

- the ideal organization of the future;
- what works and does not work in change management;
- effective organizational leadership.

Our methods also revealed internal “barriers” that may prevent organizations from achieving ideals reflected in manager responses.

Interviews generally lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. We analyzed interviews employing grounded theory methodology and a qualitative data analysis software package (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Weitzman, 2000). We verified the validity of early findings with a subset of original manager interviewees and also incorporated select protocol questions into interviews during client organizational development projects and interventions.

## RESULTS

### Overall: Presence, Impact, and Effects of Technology on Productivity and People

We did not include questions about technology in our protocol. Yet, unsolicited, 65.4% of interviewees mentioned technology in their responses. (See Table 1). About one quarter (25.2%) of managers described technology as an organizational fact of life, a confirmation that issues of adopting and adapting to new technolo-

gies are crossing geographic (e.g. East-West) and economic development (e.g. North-South) boundaries.

Conflicting views were evident in references to effects of technology on productivity (34.6%) and people (35.5%). Managers acknowledged technology-enabled enhancements to productivity and remarked that it is now possible to do business from anywhere, anytime. Conversely, many comments indicated that managers often feel “controlled” by technology and compelled to “try and gain more control” of technology.

From a female manager in North America:

*We [don't] get more done because there's just more piled on. You can be efficient if you focus on it. But if you walk around with your pager and cell phone and PC, you're less efficient. You have to know when to not be available, even if you'll get 'dinged.'*

### Reviewing the Past: What's Changed? People and Technology

“Technology” was the second most common response when managers were asked *what has changed most* and *what is currently changing* in organizations. Just over 50% of managers mentioned “people issues” – the ways employees are treated and the degree to which they are valued. Technology was referenced by 46.7% of managers.

Manager comments regarding technology and change were replete with paradoxes and tensions. Managers often characterized technology as both empowering and encumbering, equating technology with compressing time and fueling the push-pull of:

- *freedom* to work anywhere and *pressure* to work all of the time;
- *higher customer satisfaction* matched by *relentless consumer demand*;
- *more data* that can lead to *paralysis* and *diminished creativity*;
- *faster information flow* eroding *personal relationships* and communications.

From a male manager in Europe:

*Globalization [has] been great because I've been able to gain ideas and reflect on how we do the business. The flip side of that, led by technology, is the pressure for global matrix management that can add levels . . . The opportunity is to learn from our peers but not get bogged down in bureaucracy.*

Table 1. Talking about technology

Technology Category	ALL %	NA %	Eur. %	Asia %	Africa %
All Comments Concerning Technology Combined	65.4	78.3	61.5	40	66.7
What's Changed/Is Changing	46.7	60.9	46.2	20	40
Opportunities Created	44.9	58.7	30.8	25	53.3
Effect on People	35.5	54.3	23.1	10	33.3
Effect on Productivity	34.6	43.5	42.3	15	20
Ubiquity of Technology	25.2	37	19.2	10	20
Pace of Technological Change	16.8	28.2	11.5	0	13.3
Distances Us from Each Other	16.8	28.2	7.7	5	13.3
Technology as a Component of the Ideal Organization	14	8.7	7.7	20	33.3
Technology as a Change Management Constrainer	8.4	13	11.5	0	0
Technology as a Change Management Enabler	4.7	4.3	0	10	6.7
TOTAL Ns Per Region	107	46	26	20	15

NOTE: ALL=all respondents combined; NA=North Americans; Eur=Europeans; Asia=Asians; Africa=sub-Saharan Africans.

Concerns about technology “getting in the way” surfaced in other terms, as well, with 16.8% of managers identifying technology as something that distances us from customers and coworkers. Equal percentages of men and women articulated this view. North Americans (28.2%) expressed concerns about “distancing” more than other regions. Africans (13.3%) were less than half as likely as North Americans to convey this sentiment and Europeans (11.5%) less so. Managers in Asia-headquartered companies (0%) did not say anything that indicated such a concern.

From a female manager in North America:

*We say that we're focused on customers [but] we distance ourselves from customers with technology . . . Some of these great technological advancements have created easier ways to do business, but we're not talking to customers as much anymore.*

#### **Reviewing the Past: Technology—Neither Change Enabler nor Constrainer**

We asked managers to describe the most successful and least successful change projects that they had been involved in or led. Few highlighted technology as a factor either enabling successful change (4.7%) or constraining it (8.4%). Leadership, business understanding, and people factors emerged as more pivotal even in cases where technology implementation was the focal point of a change initiative.

From a male manager in Europe:

*I have seen many examples of IT that are not rooted in business understanding. So, they are not as successful as they could be . . . We had to go to SAP [and] it's taken too long and hasn't gotten the results. But I think that this is because it wasn't run as a business transformation vs. a technology project . . . You have to provide the genuine business need and case, not just that you're striving for the latest technology . . . [and spend] a lot of time on stakeholder management.*

Reflecting on successful organizational change, managers emphasized the importance of communications/education (70.1%), engaging people (41.1%), and integrating people/cultures (25.2%). Likewise, failures were attributed to a lack of attention to communications/behavior change (38.3%), mutual understanding/alignment (37.4%), and cultural resistance (30.8%).

From a female manager in North America:

*You can't build a computer platform without knowing the business model . . . A big key to that is educating our employees. You can have all of the data in the world, but if you don't help people interpret it, and build bridges between departments, well, you don't go very far.*

Collins has noted that none of the good-to-great companies began a transformation with technology, yet they all pioneered technology applications to great competitive advantage once they grasped how technology fit within their own context (Collins, 2001). Similarly, when manager interviewees recalled less-than-successful large-scale technology initiatives, they pointed to disconnects between abstract ideas and workplace realities.

From a male manager in Europe:

*The least successful projects [were] thought of and executed on a very high and abstract level. For example, they had this big idea to reduce our IT costs by reducing IT infrastructure – consolidating it and getting us on common operating platforms and equipment . . . We're in more than 100 countries . . . You can't run the world with one system or solve all problems with three formulas . . .*

#### **Looking Forward: Defining the ‘Ideal’ Organization**

We also asked managers to envision how an ideal organization of the future would look, feel, act, and be experienced by employees, customers and shareholders. In a reversal of interest, less than 15% of interviewees suggested technology would be

a key aspect of the best organizations. More than 90% of interviewees described a desired future in which people would be at the forefront of organizational intentions – with leaders supporting strategies to engage, enable and even nurture employees in the face of pressure to focus on cost-savings and profits.

Managers who spoke of an important role for technology said that technology would enhance the future to the extent it builds customer relationships, fosters productivity, enhances communications, bolsters training and development, and achieves more work-life balance. We characterize this as a latent aspiration for organizations to more fully leverage the “human side of IT” (Goman, 2000; Gordon, 2003).

#### **Technology Through a Regional Lens**

It appears that MNC managers have much in common regarding experiences and views of the ideal organization of the future and technology. Nevertheless, there are intriguing regional variations. Due to the newness of “The Whole World at Work” research and small sample sizes in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, we cannot definitively assert or explain these differences. Rather, they merit further investigations and analyses.

North Americans (60.9%) were most likely to cite technology as what *has changed* most and *is changing* in organizations. Asians (20%) were least likely. Technology was described as creating opportunities by 44.9% of managers, with North American managers (58.7%) and sub-Saharan African managers (53.3%) most likely to articulate this view in contrast with managers in Europe (30.8%) and Asia/Oceania (25%). North American managers were also most inclined to describe technology as disrupting their lives.

From a female manager in North America:

*[Technology] has increased the pace and the amount that has to be done . . . It's much more of a struggle than ever. I have to consciously make an effort to balance. I do a horrible job of it. I'm struggling.*

While European managers also described declines in work-life balance resulting from technology, the more prevalent theme was the detrimental effect of technology used to consolidate decision-making.

From a male manager in Europe:

*IT capability has allowed for a lot of centralization capability and centralized control that from a management perspective makes sense, but from an employee standpoint undermines or undervalues the role of the employee in the field. It's compromised our organization.*

Against conventional wisdom and stereotype, managers working in Asian MNCs made the fewest references to technology. This scarcity is intriguing given associations of Asian corporations with quality measures, process management, and state-of-the-art manufacturing. Asians speaking of technology focused on how it necessitates that organizations streamline and reduce costs in the spirit of fierce competition.

Sub-Saharan African managers may be divided into two subsets – those in South Africa and those in countries other than South Africa. Both can be described as “pro-technology,” but each presents a unique attitudinal profile.

South African managers tended to talk about large-scale, system-wide applications of technology and be *generally* positive in their descriptions of outcomes.

Sub-Saharan African managers outside South Africa were *uniformly* positive about technology and viewed lack of access to technology (not technology itself) as problematic. Indeed, these managers described technology as a kind of Holy Grail, as well as a must-have for Africa's participation on the world stage.

From a male manager in the Ivory Coast:

*I must invest in myself to make sure that I learn . . . Most of the work you are going to find incorporates technology . . . Those people [who] upscale themselves are going to succeed.*

From a male manager in the Democratic Republic of Congo:

*There are no more barriers [with] modern technology. . . . You can't any longer say, 'No, I'm in the Congo.' There are [only] international values of performance, of quality. . . . If you can't integrate into this new rhythm, you have a problem.*

## IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

### E-Vergence and 'The New Hybrid Leaders'

Based on "The Whole World at Work" findings, we have suggested (Shafer & Trautlein, 2006) that there exists an *E-vergence*(SM) – an emerging convergence of experiences, views and aspirations for organizations that feel "whole" – where the ethos is one of people and relationships receiving ample attention in the course of managing technology, task and process.

We have also said that evolved organizations of the future will require a model of multi-dimensional leadership dubbed *The New Hybrid Leader* (Shafer & Trautlein, 2006), where the most leaderly of leaders would be equipped and eager to integrate, respond to and lead diverse groups; demonstrate situational flexibility in management style; and be effective in a variety of geographic, cultural and dual-gender settings. These are tenets of "transformational leadership," defined as: individual consideration (fostering partnerships between people, making contact with them, and active communications), intellectual stimulation (fostering learning, risk-taking and joint problem-solving), and charismatic inspiration (visioning and passion) (Bass, 1998).

### Development Opportunities for Technology Professionals

"The Whole World at Work" findings indicate that organizations and therefore technology professionals face a shift in expectations. It can be argued that the time has come to develop new competencies. Managers will *value* professionals who can harness the technical aspects of technology as well as lead in new ways.

This suggests the importance of dramatically re-thinking approaches to leadership development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in complex global organizations. A holistic global IT leadership development framework would "deal with the intensification of systemic complexity . . . [and] respond adaptively to the depth, scope and pace of change . . ." (Daloz Parks, 2005). It would be assumed that technology managers are increasingly at the center of networks of information and relationships, but they are able to influence organizations only to the extent that they think and behave as leaders.

From a male manager who heads an IT function for a European MNC that is one of the largest corporations in the world:

*You have to align yourself with the business. . . . You have to be in there talking about their strategies [and talking] their language. . . . I make this a high priority. . . . Poor or good communication is 90 percent of everything, especially in IT.*

There is growing evidence of the tangible benefits of "soft capacities." Globalization is a process said to be both technological and human (Lodge, 1995). Among engineers and scientists at the top of academic IQ tests, the "stars" also rank high on emotional intelligence (EQ) (Goleman, 1995), and are adept at turning informal networks into ad hoc teams, persuading, and promoting cooperation. According to IT managers themselves, when IT leadership fails, poor interpersonal skills are a likely culprit (Caruso & Gentry, 2005).

From a male North American manager:

*One of the consistent problems is mistaking technology as a leading component of the change process. In fact, it's usually the people side and the leadership that is the big challenge.*

The current missing link is customized technology leadership development that goes beyond technical skills and topics to include *connectedness*. As we concep-

tualize it, a "Connected Technology Leaders"(SM) development framework steers clear of formulaic instruction and accounts for the human dynamics of change. Learning occurs through IT managers involved in facilitated dialogues, scenarios and simulations embedded within four foundational components:

- **Core and Context** – understanding personal strengths and weaknesses in reference to "transformational" leadership style assessments.
- **Customers and Colleagues** – appreciating viewpoints of customers and colleagues and integrating into internal and external social networks.
- **Company and Community** – comprehending the vision, strategies and goals of the organization and stakeholders.
- **Components of Continuity** – applying learning and insights through action plans related to real work issues.

Re-framing technology leadership involves increasing technology manager understanding of: 1) how managers define the ideal organization of the future; 2) what works and does not work in change management; and 3) effective organizational leadership. The desired outcome is technology professionals developed to be compelling catalysts of quality decisions in complex organizations.

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