

# The First Twelve Months of Random Rambling

By David Wike

## 26th Apr 2006 - Training and Technology

A friend lent me a recent issue of Personnel Today. Flicking through the pages I spotted a somewhat depressing item about European businesses reducing the amount of training given to employees. From 23.9 hours average in 2003, the number fell to 19.7 in 2004. And the UK was below the European average at 17.3. On the other hand, training in the US is on the rise.

Given the way that traditional industries are disappearing to China and other developing countries, it would appear that the only way to maintain a prosperous European economy is by focussing on the high value, high tech or specialist sectors. I would have thought that required a more highly trained workforce.

Talking of high tech, how about emails? Anyone heard of them? They are a new means of communication apparently - well it doesn't seem so in many organisations. You look on their website and are interested in whatever it is that they are offering. So you hit the 'contact us' button. Hey, you have an option. Phone them or email. Well, you obviously don't phone because that costs you money and you will probably be routed to a call centre. So you go for the email option. Well how stupid can you get? You should know that the organisation doesn't have any PCs or laptops. Well, they can't have can they because no one ever responds. I can only conclude that some malicious individual is going round stealing the IT equipment from any organisation that I am about to email. Oh well, 'tant pis' as the French would say (which isn't as rude as it sounds).

## 4th May 2006 - Thoughts on metatarsals and leadership.

Commenting on Wayne Rooney's injury, apparently Sven said that England were "one of four or five teams who can win the World Cup and this will not change that". I think that most of us would disagree with his view. Whatever else we might think of Mr Rooney, he is probably the one player in the squad who has that extra spark of genius that could lift a team's performance from very good to exceptional. In short, the one player who could make the difference between winning the World Cup or going out at the semi-final stage.

With Michael Owen not being fully fit and a number of other key players having current injuries, let's just hope that somebody wraps up Frank Lampard and Steven Gerrard in big thick layers of cotton wool until the competition starts. Both are exceptional players with the determination and leadership qualities that will be required in Germany.

Back in that Istanbul dressing room last May, the lads in the red shirts knew that they had lost the Champions League final. After all, hardly anyone comes back from 1-0 down against Inter Milan, and certainly there are very, very few who have made it back from 2-0. So 3-0 down, forget it. Which is exactly what some Liverpool fans did by making their silent exit at half time.

Now I'm sure that our Steven didn't need the manager's 'You are playing for Liverpool. Do not forget that.' motivational speech at the interval. His leadership, drive and utter determination not to be beaten were hugely responsible for that dramatic comeback to end all comebacks. These are the qualities that England will need this summer if they are to compensate for the loss of the utter genius that is Wayne Rooney. As a final football thought, it's a good job that metatarsals hadn't been invented in 1966!

In common with most people who have enjoyed a lengthy career, I have experienced leadership good, bad and indifferent. The bad don't warrant a mention here and the indifferent ... well I'm indifferent to them. But the good all had one characteristic in common. They would emphasise the positive aspects of one's performance, recognise achievements and contributions to the cause. Whilst I am not in total agreement with all of the thinking in education today, one aspect that has changed for the better is the culture of praising what is good rather than criticising what is less good. I came across my old school report recently. Not much encouragement or motivational writing in there!

And did you see The Apprentice this week? When asked whether she found hiring and firing difficult, Ruth(less) said that it was only hiring that was difficult. Glad I don't work with her! I don't think that she will get the job with Sir Alan but she might fit in at Microsoft. Apparently they aim to get rid of the least effective 6.5 per cent of staff each year. Experience tends to suggest that most people want to do a good job. Underperformance is generally as a result of poor leadership, lack of clarity as to what is expected or just being in the wrong role. A good few years ago I had a guy who I had 'inherited' who was bright and capable. But he just didn't deliver. We had him psychometrically tested (after we had found out how to spell it!). The results showed quite clearly that he was the wrong shaped peg for the hole. We managed to get him transferred into a more suitable job and, hey presto, a happy man doing a good job.

**10th May 2006 - I wasn't going to talk about football again this week but...**

I drove past the new Wembley Stadium last week - it looks absolutely amazing. Just a pity that it wasn't finished on time for Liverpool to win the first cup final there. Just have to do it next year as well lads. Actually it would be a pretty neat trick to win the last at Cardiff and the first at new Wembley!

Now talking of winning things at Cardiff has reminded me of a very special lady I met last week. Her name is Karen McGrath and she runs an organisation called **eventure** ([eventsateventure.com](http://eventsateventure.com)), which is an events management company based in Cardiff. Karen gave a presentation at the Business Start Up exhibition at ExCel in London's Docklands. It's just down the road - well river actually - from Sir Alan's place. Didn't see any Apprentices though.

Karen had the daunting challenge of having to follow Will Carling talking about how he had helped to motivate the English team to find a way finally to beat the Welsh on their home soil. Good though our former rugby superstar may have been, he would be mortified to know that this particular Welsh lady crossed the Severn and totally outclassed his performance! If you ever get the chance to hear her speak, don't miss it. Her inspirational bubbly enthusiasm, lessons in staff and personal motivation and time management made it the best investment of 30 minutes that I have spent for a long time.

I was pondering on the methods that organisations use to promote their activities. As always, I came back from the exhibition with plastic carrier bags stuffed full of paper and brochures on this that and the other, all totally unsolicited. Nearly all went straight into the re-cycling box when I got home. Worse, some organisations had people going round putting their blurb on the tables in the cafe area. From what I could see, it stayed there until the girl came round to clear the table, at which point it went straight into the bin. It would be interesting to know what percentage of this type of communication has any beneficial effect. I also came away with two biros. One so totally naff that I was about to bin it until I decided to retain it for possible use in some future training exercise on er ... dunno, how not to do naff promotions maybe. The other biro was quite reasonable. The only problem being that the printed company name is already starting to rub off. So I will use the pen but have no idea who gave it to me!

Following the recent cabinet reshuffle, I was trying to remember who is now Secretary of State for Trade and Industry - it's Alistair Darling actually; him of the mismatched hair and eyebrows. He is the third incumbent in 12 months. Doesn't suggest that T & I is very high on the agenda does it? Anyway, if you want to see the full listing of Government ministers, email Tony Blair or take a virtual tour of No.10, the website to visit is: [pm.gov.uk](http://pm.gov.uk)

Just briefly going back to the Business Start Up Exhibition, the next one is at the Birmingham NEC on June 2nd/3rd. However well established your business, however experienced you are in management, I would be surprised if you didn't learn something from one of the seminars. Check it out at: [bstartup.com](http://bstartup.com)

Ok, that's me done for another week. How about one of you taking a turn? Do come back for another Random Ramble next week

### **17th May 2006 - Cows, committees, forecasting, technology and The Apprentice.**

On Saturday morning I looked across the road for a weather forecast. Five cows lying down and two standing. Mmm ... mostly wet with a few bright spells. Spot on girls, well done!

I seem to recall President Kennedy instigating some research into the ideal number of members for a committee. The conclusion was seven. Any less and there was likely to be insufficient breadth of view, any more and it risked being unmanageable. However, there should be regular participation from 'outsiders' to ensure fresh views and ideas are considered.

My bovine friends obviously went along with this thinking because a couple of additional members had been drafted in for the forecasting meeting on Sunday morning. Their vote was eight to one in favour of rain. Bang on again!

A visit to the Met Office website confirms the validity of this method of forecasting, amongst a good number of others and suggests, "You could also use some of them to predict the weather and see which ones are the most accurate." So it sounds like they want us to do the research for them. Perhaps they will ditch their sophisticated computer modelling and satellite pictures in favour of a herd of cows.

One thing that I wish they would ditch is the ever more complex ways to tell us about the forecast. Am I the only one who ends up having little idea as to what has been said after several minutes of arm waving presenter gesticulating while a map of the British Isles is zoomed and panned until we have no idea whether we are in Edinburgh or Exeter and whether that rain is forecast to arrive on Monday or Wednesday?

And am I the only one who gets angry with the arrogance of TV directors who assume that we would much rather watch countless action replays and the experts views on whether it was or wasn't offside, rather than watching the live action? And of course, well done The Reds and commiserations to The Hammers.

Just because you have the technological capability doesn't mean that you have to use it unless there is a benefit to the customer. Another example of this was a promotional DVD given to me for a business development forum in Poland. The 'Creatives' had gone completely over the top with their attempts to impress. Images faded in and out, appeared stage left and right, words floated onto the page with font size changing as it arrived. You name it and this DVD had it. The problem being that most viewers would give up and turn it off long before they had seen the complete message being portrayed. Frankly, as a promotional tool it was a complete waste of money.

And so to The Apprentice. Sir Alan pointed his finger for the final time to hire Michelle. I suspect that he made the right choice at the end of a highly entertaining series. Roll on the third series!

A final thought. JFK's research suggested seven to be the ideal committee size. The British Cabinet currently has 23 members (21 MPs and two peers), but a further three ministers attend the meetings, two peers and one MP.

#### **24<sup>th</sup> May 2006 - Hackers, website wobbles, opera singers, coaches, football and developing markets.**

Were you one of the 37 people who sat through the first half of last Wednesday's Champions League final just waiting for half time so you could dash to your PC to look at this website? No, I didn't think so. Pleasing though this thought may be, it seems unlikely. The expert opinion is that this surge was in fact caused by someone trying to hack into the site. Happily firewalls and other protection prevented any intrusion, but I was left wondering why anyone should want to do this.

Apparently big commercial website can be subjected to hundreds, even thousands of 'attacks' every day. While most of these will be caused by bits of 'e' debris bouncing off, some will be serious attempts to access the site. I suppose that it is a bit like climbing mountains. The very fact that it is there makes some people want to try it.

Maybe the spelling mistakes in the Honda UK website are the work of hackers. Or could it be that inability to scroll through the spec of some cars on the Audi UK website is as a result of some hacker making off with the scroll bars? Or could it be that even these top professional websites have succumbed to the good old cock-up? As we have found whilst developing this site, WYSIWYG doesn't quite work out all of the time. Everything looks fine until the pages go live and then .... oops! However, we now have a solution for that ... I hope.

Our webmaster observed that he wouldn't like to be programming the computers for the new A380 Airbus, as it is so difficult to anticipate every combination of factors that can lead to a malfunction. Not encouraging for the nervous flyers amongst us. Let's just keep our fingers crossed that the lads at Honda and Audi don't go on to greater things!

On Friday evening I went to a concert in Birmingham's magnificent Symphony Hall given by the equally wonderful Italian mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli. Now I know from an acquaintance who is a top voice coach, working with some seriously well known people, that having a coach is considered the norm for classical musicians, as it is for athletes, tennis players, footballers, cricketers and so on. If these professional understand the need for coaching, why do so few businesses employ coaches, mentors, advisers, call them what you will? See Mentoring for more on this.

Following a somewhat random thought process, I ended up visiting the Barcelona football club website. I was immediately given the opportunity to view the site in Catalan, Spanish, English, Japanese and Chinese (if you can view a language). An interesting reflection on where they see the market for shirts and all of the other merchandising that is essential to today's big clubs.

Out of curiosity I had a quick look at the websites of England's big four. Starting from the top of the Premiership, Chelsea didn't appear to have any facility for foreign viewers - you might have thought that Russian would get a look in! Manchester United likewise. Liverpool has links to separate websites for Thailand, China and Hong Kong (I thought Hong Kong was part of China these days), while Arsenal also have sites for Thailand and China.

Now without going as far afield as Thailand, Japan or China, the growing economies of the new EU members offer opportunities for all sorts of businesses. Perhaps we should all think about making ourselves more visible and accessible to them. However, I'm afraid that you'll have to wait a while before you are able to view this site in anything other than English.

### **31st May 2006 - Parks, eco-sheds, hybrid vehicles, Olympics and target setting**

The word park used to conjure up images of those magnificent but rather unimaginative municipal flower displays, of small boys kicking footballs and even of young couples sliding off into the bushes at dusk. However, increasingly 'park' is preceded by 'science', 'technology', 'business' or 'retail'.

Brownfield sites, once the location of Britain's traditional manufacturing industries, are being turned into all manner of this new type of park to regenerate the local economy and put new life into the area. A quick look through the Business and Property sections of Thursday's Birmingham Post shows just how many are springing up around the West Midlands. The 'dark satanic mills' of the 19th and early 20th centuries are giving way to a modern landscape led by companies such as the brilliantly named Urban Splash.

Often these parks are allied to a university to provide the academic and research input required to allow 21st century Britain to compete at the cutting edge of the modern world. But another, more traditional park-like trend is also emerging. Increasingly, the working environment has to be attractive to enable businesses to recruit staff. No longer is it acceptable to locate offices or industrial units cheek by jowl.

A survey of the new developments in and around Birmingham reveals that trees and other greenery are a pre-requisite to creating the right environment for today's workforce. If, as in the city centre, it isn't always possible to have greenery between the buildings, then there has to be a park or other open space nearby to permit a pleasant lunchtime stroll when the weather is kind.

Continuing with the green theme. It is also no longer acceptable to shove up industrial units of any old shape, size or construction. Leading businesses are now demanding so called eco-sheds. In other words, buildings that are environmentally friendly in terms of energy costs, water usage and emissions. Not only are companies demanding this to further their green credentials but also it can attract grants, subsidies and other inducements.

Talking of emissions, there was an interesting article in Saturday's Telegraph Motoring section about the greenness of hybrid vehicles. The item started by having a bit more fun at the expense of the Deputy Prime Minister, pointing out that maybe he should have given up his Jaguars in favour of a Toyota Prius as the said vehicle had been voted the best car to have sex in by Japanese Penthouse.

Now I should point out here that my own appraisal of a Prius, comprehensive though it was, did not include that particular test. However satisfactory the car may be from that perspective, it is certainly odd to drive. And it seems that it may not be as environmentally friendly as the myriad celebrities now parading their green credentials, by driving such vehicles, would like to believe.

US-based CNW Marketing Research claim that the Prius has an energy cost per mile of \$3.25 which compares badly with Toyota's own RAV4 small 4x4 which has a rating of \$1.95. However, it has to be said that Toyota dispute these findings, with their own analysis based on a full lifetime, including raw material extraction and end of life disposal or recycling.

I was pleased to note that I'm not the only grumpy old man around when it comes to those increasingly ludicrous Olympic Games opening and closing ceremonies. The Royal Family's number one GOM, aka HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, Earl of Merioneth and Baron Greenwich, launched a scathing attack on them in an interview published at the weekend. I trust that that Lord Coe and the 2012 organising team are taking note!

Continuing with the Olympic theme, I was reading an account of why Welshman Lynn Davies didn't win a medal at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Davies had come into the event as reigning Olympic Champion and was set on winning another gold medal. Then, at his first attempt, the 22 year-old American, Bob Beamon destroyed the previous world record of 27 feet, 4¾ inches with an unbelievable leap of 29 feet, 2½ inches.

The problem for Davies was that he had solely focused on winning the gold. This was his aim, or end goal. He did not have a specific target or objective. But without such a target, he was demoralised by the enormity of Beamon's jump, as he admitted subsequently. He ended up jumping a foot short of his previous best and missed out completely on the medals. If, for example, he had set himself an achievable target of equalling or improving on his personal best jump of 27 feet, and had remained focussed and had achieved that, he would have come away with a silver medal.

Food for thought when target setting! We should always have an aim, an ultimate goal. But to allow us to get there we must have interim, realistically achievable steps, otherwise we may become demoralised by the size of the task and fail to achieve our potential.

Footnote:

Interestingly, Beamon's record jump was (allegedly) the only time in his career that he had ever had sex the night before a competition.

### **7th June 2006 - Akabusi, more on targets and how many Ps in success?**

I spent last Friday and Saturday at an excellent event, the Business Start Up exhibition at the NEC, Birmingham. Late on the Saturday I went to a seminar given by former athlete Kriss Akabusi. I should have been warned! After all I had seen him on TV and realised that he has an exclusive diet of e numbers - you know, the things that cause hyper-activity in children.

I even heard the young lady from the organisers, suggesting to the sound technician that he might need to turn down the volume when the said athlete appeared.

But nothing, absolutely nothing will ever prepare you for the real thing.

Afterwards I tried to think of a way to describe it. Being hit by an express train on the adjacent Birmingham - Euston mainline perhaps? Well, no that presumably would be relatively quick and painless. 15 rounds with Mike Tyson? No, that would only be 45 minutes of being hammered, and in any case, they only go 12 these days, so that would be a breeze.

I was sitting at the back of the hall, adjacent to the aforementioned technician. In walks this surprisingly tall looking guy in a suit. Could be a banker or a lawyer. A few seconds listening to the conversation with our technical man soon dispels this notion. This is Mr Akabusi.

KA walks onto the stage and does a sound check. No one-two-three routine here. There is a huge explosion of sound and the roof of Hall 7 of the NEC lifts several inches off the walls. Dear god, this is the Bruntsfield oil terminal explosion all over again! And this is only the sound check! Our tecchy friend has obviously messed up in a big way and hard-wired Akabusi directly to the 25,000 volt overhead supply on the main line - trains starved of current will surely grind to a halt.

We wait apprehensively for the starter's pistol. Our athlete is relaxed and friendly, chatting to anyone who goes up to talk to him. And then we're off!

He warns that he has three problems when he gets excited - you mean that this isn't excited? Oh, dear! One, he gets loud - louder than this?! Two, he talks fast - he does. Three, he spits a lot! The front three rows look nervous. Sitting at the back I don't know how true number three is, but I can certainly vouch for one and two.

At times his speech is so rapid as to be almost incoherent - but it doesn't matter in the slightest - words are somewhat superfluous as this incredible communicator leaps around the stage like a man possessed. He's back at school, then on the army parade ground, now he's running in a major final. Arms flail, eyes boggle, backside waggles, legs take giant strides - who needs words? Not for one second do you fail to understand the message.

Somehow we survive for a fraction over 57 minutes, but then the Red Bull really kicks in as we are taken back to the World Championships in Tokyo in 1991. It's the final of the men's 4 x 400 metres relay. The USA will win. They always do. They have for the past 15 years.

In the relay, tradition has it that the best runner takes the last leg. Our lads decide to do it differently and lead off with Roger Black, our fastest man, then Derek Redmond and John Regis and on the anchor leg, Akabusi. We get a replay of this epic. A replay like no other.

The sound is turned up - commentator David Coleman is beside himself with excitement as this dramatic event unfolds. Coleman is loud, really loud. But above him, way above his decibel level, is another competing commentary by Akabusi, 'describing' that 2 minutes 57.53 seconds from 15 years back. He is leaping around, gesticulating at the screen, living every second as he runs the fastest 400 metres of his life and Britain beats the USA by 0.04 seconds.

The room erupts into applause and laughter and tears of emotion. And it's all over. Thankfully it is the end of the day and I can go home. I am completely drained as though I had run that race myself.

And the point of all this I hear you ask? Well, over the last few weeks I have been in the company of some very successful people. People who have built their own businesses. Often people who would fit comfortably with Kriss Akabusi's description of his academic qualifications as being nine no levels.

Marketing people will talk about the 4 Ps, 5 Ps or even 7 Ps ( product, placement, price etc). Organisations have Processes and Procedures. All in their way have some relevance. But only 2 Ps really, really matter. People, whether they be employees or customers and Passion. Passion to succeed, Passion to be the best that you can.

Do you have Passion for what you do? And do your People - customers and employees - feel like champions? If not, be warned because surely you will go out of business one day as somewhere out there lurks a competitor who will have Passion. Passion for what they do and Passion for People.

Last week we talked about targets. How it was important to have specific, achievable (just) objectives as well as long-term goals. This was again highlighted by Akabusi when he talked about the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

He had a personal target of 48 seconds. It mattered not that the American Kevin Young ultimately took the gold medal in a world record time of 46.78 seconds. It really didn't matter to Akabusi. On that day Young was the best in the world. But Akabusi had achieved his target with a 47.82 time. In doing so he ran faster than he had ever run before. Faster than any Briton had ever run before. He had done the best he could. He was a winner.

#### **14th June 2006 - The pace of change, Sandi Thom, foreseeing the unforeseeable, David Lloyd and the bankers.**

I was reminded of the pace of change, technological change, changes in attitude, call it progress if you wish, by some wonderful black and white motor racing photographs from the sixties. There is a fabulous picture of Jim Clark and Dan Gurney stranded out on the circuit at Spa in the 1964 Belgian Grand Prix. They are sitting chatting, Clark astride the engine cover of his car. They had both run out of fuel at the end of the race and neither is sure who has won (it was Clark).

This seems so far removed from today's F1 scene where every aspect of the car's performance is monitored back in the pits via telemetry, and the drivers have radio communication with their teams. But in this old picture, something else sticks out, quite literally. There is a very substantial tree in the background, just a couple of feet from the edge of the track and there is no safety barrier whatsoever. The old 8.76 mile Spa Francorchamps is a road race circuit in it's truest sense.

Forty odd years ago may seem like a very long time to some, but in the grand scheme of things it is but the bat of an eyelid. It seems that the pace of change is ever increasing in many respects, some of them difficult to comprehend. I was reading about the singer Sandi Thom. Instead of driving to gigs up and down the country with her band, as she had done for years, she tried a different approach.

She bought a webcam, and announced a world tour of 21 shows to be performed on consecutive nights during February and March 2006 ... in the basement of her flat! The audience capacity in the flat itself was limited to just six people. But the half-hour shows were to be broadcast, free of charge, via her website. The first night, 70 people tuned in to watch, the next night it went up to 670. And by the middle of the second week she was performing to a peak audience of 70,000. By then, representatives from all the major record labels had visited the flat to see the show for themselves. And all put in recording offers.

Now I confess that I don't understand how the finances of webcast world tours work, but what it has enabled her to do is get directly to an audience without having to go through the traditional route of trying to persuade a record label to give her a contract. Once she had proved her audience appeal, of course, the record companies then wanted part of the action.

With over a billion Internet users worldwide, the opportunities to use innovative ways to reach the consumer seem boundless. It's just that it is difficult to see what some of them might be in a few years time. Or to quote the IT project manager, "What I need is a list of specific unknown problems we will encounter". In this context, substitute 'opportunities' for 'problems'.

I have this nagging feeling that many (most?) existing organisations are not geared up structurally or philosophically to take advantage of the opportunities or to cope with the pace of change. Probably many of us have been guilty of being too busy fighting the battle with bows and arrows to pay attention to the guy who has just invented the gun.

David Lloyd tells the story of trying to raise funding for his first sports centre. He had secured most of the million pounds required. He needed just £125,000 when he approached a city bank. Sports centres were an unknown concept in the UK and the three wise bankers who met him were clearly as unimpressed with him and his concept as he was with them. He reports with some satisfaction that their £125k stake would have been worth £51 million ultimately, if only they had had foresight!

So, do you have the dinosaur mentality, are you afraid to step out of your comfort zone? Be warned, the Sandi Thoms and David Lloyds of this world will find a way to bypass you on their way to success. And by the way, the bank that missed out on the opportunity for a slice of Mr Lloyd's business no longer exists!

**21st June 2006 - 24 hour diesel, voices, leading to the bank, and *you* are the only one.**

Last week we Rambled around motor racing in the sixties and the pace of change. Those two themes neatly connected at the weekend when an Audi R10 TDI sports racing car completed 380 laps of the famous Sarthe circuit to win the 24 Heures du Mans, otherwise known as the Le Mans 24 Hour Sports Car Race.

So what you may ask? Well, in so doing, the R10 became the first diesel, yes, that's right, the first diesel powered car to win this gruelling race. Now this isn't quite the same diesel that powers your average Audi - in fact it is a 5.5-litre, twelve-cylinder, twin turbo producing the power of more than 650 big strong German horses. And it isn't quite the first win for the car - it won the Sebring 12 Hours race in the US on its debut. Both are huge achievements and a real indication of the pace of diesel technology development.

Less of a triumph for the PR department though. At the time of writing, nearly 48 hours after the race finished, the Audi UK website was telling us that they would have the story soon! Audi.com had the full story on Monday, so it's a puzzle why the UK team couldn't match it. Nothing like spending a few million quid to win a race, then not telling anyone!

Hearing voices? What do they sound like? And what do they look like?

What do you mean, what do they look like? OK, not actually the voice, but its owner. It probably comes as no great surprise that body language is as important as the actual words when communicating.

Swiss voice expert Dr. Branka Pollermann reckons that Gordon Brown has some way to go if he is to match the (current) Prime Minister in effective message delivery. I don't really think it needs much scientific research to prove this - you only have to watch them for a short while. Whatever you may think about his policies and politics, few would disagree that Tony Blair is a superlative communicator.

I was going to study Dr. Pollermann's work in more detail but was somewhat deterred by references to 'a place for prosody in a unified model of cognition and emotion'. Er, quite. In words that I can understand, she illustrated today's less able public speaker by pointing to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as someone whose overall delivery fails to include enough emotion or eye contact. Apparently a strong point in the PM's delivery is that he looks towards the people he is addressing at the end of his sentences.

It's depressing to note that another corporate giant, Vodafone, is planning to pay its top executives increased bonuses despite the company's massive financial loss, forecasts of reduced share earnings and job losses. Sadly, an all too familiar story of a lack of leadership. My mobile contract is up. Perhaps I should vote with my feet.

A final thought on leaders and communication. I read that people who have met the likes of Richard Branson, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair said that they felt like there was no one else in the room at the time; that they were the full focus of attention, even if the conversation was very short. I must practise giving people my full attention and looking at them at the end of sentences!

## **28th June 2006 - Disruptions, keeping it simple and foreign languages.**

I took part in an exercise this week where the objective was to deliver a one hour training session while managing various 'planted' disruptive elements. Well, you kind of expect the odd mobile to go off, people wanting to pop to the loo, coughing fits and the like. But when all four members of your group 'play up' in a very convincing style, it's hard to pick real from fake and extremely difficult to keep everything on track. And, of course, I didn't succeed. I was not helped by being over ambitious in what I was trying to deliver, including using two different sets of PowerPoint.

The learning for the future? Keep it simple! The more complicated you make it, the more likely are the wheels to come off when things start to go pear-shaped (to over complicate the use of metaphors!).

Keeping it simple is the theme of a book called, aptly, *Simplicity Is The Key*, written by Trevor Gay, who runs a training organisation called *Simplicity* ([www.simplicityisthekey.com](http://www.simplicityisthekey.com)). I haven't read the book yet but I like the sound of Trevor's approach to management i.e. don't make things more complicated than they need to be.

Continuing briefly along the simplicity route, have a look at the item in *Resources*, which came to me by a roundabout route via the Internet. I think that it illustrates the point quite well.

I see that some educationalists are up in arms about what they see as language snobbery i.e. that non-European languages are regarded as "second-class" options among teachers, parents and pupils. Hmm, perhaps it's just that those of us who struggle mightily to learn other languages would like them to have some potential use for holidays or business. Unless we are one of the gifted few who seem to be able to pick up any language at the drop of a hat, it is always likely that we are going to target French, Spanish, Italian or German.

So that's it for this week, just a very simple Ramble!

## **5th July 2006 - Jutland, afraid to win, and school enterprise days.**

Just over a month ago we commemorated the 90th anniversary of the battle of Jutland, the largest naval encounter in history. When the British Grand Fleet met the German High Seas fleet off the Danish coast that May afternoon in 1916, the stakes could not have been higher.

Despite heavy losses, the British fleet gained the upper hand and the German fleet turned to head for port. The Commander-in-Chief of the British fleet, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, called off the pursuit for fear of being lured into a minefield or to lurking submarines off the German coast.

Jellicoe knew that he simply could not afford to lose. To have done so would have been to risk German domination of the sea routes to Britain, hence starving us of the supplies vital to allow the war effort to continue. As Churchill subsequently said, Jellicoe was the only man on either side who could have lost the war in an afternoon. The current phrase often applied to footballers about to take a vital penalty - 'no pressure then' - could well have been applied that day to Admiral Jellicoe!

A game of football could never be considered as a matter of life or death. So losing is an outcome that can be faced. I'm no football expert but it seemed to me that during the World Cup, the England football team were more intent on not losing than on winning. Their strange approach of pumping long balls to the strikers seemed designed to allow the midfield to remain in midfield, hence reducing the chances of the opposing team catching them out with a quick break.

To me this seems the only explanation for how such a talented team failed to really get going. In my view, and that of many commentators, of both the sporting and business kind, to win you have to take risks and that means that you might lose. The key is to minimise the potential impact of these risks, but nevertheless to go ahead and take them to give yourself the possibility to win.

And just for the record, as well as being a master tactician, John Jellicoe was a superb leader of men. He was a man who liked to 'just get on with the job' and hence avoided publicity. As naval heroes go, Jellicoe should rank alongside Nelson in my view. Sadly, in later years he was rather eclipsed by Admiral David Beatty, a lesser man but one of considerable ambition who fully understood the career benefits of courting the press and being in the limelight. Hmm, food for thought ...

I spent a very enjoyable day on Monday in the company of my friends from Full Throttle Racing ([www.fullthrottlerracing.org.uk](http://www.fullthrottlerracing.org.uk)) and the Year 10 students of Alcester Grammar School in Warwickshire. We were there in support of the school's Enterprise Day. The students were divided into teams and then set various tasks by the invited business people, including ourselves.

At the conclusion, each team had to present its product ideas together with thoughts on costs and marketing strategy. I was amazed by how well they had thought things through and how confidently they presented their work. Their self-elected team leaders also showed considerable leadership skills. Frankly, some of them would make a better fist at running a company than some managers I have encountered in the past!

STOP PRESS! Wasn't it great to see Italy and Germany going at it hammer and tongues in last night's World Cup semi-final. Neither was afraid to lose and a wonderful game resulted. Well done to both teams.

**12th July 2006 - They think it's all over ..., paper clip houses, yellow submarines, nosey neighbours and gifted children.**

It is now. All over that is. I mean the World Cup, just in case you have been on a trip to Mars for the last few weeks. No more metatarsals, no more 'simulating' (Portuguese for diving, otherwise known as cheating), no more pundits chewing the fat endlessly. Somehow, the whole thing seemed a bit of a disappointment with one or two exceptions, such as the Germany v France semi-final.

And of course there was ZZ. I prefer to remember him as a great player and not for one mad moment. No one is perfect but to achieve what he has achieved makes him a very special person. It was good to see him welcomed back in Paris by President Chirac.

I was just reading about the Canadian man who set out to use the Internet to trade a paper clip and ultimately ended up with a house! Talk about a salesman! Apparently Kyle MacDonald made 16 trades over almost a year - and is now preparing to move into his new home. A novelty doorknob, a camping stove, a keg of beer and an afternoon with rock star Alice Cooper were some of the stages in his swap marathon.

I've just checked my paper clip tray. Do you know, I have almost enough to enable me to rival Robbie Fowler's property empire (around 100 houses). I gather that there is a new song at Anfield now. 'We all live in a Robbie Fowler house' is sung to the tune of Yellow Submarine!

I read an amusing account of Robbie's early days at Liverpool when Kenny Dalglish was the manager. On one occasion, Dalglish gave Robbie and his dad a lift home to Toxteth (not the poshest part of Liverpool) in his large white Mercedes. Robbie said, "I took an eternity to get out of the car, with Kenny Dalglish hanging out the window saying goodbye. But you know what, not one of my mates walked by, and not one of the neighbours stuck their heads out their windows, even though they were all nosey buggers!" I think it's called sod's law Robbie!

So the Government is setting up a national register of gifted children. Aren't most (all?) children gifted? It's just that they have different gifts. The likes of David Beckham may not be the most academically gifted, but could your brain calculate exactly where to contact the ball to make it swerve to exactly where you want it to, to work out how hard to hit it so that it arrives at the right height and at the right time - while you are running at speed and the person you are aiming it to is also running at speed and still some way off where he will be when the ball arrives? No, I thought not. Just think about the complexity of that calculation for a moment. The more you think about it the more impressive it becomes.

We also tend to develop at different rates - quite dramatically so in some cases. Isambard Kingdom Brunel was appointed chief engineer of the Great Western Railway at the age of 27, Churchill was 65 when he became Prime Minister for the first time and a month short of his seventy seventh birthday when he came to office for his second term. (For the record, Viscount Palmerston is the oldest person to become PM for the first time - he was 71).

Whatever our age or whatever our apparent abilities, it is the responsibility of teachers and managers to do their best to ensure that we can do our best, to help us to develop to be the best that we can be in our chosen field.

My challenge for you this week is to see how many trades it takes you to get from a paper clip to a house! And remember, research has shown that we are all a maximum of six steps away from anyone in the world i.e. we all know someone who knows someone etc.

### **19th July 2006 - Bastille Day, Irish Spaniards, brand values, Chinese American MGs and manager or leader?**

Having a few minutes to spare, I have started this ramble unusually early. To be precise on le quatorze juillet (14th July), otherwise known as Bastille Day, or more correctly, la Fête Nationale; the day that signals the start of the holiday season in France. With the sun shining here, my mind inevitably drifted to holidays - in France and elsewhere. And from there it was but a short step to sitting sipping a glass of something cool!

Now it just so happens that I was looking at a box that had held cava, the sparkling wine from North Eastern Spain. According to the box, this particular brand had won an award for three consecutive years. Was this a typesetting error or was it translated from Spanish by an Irishman?!

As my daughter lives in Barcelona, I have become quite partial to the odd glass of cava. In my humble view, a decent bottle of cava can happily stand a challenge from champagne. They are both made by the same method, albeit different grapes are used. So why is it that many of us (not often me these days) are happy to pay two or three times as much for champagne as for other equally good sparkling wines? Is it any wonder that the French have fought so hard to maintain control of the name champagne? With a brand name like that, who wouldn't?

Isn't it strange how we value brand names? Fair enough if it is a name like Porsche where you know that you are buying not just a famous name but a car that is special in every respect. But why on earth would we pay a price premium for something that is no more special than something else, just because it has a 'designer name'? And what is a designer brand? Isn't everything designed to a greater or lesser degree?

This talk of famous brand names brings me to the news this week that Nanjing really do intend to build MG sports cars again. Apparently some of these will be built at Longbridge, but it seems that the focus of the operation will be in the USA in Oklahoma. Not only will there be an assembly plant, but the global headquarters and the technical centre will be there also.

As a former product strategy manager for MG sports cars, I have mixed views about this. It is great that MGs will be produced again, but will it really be a British sports car when it is essentially a Chinese-American entity? Does this devalue the brand?

Previously I hadn't consciously differentiated between the role of a manager and a leader. But Trevor Gay's thought provoking book, *Simplicity is the Key*, makes the very valid point that the two are different.

I guess it's a bit like aims and objectives. The aim is where you want to get to, the objectives are the steps that you need to take to get there. In that respect, it is a leader who will decide the direction to be taken and then inspire, motivate and empower others to achieve the dream. It is managers who will sort out all of the details to turn the plan into reality. Of course, the very best can lead and manage.

Unfortunately there are leaders who also try to manage but don't have the capability, so the dream goes pear-shaped. And, sadly, there are many who can neither provide leadership nor manage competently. So how do they get to such exalted positions? I think that it may be a case of attitude before aptitude. In other words, having a positive (aggressive?) approach and unwavering self-belief can be enough to fool their superiors into thinking that they are the right person for the job.

Remember last week's comment that research has shown that we are all a maximum of six steps away from anyone in the world i.e. we all know someone who knows someone etc? Have you thought about it? When I started to think it through, I was astonished to find that, in theory at least, I could probably do it in three or four!

Try it for yourself. Of course, we don't necessarily know who the next person in the chain might know, so you may not realise how close you are to a link with George W, the Queen or even David Beckham! However, as was pointed out by Andy Lopata, co-author of '... and death came third!', the popular view that it's not what you know but who you know, is not entirely accurate. What really counts is who knows you! C'est la vie!

### **26th July 2006 - Queues, PMQs and why is everything so hard?**

Queuing may be very British thing but that doesn't mean that we like doing it. Apparently the banks are trying to convince us that we rarely have to queue to see a cashier. The torrent of 'oh yes we do' comments coming in to the BBC breakfast news programme suggested a very different picture and one which we clearly don't like. It could just be that those bankers are trying to drive us to telephone and Internet banking so that they can cut their costs. Or am I just cynical?

Of course they are not the only ones who make us wait. M&S was (and maybe still is?) famous for it. One Christmas I was in their store in Birmingham when I overheard a couple of management staff discussing the best way to arrange the queuing system. I had to restrain myself from suggesting that there might not be a queue in the first place if they were to go help at the tills!

One Q that I do like is PMQs, otherwise known as Prime Minister's Questions, the weekly half hour joust in the Commons. It is fascinating to watch the battle of wits and words between Tony Blair and David Cameron, both excellent communicators but with different styles. I'm afraid that poor old Ming doesn't stand a chance against Blair, not helped by generally asking inept questions which guarantee a sharp put down. I'm left wondering why someone doesn't help him to improve his performance.

There are quite a few MPs who could do with a bit of help as well. It amazes me that so many of them ask pointless questions that waste their one opportunity to challenge the PM. And some ramble for so long that the Speaker cuts them off before they get to the punch line, if there is one. They must understand the procedures, so why don't they get their act together? I am reminded of that wonderful Bill Shankley quote, "If you can't make decisions in life, you're a bloody menace. You'd be better becoming an MP!"

Should it be this hard? Have you tried to change your mobile phone or price plan recently? Talk about complex! Is it really necessary to have so many different phones? I recall from my car industry days that too much choice was likely to be a turn off for the customer. Well, if it wasn't for the fact that I've dropped my phone so many times the thing is falling to pieces, I'd have got bored and walked away.

All I have to do now is find out how it works. And I hate reading instructions. If it isn't intuitive, then I don't want to know. I'm sure that I only use a fraction of the features of any of the technology in our house as a result!

### **2nd August 2006 - From Russia to Washwood Heath with love, wobbly Wembley and rural wi-fi.**

UK van company LDV, based in Washwood Heath, Birmingham, has been sold to Russia's Gaz which, apparently, is the country's second largest auto firm and the seventh-largest maker of commercial vehicles worldwide. Well, I never knew that!

Apparently LDV is "a well-loved and long established brand". Or so the chief exec says. Anyway, it's good to know that the future looks bright for the van lads.

Less bright is the immediate future of the new Wembley stadium. So when is it going to be finished? Originally scheduled for August 2005, that has now been revised to September 2006, or is it end-2006, or even June 2007? Owners Wembley National Stadium Limited and builders Multiplex don't seem able to agree.

In fact it appears that they haven't agreed about much during the entire project. With customer and supplier apparently now reduced to communicating by public slanging match, it doesn't augur well for an early completion.

I wonder why some projects go completely pear-shaped when other, such as Heathrow's Terminal 5 run to time and budget? Of course, the two tend to be inextricably linked. If it takes longer than planned, it inevitably will cost more for the simple reason that the labour to complete it is employed for a longer period.

So a realistic timing plan is a very good starting point for a realistic budget estimate. And for a realistic timing plan you need to decide exactly what you want before you start, and then to stick to that specification. And of course, customer and supplier need to be in agreement as to what is to be achieved. And so we come back to effective communication.

Effective communication in rural areas could benefit from proposals to boost the power of signals used in wi-fi networks. Telecoms regulator Ofcom wants to deliver broadband access to parts of the UK with no high-speed Internet. At the moment, limitations on the strength of wi-fi signals make it expensive to deploy such networks outside of urban areas. And lest you think that it is only the most remote areas that do not have broadband access, let me tell you that some villages only half a dozen miles from major towns in the Midlands do not enjoy the facility.

With the rapidly increasing number of small businesses, many run from home, the lack of broadband is a major obstacle. The Internet is the most fabulous research tool that allows even the smallest business to carry out studies that would have been beyond their means not so many years back. With the Internet, the fact that a business may be in a rural location makes no difference, unlike the traditional resources that tended to be based in the larger libraries found in big towns and cities.

Use of the Internet as a selling tool gives small rural businesses the same access to markets as those more centrally located. It is also a cost and time effective selling tool compared with the traditional sales rep, and as a marketing tool it can allow coverage that only a very expensive traditional advertising campaign could have achieved. Clearly its effectiveness depends on the type of product or service being offered, but there can be few businesses that can't benefit from it in some way.

But all of this is severely limited without the speed of operation provided by broadband, so it is to be hoped that a rural wi-fi network can be generated rapidly to support business development in these areas.

**9th August 2006 - Beware cross-country running, Google is looking after us and 'Yes Minister' is still here.**

Are we living in an ever more bonkers world? I was reading today that a book, distributed to 14 to 16-year-olds studying citizenship, says children have the right to protection from physical and emotional abuse. Yes, totally agree. But then it lists cross-country runs as a possible example!

Well, when I used to be 'made' to run four or five miles across ploughed fields, up hills, over stiles and dodge aggressive dogs I didn't feel abused. And I wasn't particularly athletic. I suspect that what classes as cross-country these days is no more than a run round the playing field, assuming that it hasn't been sold off.

When you look at the conditions that children have to endure in India, China, in fact pretty much most parts of the developing world, you can't help but feel that they will grow up mentally tougher and better able to compete in the increasingly challenging world of the 21st century global economy.

Good news! Google has started warning users if they are about to visit a web page that could harm their computer. The initiative comes out of a larger project cataloguing programmes that plague people with unwanted ads, spy on web habits or steal personal data.

Google is one of several companies trying to act as an "in-flight adviser" to ensure people stay safe online. Good for them. Now if they could just stop Word documents reverting back to Times New Roman 10 or pretty much any font but the one that you happen to be using ....

The world of Sir Humphrey Appleby and Jim Hacker of 'Yes Minister' fame is obviously still going strong. An Institute for Public Policy Research report reveals anger on both sides about what they see as a lack of accountability and qualifications.

The report suggests that while government ministers are often not specialists in their fields, their top civil servants are hardly experts either. Good grief, no wonder they make such a pigs ear of most things!

A minister apparently said: "The most fundamental problem with the civil service is that it is not accountable to anybody. It is certainly not accountable to ministers. This lack of accountability explains why the pace of change in Whitehall is best described as glacial."

Never mind, I expect the top civil servants will continue to amble along, collect a knighthood and a huge inflation proofed pension at the end of their career and then go on to be appointed to lucrative positions on PLC company boards once they retire. Me jealous? Never!

**16th August 2006 - The customer is king, looking after the king, a good deal, planets and filing systems.**

A good few years ago, with some senior colleagues, I was having dinner with representatives of a major Japanese company. Their company president, a venerable gentleman, described their approach to business as being one where the customer was king. In other words, they would do all they could to accommodate the specific requirements of the customer.

Pretty obvious stuff you might say. Absolutely, but not something at which every organisation excels. In fact many seem to have a take it or leave it approach. Obviously it depends on the product. There are many where it would be impracticable to try to tailor the product to individual customer's requirements.

One way that some businesses try to address this is by offering a wide range of products. But that can just make it hard work to select the one that you want, as recounted in Random Ramblings 26th July.

But what all businesses can try to do is look after the king (or queen) who is their customer. Some do it supremely well. I am looking to change my car, so one evening recently I fired off an email to my friends at A-Plan Insurance to ask for an indication of the likely premium. Very early the next morning the phone rang and there was James Shaw, the branch manager, with the answer to my question.

Now, I referred to them as my friends. In fact I have never met any of them but it feels like I'm dealing with friends, people who are looking after my interests. And that is the key. I trust them to take care of insurance matters for me, to take the hassle out of something that can be complex, expensive and downright risky if you buy the wrong product. So well done to James and his team in Sheldon.

Of course, I am not naïve enough to think that they or any other business are looking after me out of the kindness of their hearts. I once read a biography of the Canadian newspaper magnate, Roy Thomson, later to become Baron Thomson of Fleet. His view was that a deal was only a good deal if it was a good deal for both parties.

To me this seems like a very good approach to business. You may be able to rip off the customer once, but if that leaves him feeling bitter, he won't be coming back your way again. Patronise him and make him feel inadequate and you won't see him again either. Provide poor service and it's goodbye forever.

With our increasingly complex and busy lives, most of us want to have experts around who can take care of things for us so that we don't have to worry unduly. Businesses that take care of their customers are the ones that will be successful in the long term. If you don't believe this, take a look at Toyota.

Yet another survey, just published in the US, shows the Japanese brand top for customer satisfaction and only last week the influential JD Powers survey showed Toyota top for reliability in the US. This mirrors what we see in the UK and it is certainly reflected by personal experience. Toyota's profits continue to grow and it is predicted that their production levels will overtake General Motors this year to make them the world's biggest carmaker.

Apparently, Pluto's fortunes are going in the opposite direction to Toyota's and it may soon lose its planet status. It would appear that its original classification may have been a little hasty back in the 1930s as it is only a tiddler compared to the other planets currently recognised as such.

What's that got to do with business or training you may ask? Well not a lot really apart from the fact that it gives me a lead into the next subject which is that NASA apparently can't find the original film of the first US moon landing. It may seem inconceivable that they have been so careless but I suspect that it is an all too common problem with many organisations. People move on, leave, reorganisations happen and over time the location of vital files becomes a mystery.

In this respect, I'm sure that my filing system is no better than NASA's and as I found to my cost recently, computer files can go astray. In this case it was about a year's worth of digital photographs. Even the purchase of a bit of software that can find deleted files on the hard disk has failed to turn them up.

Fortunately I have copies of the best ones, the ones that I had put on disk to allow me to get prints run off. But it is a salutary lesson of the need to back-up important stuff and preferably keep it at a remote location to overcome the fire/theft risk.

Stop press: I have found a car and 'the other James' at the Sheldon branch of A-Plan, James Haynes, did another very professional job of looking after the 'king'. Now all that's needed is a royal standard to fly from the bonnet!

### **23rd August 2006 - This used to be..., fast digging and throwing stones.**

My daughter Anna lives in Barcelona. This week she is at home and has brought her Spanish, or perhaps I should say Catalan, friend, also called Anna, with her. As we were driving round the district I found myself saying 'this used to be ...' rather often.

This used to be a hospital, but now it's a housing development, oh, and this also used to be a hospital and is now a housing development, this used to be a factory and guess what?

This morning we visited Avoncroft museum of buildings. It is a fantastic place with around 25 buildings of all shapes and sizes dating from the 14th century onwards, that have been moved from a wide area and rebuilt at the museum.

To reach Avoncroft you drive through a new business park with some futuristic buildings. For once it was good to see something that is and will be, rather than used to be!

And of course, on any new development you are likely to see a few JCBs - OK, some may not be actual JCBs, but that's beside the point. At this moment the JCB guys are trying to break the world land speed record for a diesel powered vehicle. Good luck to them.

Just seems a pity that the record attempting vehicle is a long streamlined streak of a thing. Somehow the vision of something with huge tyres and a great bucket front and back travelling at 200mph+ is rather more appealing!

Talking of big bucket, well almost. Yesterday I saw on TV some guys trying to break the world record for hurling a stone with a trebuchet - one of those medieval siege machines. It amused me to think of grown men spending time doing such frivolous things. And then I got to wondering how the font 'Trebuchet MS' used on this website acquired its name. Anyone any idea?

### **30th August 2006 - More on fast diggers, product quality and top PMs**

Congratulations to Andy Green, Tim Leverton and his JCB team on taking, by a huge margin, the world speed record for a diesel powered vehicle. Their new record stands at 350.092mph, although on the first of the two timed runs they actually got over 365mph. My recollection of Tim when he worked at Rover Group is of someone who arrived at meetings in plenty of time with a well prepared brief. Clearly this organised approach has paid off with the JCB DIESELMAX project.

It's been a good year for diesels with Audi taking the Le Mans 24 hour sports car race back in June and now JCB's triumph at Bonneville. Now if only someone could find a way to make the stuff less smelly and possible to remove in less than a decade if you get it on your hands ...

Staying with the automotive theme, I was astonished to find that Toyota feel the need to have a major review of their processes to improve total quality. But it seems that even this manufacturer that consistently tops quality and customer satisfaction surveys isn't without its problems.

Apparently they recalled 1.5 million cars in Japan and the US last year. This may seem an alarming figure but given the volume of cars produced and the fact that a problem may not emerge until well into a production run, it is not an unusual number. However, a recall is a costly process and one that inevitably brings bad PR so I can see why they want to try to overcome these types of problems.

Accepting that not everything is perfect and then setting out to try to improve things is one key reason why some businesses succeed whilst others fade away. Too many organisations appear to deny that there is a problem. While no one wants to admit to problems, it is very frustrating if you are the customer and there is an apparent failure to recognise that your complaint is genuine.

And talking of not acknowledging the truth, we turn to politicians! Or to be more precise, prime ministers of the 20th century. The BBC History Magazine has given them scores from 1 to 5 based on how effective they were at implementing their policies - as distinct from whether the policies were any good.

In top slot with 5 out of 5 are Margaret Thatcher and Clement Attlee. Talk about chalk and cheese! However, I can see the magazine's thinking. Both were responsible for huge changes that shaped the way the nation is today. And for the record, Neville Chamberlain didn't trouble the scorer, to use a cricketing term. Obviously standing on the top of the aircraft steps, waving a piece of paper and telling the world that Mr Hitler was really a jolly nice man who had no intention of invading Poland, let alone anywhere else, didn't go down as one of the century's better bits of judgement!

### **6th September 2006 - Models, getting what we deserve, Bournemouth, grumpy old men, and looking beyond the label.**

The model reference isn't related to the troubled Airfix company - I wonder if they still fail to give you all of the parts that you need to build the plane or whatever it might be?

No, I was thinking of an interview that I saw with Sandra Howard, wife of the ex-Tory leader, whose earlier career was as a model. What a delightful lady she appears to be. In the same programme, the BBC's Andrew Marr also interviewed Hilary Armstrong. This Government minister talked passionately about helping the disadvantaged. Here was a lady who appeared to know what she was talking about and really cared about what she was doing.

But of course, no journalist can resist asking about when Tony Blair will stand down and so the interview predictably descended into the usual politicians' babble that says absolutely nothing worth listening to. I can't help but feel that we get the politicians we deserve when the whole of the media is looking for an opportunity to trip them up or distort what they have said. It's no wonder that they have developed a language of political speak and appear evasive if not downright devious.

And talking of drivel brings us neatly to motoring journalists. I recently bought a Honda Accord. My friend Jeremy Chapple (see Random Ramblings 29th May 2006 for Jeremy's Letter from Bahrain) emailed me to ask, "Why a Honda? You know what Top Gear has to say about them, and you don't live anywhere near Bournemouth."

(By the way, congratulations to Kate and Jeremy on the birth of their daughter, Olivia.)

The answer was, "No, I stopped watching such programmes when they became comedy shows with the sole purpose of promoting the overblown egos of the presenters! And the only time I went to Bournemouth it was full of very desirable young ladies on holiday, mostly from Scandinavia I think!"

Now I admit that it was many a long year back that I visited Bournemouth and maybe it is now the tranquil retirement home that Top Gear presenters portray, and perhaps a fair few of them buy Hondas, but this is a good example of how we tend to stereotype things, places and people.

Although I wouldn't admit to getting old, I will own up to being increasingly grumpy, perhaps intolerant is a better word, of poor service and poor design. I accept that complex pieces of machinery will often go wrong but a coffee pot!? Well a cafetiere to be precise.

We recently acquired a new one made by Bodum a well respected name. The handle is designed so that it overlaps the top of the glass jug and the lid has a recess to fit neatly around the handle. So far so good. However, the problem is that the plunge filter part is circular and of necessity a tight fit in the jug. So when you want to remove the filter, you have to angle it to get it past the handle. Inevitably it catches sometimes, resulting in the filter mesh becoming distorted. Then, next time you are making coffee, the grounds squirt up past the kinked filter resulting in a sludgy cup of coffee. Grrr! I can't help but wonder if anyone at Bodum actually tried making coffee with this product before launching it on the unsuspecting public. Perhaps they are all tea drinkers. And live in Bournemouth!

I have recently become a voluntary business mentor for the Prince's Trust. The Trust's aim is to try to help young people who are disadvantaged in some way. Probably some are the same people that Hilary Armstrong was talking about. The Trust has a slogan, 'Look beyond the label.' In other words, put prejudice aside, look at the real person, not the stereotype. Maybe Top Gear presenters would do well to follow the same approach.

### **13th September 2006 - Sex on wheels, yet more on diggers, beer and work.**

The Aston Martin makes its driver the sexiest on the road, according to a survey published a week or so ago. Which is good news for Ford who, apparently, are considering selling the company. So if you think your sex appeal could do with a boost, perhaps you should raid the piggy bank and buy the company. Just think how appealing that would make you!

Years ago I used to work with a guy who is now a very, very senior Ford executive. Then in his twenties, he met a young lady who was very impressed by his MGB sports car. She was somewhat less impressed next time he took her out as he was driving a Mini Van. You see, he and his brother shared the MGB and the Mini Van and so took turns to drive each. The Mini Van clearly didn't do it for her as she instantly dumped him!

Continuing with the Ford theme, it is also suggested that they might be considering selling Jaguar. Apparently JCB would be interested in buying the Coventry firm. After JCB's world land speed record with their DIESELMAX project, there is possibly some tenuous logic to the deal. I'm just trying to visualize what you get if you cross a JCB with a Jaguar!

Staying with transport, apparently Ryannair is considering allowing mobile phones to be used on its planes. I already have an intense dislike of flying. The thought of being cooped up inside a flying drainpipe with ludicrous ringtones and people bellowing "Hello, it's me, I'm on the plane" is just about the final straw! It's enough to drive a man to drink, but possibly not if he's a university student.

It is suggested that higher tuition fees will force students away from partying and drive them towards serious study and part-time jobs. So now we know why university applications are down this year. The thought of serious study and no beer is enough to turn off any self-respecting potential student!

### **20th September 2006 - Change, the future and communication**

Change is the law of life.

And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future.

*John F. Kennedy*

It is difficult to disagree with JFK. And yet I suspect that most of us do not welcome change in most aspects of our lives. The phrase comfort zone is frequently used these days to describe a variety of situations. Unlike many bits of 'modern speak' it is a concept that most people will understand.

Some people always go on holiday to the same place. This may not seem very adventurous, but on the other hand, if the familiarity of the place makes for a more relaxing holiday, what is wrong with this approach?

Others take the opposite view and seek out somewhere more challenging for their annual fortnight - climbing Kilimanjaro or walking the Great Wall of China for example. I guess I fall somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. There is something nice about going back to a place, you start to feel a certain 'belonging'. But there again, after a while you have seen pretty much all there is to see.

Maybe the rest of life is like holidays in the sense that some will always want to change as much as possible while others want complete stability. However, the reality is that the world is changing around us whether we like it or not.

The workplace has seen huge changes, many of them bringing vast improvements in working conditions, health and safety etc. But some have been arguably less beneficial. I say arguably because it will probably depend on the circumstances of the individuals involved.

Is the closing of a coal mine good or bad? Well, if as a result you get a well paid job in a clean and safe environment, presumably you would think it to be good. But for those who had spent half a lifetime underground only to find that they could not get further employment, almost certainly the perspective will be negative.

One certain thing about change is that it brings uncertainty. Uncertainty can cause worry, stress, even fear. Therefore, it is the responsibility of managers to remove as much uncertainty as possible.

Communication is paramount. Tell people what is happening or likely to happen. Better still, discuss it with them beforehand and seek their views. Often people say that they haven't communicated because there is nothing to communicate. Well fine, often things take longer than expected to firm up. But talk to them even if it's only to say that you have nothing to tell them.

The respected American journalist, George Will, commented, "The future has a way of arriving unannounced."

And isn't that part of the problem? There we are, all content with our lot, in control of what we are doing, sitting comfortably and then 'wallop', the future arrives. Now the future can take many forms but one thing is for sure, something is going to change.

Often the change may be for the best of reasons, but nevertheless, unless it is handled well, it can be a time of worry. Most of us spend a very significant part of our lives at work. Therefore it is important that we feel that we belong, that we are part of a family outside of our own family. The attitude of the management is critical here.

Viv Hudson runs a rapidly expanding hotel and travel booking business based in Droitwich, Worcestershire ([www.hotelshopuk.com](http://www.hotelshopuk.com)). As the business grew, there was a need to look for larger premises. They could have moved out of the town to one of the surrounding industrial estates but this would have posed a problem for some of the staff who did not own cars. So despite the fact that it made finding suitable premises more difficult and possibly more expensive, it was decided to stay in the town centre.

I am sure that the decision to put the welfare of the staff to the fore can only have enhanced the feelings of the employees towards the business. This in turn has to be good for the business. The proverbial 'win win' situation.

So tackled positively, change and the future can be good news. For businesses to be successful they have to look to the future and embrace change. Standing still means going backwards in reality.

## **27th September 2006 - French thoughts**

Having just returned from a couple of weeks in the south of France, I have been pondering on the differences in our business cultures. A key one is that they have adopted the 35-hour week. Now, this was intended to prevent the exploitation of workers and to increase employment opportunities. The thinking being that if no one could work more than 35 hours, businesses would be forced to take on more people.

As with many ideas dreamed up by politicians and bureaucrats, theory and reality are rather different. With the high welfare costs that French employers have to pay, the last thing they do is to take on more staff, and I read about a number of restaurants that found it more cost effective to open for fewer hours.

After all, why open on a Monday or Tuesday for a handful of customers if you have to increase your headcount to allow you to serve them? I even read of one place that had made its entire staff redundant and then re-employed them on a casual basis as required.

And of course, the French love bureaucracy. Whilst away I read Tony Hawks' very funny book, 'A Piano in the Pyrenees', where he recounts being told that he didn't need permission to install a swimming pool in his garden. He just had to fill in a complex form to apply for permission not to need permission!

Another French institution is the 2-hour lunch. The reality is that many now only take an hour or an hour and a half. But the point is that they have a proper break in the middle of the day and a relaxed meal. I wonder whether we would do well to follow suit. Perhaps this break from the pressures of the working day would result in a less stressed workforce and maybe greater output in the afternoon.

Not entirely linked but in a similar vein, I have been considering the best way to approach a long journey. I remember a work colleague recounting how he had driven from London to Vienna in a single day. This is a journey of just over 900 miles. He reckoned the key was having a very refined car, as in his opinion, noise level was a significant factor in tiredness.

Well, I have just driven a similar distance to a small village a few miles beyond Montpellier. And having done it in my newly acquired, very refined Honda Accord, I agree with Charles, it is much less tiring. Having said that, I had an overnight stop en route. Not sure I could manage it in one go however refined the transport.

Still, the benefit was that it allowed us to re-make the acquaintance of Catherine and Alain Grenet at Le Marais in the small village of Voué, a few miles north of Troyes. As far as I can tell, they appear to run their hotel and restaurant more or less single handed. I suspect that their week is rather longer than the 35 hours permitted for paid employees. But perhaps passion for what you are doing and satisfied customers is compensation.

## **4th October 2006 - Passion, communication, supermarkets, music and regeneration**

"I don't think I'll ever calm down. I'm afraid that's me. Honestly, I'll just take one massive big 'woof' and I shall be gone. Heart - gone!" *Martin O'Neill*

Well we hope not Martin. It has to be said that one can see where he's coming from. Aston Villa's new manager is nothing if not excitable and passionate in all he does. Which goes some way to explain his success as a footballer and more recently as a manager.

Of course, Mr O'Neill isn't the only person who is passionate about what he does and lets the world know. Gordon Ramsey is another example; just wish he wouldn't swear so much though! Of course, you do not have to be excitable to be passionate about what you do. You just have to want to be the best at whatever it is you are doing.

Now the world of football often provides us with amusing examples of communications that didn't quite say what, presumably, was intended.

"Reading just had a great five-man move that involved everyone."  
Phil Thompson on Reading's "five-man" team.

"Cristiano is intelligent and understands the situation.....and Wayne just needs games."  
Sir Alex Ferguson on the difference between Ronaldo and Rooney.

Those two quotes seem to illustrate the problem. What we intend to say or what we mean may not be quite the same as the words that come out or the way that they are interpreted. Although the mathematical accuracy of Phil Thompson's comment may be questionable, there is no real problem in understanding his meaning.

And indeed, Sir Alex's message is quite clear unless taken out of context and viewed with mischievous eye. But that's one of the problems with trying to communicate. Those to whom we try to communicate often hear what they want or expect to hear. Preconceptions and even prejudices can get in the way of hearing what has really been said.

As I am drafting this ramble, Tesco have announced their half-year profits of £1.09 billion. I suppose that we should be pleased that here is a British company that is supremely successful. And yet there is that nagging feeling that these huge supermarket chains are not all good news.

But while we may have doubts about some aspects of supermarkets' operations, it is difficult to argue that they haven't provided what their customers want. And isn't that a pretty important ingredient in the success recipe? Perhaps more organisations should try it!

Last night I visited Symphony Hall in Birmingham for a performance of Elgar's oratorio *The Kingdom*, on the 100th anniversary of its first performance. Being honest it wasn't the most enjoyable musical experience that I have had; I didn't return home feeling uplifted as I have on many previous occasions. But Symphony Hall itself is always a wonderful experience. Generally reckoned to be one of the finest concert halls in the world, it is a tribute to those who pursued the vision for so long before finally achieving their ambition 15 years ago.

Another local visionary, of course, was Herbert Austin. It is a few weeks since I have driven past Longbridge and so it was good to see the progress being made on the new Longbridge Technology Park that is being developed on part of the old car-manufacturing site. But it was rather sad to see that demolition has started on the Old West Works, which was originally built as one of the wartime 'shadow factories'. West Works was assigned to the Admiralty and produced shells for the Navy.

Soon the Longbridge area will be transformed, as has much of Birmingham itself. In my view it is a fantastic city with a wonderful blend of ultra-modern buildings alongside those fabulous classic Victoria edifices. In my Ramble of 20th September I quoted John Kennedy: "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future." Birmingham and Longbridge have embraced that view.

### **11th October 2006 - Clip culture, singing to the world, shedding some light and STOP PRESS: a meeting with Geldof!**

Google has bought YouTube for \$1.65 million. Gosh! Amazing! Er, but who or what is You Tube I asked myself?

Apparently YouTube was launched in February 2005 and has grown into one of the most popular websites on the Internet and is part of what seems to be known as clip culture whereby individuals or companies can post video clips on the Internet.

YouTube has 100 million videos viewed every day and an estimated 72 million individual visitors each month. I am astonished. These all seem staggering figures, especially for an organisation that has been in being for less than two years.

I am reminded of a story I featured back in June about the singer Sandi Thom who made webcasts of her 'live concerts' in the basement of her flat. While the audience capacity in the flat itself was limited to just six people, by the middle of the second week she was performing to an audience of 70,000 via her website.

While I sit here contemplating these stories of how astonishing new technologies have allowed us to communicate without boundaries, to exchange ideas, to market our businesses, to sell goods, a scene from the last century (OK, I know it was only six years ago!) plays out the other side of the road from my office window.

There appears to be a programme to replace old concrete lamp posts with new steel versions. Rather than do the whole road in one go, it seems to be a completely random process. It only came to my attention a couple of weeks ago when some blokes turned up, dug a hole a few yards from the existing post and left the base of a metal lamp post loosely popped in the hole. A while later a different lorry turned up carrying barriers to place round the hole/post.

A week or so went by and the first gang turned up and removed the post! Then the other guys came and took away the barriers. Somewhere along the line the hole got filled in. Then a few hours later the whole process started again, but this time a few yards the other side of the existing lamp post. But this time the new post was firmly set in the ground and the hole filled.

As I watch now there are three more blokes digging up the adjacent pavement. Well, to be more accurate, one digging and two leaning on their shovels. I presume this is to locate the cable to connect to the new lamp. Oh, by the way, we still only have the base of the post. Presumably at a later stage the top half will be delivered. I wonder if they will have bulb for it or whether that will require a visit from another team.

I find it difficult to reconcile the two very different worlds of high tech communications and the public utilities, town councils or whoever is responsible for lamp posts. UPDATE: Another van arrived, then left, then our three men left and we still have a large hole in the pavement.

STOP PRESS: This afternoon (Tuesday) I was extraordinarily privileged to experience 45 unforgettable minutes in the company of Bob Geldof. Regrettably I didn't have Sir Bob to myself, but had to share the experience with a roomful of people at the B2B business exhibition at the Ricoh Arena in Coventry.

Above all he comes across as a thoroughly decent human being who is still angry at the injustices in the world and driven with a desire to do all he can to redress the balance.

A memorable moment was his recollection of events leading up to the Live 8 concert and the Gleneagles summit. He described how he told Tony Blair that he had to deliver the political solution, an agreement to restructuring and cancellation of third world debt. That without this agreement the Live 8 concert was pointless. The PM said that he couldn't guarantee the outcome but Geldof insisted that he had to otherwise the concert wouldn't go ahead.

It is often said that the Prime Minister gets nothing in return for his support for George Bush. Geldof said that simply was not true, as Blair had called in the favour at Gleneagles in a 2-hour one to one meeting with the US president. The result was Bush's support for the debt proposal, which was critical to getting the G8 agreement.

Not a bad achievement for an Irish musician!

### **18th October 2006 - Pause for thought, relaxed traffic and no digging cats.**

Last week I described a few snippets from my encounter with Bob Geldof. What I didn't talk about was his communication style. As you might expect, it was very informal and relaxed. But there was one aspect that fascinated me. Twice when answering questions from the audience, he paused for what seemed like an eternity before answering. In reality it was probably only 20 to 30 seconds before he started to speak.

This demonstrated two things. Firstly, here was a man who liked to think before opening his mouth, so what he said actually meant something. The second point is that he was sufficiently self-assured to be comfortable with the silence, not to feel that he should have instant answers. Perhaps we would all do well to listen to the other person and to think about what they have said before rushing in with our own opinion.

Now what is traffic calming? Don't we really mean driver calming? Three times I have seen children who have been knocked over. Seeing their pale, frightened faces leaves me with little tolerance for those who blatantly ignore speed limits in urban areas.

Any of us who drive in towns or cities will also be all too well aware of the problem of traffic congestion. How a journey of a couple of miles that should take five minutes actually takes 10 or 15.

So what's the answer? Traffic lights, speed humps, traffic islands? Or the latest craze round here, white lines and hatching to guide us where the road planners think we should go. No, actually none of these really solve the problem; in fact they can make it much worse. And in causing congestion, not only do they frustrate drivers but also lead to a significant rise in pollution. A vehicle going nowhere still emits exhaust gases - well, unless the engine is turned off.

In the Netherlands there has been an experiment to remove traffic lights and let motorists sort it out for themselves at junctions. Lo and behold, less congestion and less accidents! Could this be the way forward, not just for traffic but for a few other aspects of our over-regulated lives? Perhaps politicians should take note.

It seems that Sir Anthony Bamford has lost interest in buying Jaguar, allegedly because he got two for the price of one - sort of. Ford wanted the deal to include Land Rover, which didn't appeal to Mr JCB. Well why would it? He has all the off-road toys that he could possibly want!

### **25th October 2006 - iPods and doing it.**

Apple had a plan, followed through on it, and didn't deviate from it over time. It made a simple product that to this day performs the same task that it did on the day it was announced. It might do other things today, but those are secondary. The iPod was all about the music.

So said Rick LePage writing in Playlistmag about why the iPod proved such a success. Now I don't have an iPod and know even less about how it was developed. But I do understand the philosophy spelled out above.

Unfortunately far too many projects are started without a fully detailed plan and too many suffer from changes as they are developed. There seems to be a reluctance to spend time planning; let's get on with it and we'll make it up as we go along is the order of the day. The inevitable result is that ultimately it takes longer than if it time had been spent on thorough planning and it overruns its budget because the changes mean that some things have to be done twice.

I have just started to read a short book by Richard Branson. It has the unforgettable title of 'Screw It, Let's Do It'. Illustrated by stories from his life Branson explains his philosophy of weighing the risks, carefully planning, then just getting on and doing it. I began to realise the difference between him and normal mortals when he explained how he was at an airport in the Caribbean and found that his flight had been cancelled.

While everyone else was milling around wondering how they were going to get to their destination, Branson went and hired a plane, and then sold tickets to all the other passengers. This was some years before his Virgin airline came into being but obviously sowed the seed. I haven't found out yet how he got into the railway business!

Sir Richard's book is very short and so is this week's Ramble!

**1st November 2006 - Savaged by a mouse, stories of floods and ask the audience.**

Just like last week, this Ramble is going to be short. The reason being that I have a problem with my neck and shoulder, which I realised has been caused by a lot of work with my PC's mouse. The reason for this is that the relative height of my desk and chair isn't quite ideal so I have to lift my arm and stretch slightly to use the mouse.

In responsible businesses, health and safety is taken seriously, but I wonder how many self-employed people don't have the ideal work station and end up with problems that restrict their ability to work effectively.

My friend Trevor Gay has just published his fourth book, *I Wanna Tell You a Story*. I was privileged to be able to read a draft a few weeks back. In the book Trevor illustrates various management and leadership issues with anecdotes from his working life.

One that sticks in my mind is his account of how he was the on-call manager at a small hospital when a nearby river broke its banks and flooded the place. To add to the problem, the power supply and telephones (pre-mobile days) were out of action.

There were policies and procedures that had been written in the warmth of a comfortable office. But these didn't really address the situation. However, with a small number of staff and a few volunteers they were able to cope by pooling their combined knowledge and expertise.

In general, a group of people will have enough expertise between them to sort something out when required - if they are allowed to. Unfortunately arrogant managers often try to impose solutions without consulting those who really understand what needs to happen.

It is rather like the 'ask the audience principle' on the *Who wants to be a millionaire?* TV programme. If you ask enough people, you will get the right answer.

**8th November 2006 - Time, pebbles, popular culture, pushing the boundaries, whinging managers and stability.**

I was reading an article about 'making' more time. It suggested that one should always have odd things that can be done anywhere when there are a few minutes to spare, for example when a meeting is late starting, when waiting at an airport etc.

When I first started the website, preparation of Random Ramblings was a time consuming activity. Now I tend to add bits in at odd moments when a thought crosses my mind.

It's a similar concept to a theory of time management. You take a pile of different sized stones - lets call them rocks, pebbles and gravel for clarity, and a bucket.

Put the gravel in the bucket first, followed by the pebbles, and the chances are that you can't get all of the rocks in. (Try it at home.) Now do it the opposite way round. Put the rocks in the bucket first, followed by the pebbles, giving it a bit of a shake as you go. Now add the gravel, again giving it a shake. Hey presto! It all goes in.

So now list all of your tasks (I hope you keep lists.) Divide the tasks up into rocks - the big, important things, then pebbles - the medium sized tasks - and what's left is the gravel. Do the rocks tasks first, fitting in the pebble tasks next, and then shake things about a bit to squeeze in the gravel tasks as and when you can.

And going back to our bucket, one wag opened a can and tipped its contents in to soak in around the rocks, pebbles and gravel. The moral of the story being that if you plan your time, you can always fit in a beer!

Tonight (Wednesday) I'm going to Birmingham for a performance of La Bohème by Welsh National Opera. I think it is my favourite opera, from a musical perspective. I have heard/seen it a couple of times before, and I know that I should be more adventurous but ... well, I have concluded that obscure operas are obscure for a very good reason!

So having tried quite a few lesser known ones, I have decided that, if I'm paying £40 for a ticket, I might as well go to one that I know that I will enjoy, even if it isn't a new experience.

Of course it is right that opera companies, symphony orchestras, product designers, creative people in general, should push the boundaries and try new things. But in some fields they would do well to recognise that many customers are conservative by nature.

And talking of fields, this week saw the 20th anniversary of Sir Alex Ferguson taking over at Manchester United. I think that he has set a splendid example that other managers would do well to follow. Yes, he absolutely refuses to speak to anyone from the BBC! Now if only that whinging pair, Mourinho and Wenger would follow the same example!

Whilst not an absolute rule, perhaps not surprisingly, the fewer managers that a football club has had over time, the more successful it has been. This tends to indicate that club boards should be more patient and in time things will work out. After all, it was quite a few years before Sir Alex brought success to United, but hasn't he done well since?

Maybe the same approach should be applied to businesses: keep things stable, evolve rather than go for wholesale change; and perhaps they would be more successful. If nothing else, they would save a fortune on consultants' fees!

### **15th November 2006 - Try your own products, stunning operatic marketing and a game of two halves.**

Delta Airlines operations director, Tim Canavan, has admitted that their planes have become dirty and dingy but that they will now have a new emphasis on 'safety, cleanliness and on-time flying'. That's nice!

Good news, they are going to clean the loos after every flight and even pick up rubbish. Better still, they'll vacuum the carpets overnight (but presumably not on night flights) and give them a deep clean every 30 days rather than the current 15 months!

One can only conclude that Mr Canavan and his fellow directors fly with other airlines, although apparently other US based airlines aren't much better. Perhaps they stay at home.

This set me wondering how many senior executives have real experience of their own company's products. And if they do, do they suffer the frustrations that the rest of us sometimes experience. Of course, top people usually have someone to take care of whatever crops up, so they probably don't get to feel the pain.

In last week's Ramble I mentioned that I was going to a performance of Welsh National Opera's *La Bohème* on Wednesday evening. If you don't know the story, it ends in a tear-jerking scene with the heroin, Mimi, dying of consumption, accompanied by heart-rendingly beautiful music.

On Thursday morning the postman delivered a small package containing paper tissues. They were folded so that through the cellophane wrapper one read, "If WNO made you cry last night ...". You then open the packet, extract a tissue, unfold it and read the trailers for two of their operas for next season, *Carmen* and *Madam Butterfly*, both of which include emotional scenes.

The by-line on the tissues is, "Book tickets before 20 December 2006 and we will send you another packet of tissues for a friend"! Brilliant! This must be one of the cleverest, most innovative bits of marketing that I have ever seen. Oh, by the way, the opera wasn't bad either!

Sometimes customer service (lack of) makes you want to cry. I have just had an interesting experience where I'm not quite sure whether I was impressed or not! When in York earlier in the year we bought a suitcase, which was in a sale at a department store. It is one of those that has a couple of wheels and an extending handle. Very handy when travelling on trains and planes.

The second time we used it the handle failed to retract when we arrived in a hotel lobby, so I was forced to struggle up the stairs to our room with a couple of feet of handle projecting. It wasn't practical to take it back to the shop in York, so my wife wrote to the manufacturer. After three weeks there was no response, so I phoned them up one Friday afternoon.

The phone rang and rang and no one answered it. By now I was pretty irate so I sent them a fairly terse email. This generated an automated reply to the effect that they closed at midday on Fridays, and because they had a backlog of emails after the weekend, it could take up to three days to respond.

By this point it would be fair to say that steam pressure was well and truly up! Come Monday morning they were high on the list of my 'targets' for a call. But before I got to them I received an email apologising, but saying that they had no record of my wife's letter. OK, give them the benefit of the doubt as we all know that Royal Mail lose millions of letters each year. The email said that if I called a certain number, they would arrange to collect the case and get it fixed.

So I called the number and got a very pleasant lady who took my details, asked me to put a note in the case explaining the problem and including my contact details. She then arranged for a courier to collect it, which they did at the appointed time. By this point they were now back in my good books.

I asked if they could repair it by a certain date as my wife was due to visit our daughter in Barcelona and wanted to use the case. In fact, ultimately, they achieved this with a week to spare. More brownie points, but ...

I got in from a meeting to find that there was a message on the answer phone from the courier who was trying to return my case. They wanted to know my house number, as it hadn't been included in their instructions. OK, so we sorted that and arranged delivery. When the guy arrived he commented that it was somewhat easier with the house number, given that the road is a couple of miles long!

He also said that he had tried to deliver it 'on spec' earlier as he was coming my way, and had asked around but no one seemed to know me. I looked at the address label - my name was mis-spelt, as was the locality and Bromsgrove was given an extra B at the beginning! No wonder he struggled. My note, included in the case when it was sent off, was typed, so my handwriting couldn't have been the excuse for messing up the return address details.

So how do I rate the service I received, discounting whatever happened to the original letter from my wife?

Pros: friendly, helpful lady in customer service; no questions asked, send it back and we'll fix it; rapid repair turn round; good courier service (but only so because I am available during 'normal' office hours).

Cons: the whole organisation shuts down at lunch time on Fridays; worse, they don't have a recorded message to advise of this; they emailed me to ask me to phone them rather than phoning me (I had included my phone number in my email); sloppy addressing made the return delivery more difficult than it needed to be.

Conclusion? They could have come away with the full three points for customer care, whereas they probably just about earned one point for a draw. Why is it that some organisations can do the hard things but don't seem able to get the little things right?

## **22nd November 2006 - Bonkers BA, unusual Brazilians, advertising gone mad, deer reinvention**

What a mess BA has got into over its ruling that one of its employees cannot wear a small crucifix necklace because it is jewellery, whereas Muslim women can wear headscarves and Sikh men can wear turbans, because they are both seen as religious items.

Whilst I can see BA's logic, it seems to me that by adopting an inflexible attitude to their policy on wearing jewellery, they have created a huge amount of negative publicity, with everyone from the Archbishop of York to Cabinet ministers suggesting that they are barmy.

A somewhat more flexible and enlightened attitude to running an organisation is exemplified by the Brazilian businessman, Ricardo Semler, head of Semco, one of the country's major companies.

Actually it's not really true to say he is the head, as they don't have an organisation as such, no rulebook or written policies. They don't even have a business plan.

Basically, employees run the business as they want, working on the principle that the front line knows best. Staff can pretty much choose how they work. If they want to work from the beach, that's fine. They even decide their own salaries and bonuses using a process of peer group review.

Even Semler admits that this anarchic way of operating is unlikely to be adopted universally, and yet the business continues to grow at a rapid rate, diversifying into new directions at the whim of employees.

And do you know the best bit about the organisation from my perspective? They don't have a personnel department (aka human resources). They don't even have a headquarters. Well, why would you need one when you can sit on the beach with your laptop?

Somewhere near the other end of the spectrum of enlightenment, we have the NHS. Apparently hospitals are going to be allowed to advertise! Surely the whole point of a health service is to keep people out of hospitals, not advertise to get them in?

This seems like yet another daft idea, one that will line the pockets of advertising agencies rather putting the money into patient care. The NHS already spends mega-bucks on consultants (not the medical sort) when they could get better answers for free. Yes, that's it, by asking their staff.

Continuing with the advertising theme, I see that the department store chain House of Fraser is considering getting rid of its prancing-stag logo in a bid to 'modernise' its image. It is claimed that culling the stag would be part of a strategic plan for House of Fraser to reinvent itself.

I would have thought that by now top management would have realised that the logo, company name, colour scheme in the executive loo, or whatever, is not the answer to business success. I don't want to harp on about a certain airline, but I do recall that getting rid of the union flag on the tail of its aircraft wasn't the best judged decision.

Other daft ideas come to mind. I have seen it described as "the most ruinous decision since the biblical scam that saw Esau swap his birthright for a bowl of stew." Yes it was the decision by the Post Office to rename itself Consignia!

I think I'll renew my campaign to get the companies act changed to make it mandatory that every board should have at least one member who is a child! Why?

"Strategies are okayed in boardrooms that even a child would say are bound to fail. The problem is there is never a child in the boardroom." *Victor Palmieri, corporate turnaround specialist.*

**29th November 2006 - BA sees the light, wise judgements, website warnings, sales of red tape forecast to slump, too much of the stuff can make you ill and school trips are back on.**

It seems that common sense is going to prevail at BA after all. Although only after they got themselves into an almighty mess over jewellery and religious symbols.

This change of heart has only come about because of the howls of protests from many people, not least potential customers and shareholders who were threatening to take their business and investments elsewhere.

Many years ago, Lord Denning, hearing a case brought against a cabinet minister (memory fails me as to which one), ruled along the lines that, 'be you ever so high and mighty, you are not above the law'. This could be re-phrased as, 'be you ever so high and mighty, you are not above the customer'.

M&S has come out top in a survey of the website user-friendliness of twenty high street brands, which is good news for them in the light of the findings of another recently published survey. It found 75% of the 1,058 people asked would not return to websites that took longer than four seconds to load.

This should be a warning to organisations that succumb to the creative urges of website designers who want to demonstrate how clever they are. Want to know what I mean? Take a look at the Honda UK site. ([www.honda.co.uk/car](http://www.honda.co.uk/car))

Hmm, just tried it. Seems you can only buy used cars or company cars from them this week! The new cars section only loads to 32% before stalling! So you may not be able to see what I mean!

The Prime Minister has told the CBI conference that he intends to cut red tape affecting business in a drive to make the UK more competitive. Apparently he has set each government department a target of a 25% reduction in red tape.

Now if you cut out 25% of bureaucracy, presumably you will need 25% less civil servants to administer it. So we can be reasonably sure that Sir Humphrey (of *Yes Minister* fame) and friends will make sure that the red tape manufacturing industry continues to thrive. And in case you are wondering, the origin of the terminology red tape being used to describe bureaucracy, is because legal documents are traditionally tied with the said ribbon.

It is interesting that the Prime Minister should choose to announce this a couple of weeks after a consultant psychiatrist claimed that most of his patients are public servants, many of them doctors, suffering from stress as a result of the huge amount of bureaucracy that they have to deal with as a result of political meddling.

Dr. Timothy Cantopher writing in Public Servant magazine commented, "When mistakes are made by public servants, there is routinely an inquiry, followed by the identification of a scapegoat and then a new 'ream' of regulations, which ends up destroying the service itself."

"Instead of one catastrophe, we now have an environment that stops people doing their jobs, leading to a downward spiral of mediocrity and disillusionment."

It is good news that the government has recognised the value of school trips in the education and development of children. Of course, many of these have been abandoned in recent years because of the fear that teachers have had of the consequences for them if things should go wrong.

I imagine that another reason that teachers have been reluctant to get involved with extra-curricular activities is that they have been too busy filling in paperwork to keep OFSTED and the Department for Education happy!

I think it's time to up the campaign to bin policies, procedures, targets and other paperwork and just let people use their common sense.

**6th December 2006 - Virgin economy class, Yahoo Britney, small business technology, a social conscience and working from the beach.**

Virgin Atlantic is to start trials at Heathrow and Gatwick aimed at reducing fuel consumption and, therefore, CO2 emissions. The plan is to tow aircraft to near the end of the runway so that they will have their engines running for a shorter period.

Apparently this relatively simple move could save up to two tonnes of fuel per flight. Virgin reckons this could amount to a reduction of 120,000 tonnes in carbon emissions a year if extended across its fleet at all airports.

In his book, *Simplicity is the Key* ([www.simplicityisthekey.com](http://www.simplicityisthekey.com)), Trevor Gay argues that we tend to make life more complex than it needs to be. Here is a perfect example of keeping things simple. No high tech solution, just a diesel powered tow truck to get the plane to where it needs to be.

Now if they were to tow them down the M4 to Bristol to be that bit closer to the States, think how much that would save! And Bristol has a really nice little airport!

The search engine Yahoo claims that 'Britney Spears' has been the most searched for term during 2006. I presume that anyone wanting useful information uses Google!

Have you ever wondered how we managed before search engines, the Internet and, of course, Broadband that makes it economically viable to spend our lives gazing at the small screen? Sometimes it is even useful!

It is well documented that the UK is increasingly moving away from the traditional large industries - steel making, car and ship building, textile manufacturing and the like. The emphasis is now very much on small and medium sized enterprises, the so-called SMEs.

Not only does the Internet afford the means to research extensively, but also it allows small businesses to reach potential consumers anywhere in the world in a way that they could not possibly afford to do via conventional advertising.

This new world of small businesses has also spawned a network of supporting businesses offering everything from website design to a virtual office. The average start-up business cannot afford to employ someone full time to answer the phone, book meetings and the like. But there is a solution at hand.

There are now any number of businesses offering *front office* services. Basic phone answering/diary management costs around £50 per month and obviously rises for additional services. Try employing anyone to answer your phone for £50 a month!

Of course, in some parts of the world, £50 a month would be a princely income. A new study by a United Nations research institute shows that the richest 2% of adults in the world own more than half of all household wealth. The report, from the World Institute for Development Economics Research at the UN University, says that the poorer half of the world's population own barely 1% of global wealth.

I was pondering on a set of business values for a new venture that I am involved with. I came across a set that I rather liked on John Niland's Success 121 website ([www.success121.com](http://www.success121.com)). They included:  
*We are entitled to high financial rewards as a consequence of exceeding the expectations of clients and associates.*

But then concluded with:  
*Success 121 are enthusiastic supporters of Pump Aid, an organisation that uses simple, sustainable technology to provide clean water for drinking and irrigation in Africa.*

I like this. In my view there is nothing wrong with high profits or income, but it is good to remember that most of us in the western world are very privileged.

Random Ramble on the 22nd November took a brief look at the views of Brazilian businessman Ricardo Semler, who allows employees flexibility on what they do and when they do it. Semler commented that it was OK to work on the beach if that suited them.

Whilst I don't know of anyone who does that, I do know of organisations that allow employees to work flexibly, whether this is in terms of hours or, indeed, location. With laptops, Broadband, mobile phones and the like, your office may well be in London but it doesn't mean that you have to go there every day.

This approach allows people to take jobs further from home than would otherwise be possible and, of course, working from home cuts down on traffic congestion and hence CO2 emissions. Perhaps the Government would do well to encourage this sort of approach rather than road pricing.

### **13th December 2006 - Low tech Virgins, beyond Calais, a skill free zone and the final Ramble of the year with HRH The Prince of Wales.**

It is reported that updated safety standards for laptop batteries should be in place within the next 12 months, a working group of computer firms has said. This follows on from some Sony batteries overheating and even exploding. The risk of this happening caused several airlines, including Virgin, to restrict the use of laptops on flights.

This restriction would not have troubled Sir Richard Branson as, apparently, he manages to run Virgin and his other businesses without the use of laptops, electronic diaries or even a mobile phone. Perhaps this puts into perspective the behaviour of those who cannot manage to drive their car without having a phone attached to their ear.

The Institute for Public Policy Research has published figures showing that around 5.5 million Britons live permanently abroad, with a further 0.5 million doing so on a temporary basis. In other words, roughly 1 in 10 of us live outside of these shores.

As you might expect, many are the middle-aged, retired or semi-retired, who are investing in foreign property. More disturbingly, many of those going appear to be young and highly skilled; the government estimated that four in 10 of those leaving in 2004 were in managerial or professional occupations.

It is generally accepted that if you don't have a skilled workforce, a strong economy will become unsustainable. Other countries have much better skill levels than the UK with India and China, in particular, fast overtaking us. The UK is "on track to achieve undistinguished mediocrity" if it fails to upgrade the skills of its workforce by 2020.

That was the blunt message from the UK skills audit, the Leitch Report, which was fully endorsed by the chancellor in his pre-budget report.

My very first Ramble on 26th April 2006 contained the following paragraphs:

*A friend lent me a recent issue of Personnel Today. Flicking through the pages I spotted a somewhat depressing item about European businesses reducing the amount of training given to employees. From 23.9 hours average in 2003, the number fell to 19.7 in 2004. And the UK was below the European average at 17.3. On the other hand, training in the US is on the rise.*

*Given the way that traditional industries are disappearing to China and other developing countries, it would appear that the only way to maintain a prosperous European economy is by focussing on the high value, high tech or specialist sectors. I would have thought that required a more highly trained workforce.*

So we have the worrying combination of a skills drain and insufficient training. This lack of training is especially disappointing given that there are many subsidised courses available for small and medium sized businesses.

It would be interesting to know whether businesses are not aware of the help available or whether they are just not willing to release people from their daily duties. I suppose that many small companies are struggling to survive from day to day, so even a subsidised course is expenditure that can be avoided.

As this is the last Random Ramble for this year, I'll end on a positive note. This year I have become involved with The Prince's Trust. The Trust helps young people by giving practical and financial support, developing skills such as confidence and motivation.

It works with 14-30 year-olds in the UK who have struggled at school, have been in care, are long-term unemployed or have been in trouble with the law.

There are one million young people in the UK who are not in education, employment or training who need our help. In 30 years, The Prince of Wales's charity has helped over half a million young people and continues to support 100 more every day.

The Trust supported 40,805 young people last year of whom:

- 18,384 participants were educational underachievers, including young people with low basic skills, those truanting and those excluded from school
- 15,786 participants were unemployed
- 3,622 participants were offenders or ex-offenders
- 2,364 were in or leaving care

In 2005/6 the Trust helped:

- 13,886 young people at risk of exclusion from school through the 1267 xl clubs operating in more than 621 schools across the UK
- 8,802 young people gain skills and confidence as part of a 12- week personal development programme Team in over 300 locations across the UK
- 9,649 young people in business start-up - helping 3,452 to start their own business and providing ongoing support to 6,197 young people in their enterprises
- 8,327 young people move forward in their lives through mentoring
- 3,432 young people with cash awards to help develop their skills and employability
- 1,498 people in 248 groups with funding to help devise and deliver their own community project
- 321 young people develop their self-confidence, skills and employability through Live, a six month music and arts programme
- 188 young people develop confidence and skills through European work placements or community projects

The Trust delivers high quality practical solutions nationwide

- 75% of all the young people supported last year moved into employment, education or training.
- After 12 months more than 80% of young people helped to start up a business were still self-employed, in employment, education or training.
- Last year 68% of young people who completed the Team programme survey went on to employment, training or education.
- Since the launch of the Team programme in 1990, more than 90,000 young people have joined the personal development programme.
- Since 1983 The Prince's Trust has helped over 63,000 young people set up in business.

Getting young lives working regenerates communities:

- Through the Team programme The Trust contributes more than £4.75m to local communities through community projects such as the renovation of a community centre or creation of a children's play area.

The work of the trust relies on more than 7000 volunteers, major corporate partners, support from over 60 Premier and Football League Clubs, 14 County Cricket Clubs and the English, Scottish and Welsh Rugby teams.

For more information on the work of the Prince's Trust, click here:

[www.princes-trust.org.uk](http://www.princes-trust.org.uk)

This year my friends at A-Plan Insurance in Sheldon made a generous donation to the Trust. Click here to access the A-Plan website: [www.aplan.co.uk](http://www.aplan.co.uk) or email James Shaw and his team at Sheldon: [sheldon@a-plan.co.uk](mailto:sheldon@a-plan.co.uk). or give them a call on: 0121 742 7961

So that's about it for this year. I hope you all have a great Christmas and a brilliant 2007.

### **3rd January 2007 - Only Excellence**

Nearly 25 years late, over Christmas I finally got round to reading Tom Peters' and Robert Waterman's seminal 'management' book *In Search of Excellence*. However, despite the passage of time it strikes me that many of the excellence practices described by Peters and Waterman would benefit so many organisations today.

I am pleased to note that one of my *Two Ps in Success* features heavily. The research for *Excellence* showed that companies that excelled were very People focussed.

Successful businesses understand that the customer is king (or queen). This seems so obvious and yet many (the majority?) of businesses fail to adopt it as the key operating requirement. Of course, most will tell us how important we are as customers, but few turn their words into deeds. The very best work with their customers to develop products so that the product is what the customer actually wants, not what the business thinks they want. And then they go to extraordinary lengths to deliver it.

Likewise, successful businesses require that the contribution made by all employees is valued, and that everyone has a contribution to make. The guy on the shop floor (making the products or selling to customers) is far more likely to know the best way to do things than a manager sitting in an office. Excellent companies have exceptional communications i.e. they talk to each other! They go out of their way to ensure that people meet and talk. Meetings, formal and mostly informal, often over a coffee, rule the day, rather than paperwork.

OK, off for a coffee and a chat now!

### **10th January 2007 - The not so green of Ireland, stalking, Red eclipse of the Sun, declining giants and wow bankers**

Ian Pearson, the climate change minister, sparked a furious row with Ryanair boss Michael O'Leary when he described the airline as "the irresponsible face of capitalism" and said Mr O'Leary was "completely off the wall".

Mr O'Leary's response was that the minister was "foolish and ill-informed" and "hasn't a clue what he's talking about". Maybe not, but it seems he's in good company. A survey of MPs by a national newspaper showed that they were remarkably ill informed on key issues such as the Middle East. All the more concerning as several were members of Commons committees or interest groups dealing with ... the Middle East!

I was under the impression that stalking i.e. taking an obsessive interest in someone and persistently following them was a criminal offence. So how come it's OK to do it if you happen to be a professional photographer? What right do these people have to harass people in the public eye, whether they are politicians, pop stars, footballers or indeed, the girlfriend of the heir to the throne?

Of course, the most effective way to combat this is to boycott the papers and magazines that publish the photographs. Consumer power is the most effective means to change any product or business.

A very powerful demonstration of this was seen at the Liverpool - Arsenal FA Cup match at Anfield last Saturday. The target was the Sun newspaper and in particular, its former editor Kelvin Mackenzie, or as a recently formed fans' group website termed him, "the despicable former editor of low-life gutter rag The Sun".

Anyone who saw the game on TV cannot fail to have been aware of the co-ordinated protest of the entire Kop which went on for the first six minutes of the game. This group of die-hard fans have recently banded together to form an organisation called *Reclaim The Kop (RTK)*, the aim of which is to ensure appropriate standards are observed by all who follow LFC.

Although this group is independent of the club, their Kop Charter is published on the LFC official website ([www.liverpoolfc.tv](http://www.liverpoolfc.tv)).

The sixth of ten points in the charter is:

*On 15th April 1989, many thousands of us set off to support our team in the semi final of the FA Cup. 96 of us never came home again. We will always honour the memory of those who died at Hillsborough. In our respect for them and their families, and in our disdain for the unprincipled and unregulated hacks who scared up a shameful pack of lies out of a desperate human tragedy, we will never purchase or read The Sun newspaper, and we deplore the reading of it by any Liverpool supporter.*

It will be interesting to track the future sales performance of the Sun in the Liverpool area.

US car giant Ford has conceded that it will be overtaken next year in its home market by Japanese rival Toyota, according to the New York Times. It is also expected that Toyota will overhaul GM this year as the world's number one car maker.

How can this be possible? It's simple, Toyota and other Japanese manufacturers have listened to their customers. The same is true of Commerce Bank in the US, which is one of three winners of the Tom Peters Most Valued Companies Award 2006. The following report comes from Tom Peters' website ([www.tompeters.com](http://www.tompeters.com)).

#### *Commerce Bank*

*They love deposits. They hate stupid rules (remind me to tell you about the Red "no stupid rules" button on every computer terminal). They want people to come into the branch rather than use the ATM or Web. They keep said branches open all the damn time (no exaggeration). They love individuals of modest net worth. They think that when you call them you should speak to a ... l-i-v-i-n-g h-u-m-a-n b-e-i-n-g. They love to give out dog biscuits and balloons—and think nothing of taking 8,000 employees to Radio City Music Hall to celebrate a good year.*

*They think "Wow!" is the coolest word ever (no wonder I love them!!), and that it belongs in banking. They like fun ... and I guess they don't like the Bank of America: "We defy conventional wisdom, operating more like the young bucks at Starbucks than the old farts at the Bank of America."—Vernon Hill, founder and CEO.*

*J.D. Power likes them ... for example, Commerce recently won a Power award for best customer service for a bank in New York City by placing 1st in 5 of 6 categories and 2nd in the sixth.*

*They are incredibly profitable in hyper-tough East Coast retail banking markets and growing like Topsy. Hill loves revenue growth ("Our whole story is growing revenue"). And he believes religiously in getting that revenue growth organically ("No great American retailer was ever created by doing acquisitions"); growth-by-acquisition, he insists, is invariably followed by a cost cutting mentality that turns the customer into a second class citizen.*

So I think that the message is clear, upset the customer at your peril. If you want to succeed, forget the advice from David Cameron to hug a hoodie, try cuddling a customer instead.

### **17th January 2007 - Another fine mess, small is beautiful, freezing sailors**

The airline industry has had more than its fair share of problems recently. We've had several revisions to security arrangements, dense fog, a slippery runway at Bristol and now the increase to the Air Passenger Duty.

Now while it would be unreasonable to blame the government for fog or Bristol's runway, the chaos caused by the tax hike is entirely of their making. The increases were announced on 6th December and are effective from 1st February.

This leaves the airlines with the difficult job of asking for more money from passengers who booked prior to 6th December. Well done to BA for deciding to absorb the cost rather than spend money on additional admin while also annoying passengers.

Increasingly I despair at the muddled thinking and increasing attempts to control our lives, only thwarted by the organisational incompetence that is much of the Civil Service. You would have thought that more than half a million civil servants would have been sufficient to run the country efficiently. You also might have thought that 24,000 at the Home Office would have been able to track criminals, illegal immigrants and the like.

In *In Search of Excellence*, Peters and Waterman make the point that Excellent companies have recognised that it is impossible to organise on a grand scale, so they don't try. Rather, they push responsibility down into small, semi-autonomous units which are of a size that is manageable.

Apparently it has been decided to freeze promotions in the Navy for the next five years to control costs. Seems like a pretty good way to demoralize sailors. Maybe a better cost cutting idea would be to fire the civil servant who came up with that proposal. In fact how about freezing promotions at the Ministry of Defence for the next five years?

David Cameron talks about reducing central control and putting the decision making back with those charged with delivering services such as the NHS. He is absolutely right but I wonder whether the inertia in the system and the stonewalling of scores of Sir Humphreys will derail his laudable ambitions.

**24th January 2007 - Visiting the far-east, amazing cathedrals, enthusiastic staff, proper shops, wealthy Ireland and French follies.**

No, I haven't been to Japan or China, just the far east of England, to be more precise, Norfolk! One of the pleasant aspects of the week was the level of enthusiasm we encountered in various establishments.

On the way we deviated via Ely to visit the cathedral. It is quite rightly highly regarded architecturally. Quite simply, it is the most extraordinary cathedral that I have visited. And before the good folk of Norwich complain, theirs is a pretty impressive building too.

Whilst in Ely we had lunch at Pizza Express - a more 'upmarket' establishment than its name might suggest. Quite clearly the staff enjoyed working there, and this was reflected in their friendliness and enthusiasm for what they were doing.

We stayed at a spa hotel, Dunston Hall, which is situated just south of Norwich. Again, the staff were friendly, enthusiastic and committed to providing good service. And this wasn't just while on duty. I encountered one of them in the jacuzzi, who was genuinely interested in my reasons for visiting and proud of his city.

One point of particular interest was how young were many of the staff. Young people are often criticized for a lack of interest or commitment, but these examples show that given the right training, encouragement and work environment, they can be a valuable asset to any organisation.

If you should find yourself in north Norfolk, I would recommend a visit to Holt. This small Georgian town is completely different from most in that it has 'proper' shops - the sort that were common in most towns until the national retail chains took over, in the process making one town look very much like another. It would be interesting to know how Holt has managed to retain this individuality.

Now it's a long way from Ireland to Holt, which is a shame as the Irish have lots of money to spend according to the latest figures released for GDP per capita. They show Ireland in sixth place - only countries with favourable tax regimes or high oil revenues are ahead. The UK is down in 18th spot.

When you look at the proportion of weekly working time absent from work i.e. annual and public leave, maternity and parental leave, sickness absence etc, we find that the Irish only miss 9.8% compared with the UK's 15.5% and France (which trails the UK in GDP per capita) at 26.4%.

In my Ramble on 27th September 2006 I talked about the fact that the French adoption of the 35-hour week (to prevent the exploitation of workers and to increase employment opportunities), wasn't quite working out as anticipated, particularly in the restaurant business. Some restaurants were finding it more cost effective to close on Mondays and Tuesdays rather than employ extra people now that staff are limited to working 35 hours.

I have come across further evidence of the folly of this legislation, this time in the vineyards of France. The limited working week coupled to the very high social welfare employment costs make it very difficult for vigneron to employ the amount of labour required to look after a vineyard and the wine making process, both of which are extremely time consuming at various times of the year.

It has become all but impossible to justify financially, hand-picking grapes, and so the vast majority are now picked by huge monster-like machines that straddle the rows of vines and do the work of dozens of pickers in a fraction of the time previously required.

Still, I suspect that the plight of French vigneron will be of little concern to our affluent Irish friends as they sit supping a pint of Guinness!

And finally, our Winter break in the east was organised by my friends at Hotelshop UK. If you are travelling around the UK, save yourself hassle and money by letting them make your hotel bookings.

### **31st January 2007 - Bollocks, a load of Ps, common sense, customer feedback, quotations from America and from tablecloths to knickers.**

Whilst reading Richard Branson's autobiography I discovered that the origin of the word *bollocks* was not quite as I had believed. Apparently it was 18th century slang for a priest - don't ask me why. It appears that parishioners were often not that impressed with the thoughts coming from the pulpit, hence the term talking bollocks.

Now on that subject, I have come across an organisation with 87 policies! They have a 21 page booklet just to list them and explain what they cover. I dread to think how many pages the actual policies take up. I wonder how many of their employees have read them. So it isn't just 18th century priests ....!

The US fashion chain Nordstrom has a 'handbook' given to all new employees on their first day. The boss explains this is the company policy for front line staff in how to deal with customers.

This 'book' of company rules is about three inches thick. When the employee examines it they discover in fact it is one solid block in the shape of a book. On the front is the company name and policy heading etc. On the back it simply says,  
*"The Company rule - Use your judgment with customers at all times."*

As I told you last week, we had been to Norwich for a few days and stayed at Dunston Hall hotel. On our return I sent a letter to the general manager to congratulate him on a well run hotel and pointing out a few areas where I felt that they could do even better. Now I will willingly confess to being a nit-picking perfectionist, and some of my comments were probably in that vein. Nevertheless, by return post I received a very nice letter thanking me for taking the trouble to write.

I suspect that he thought similarly to Marshall Field, founder of US department store group who said, *"Those who enter to buy, support me. Those who come to flatter, please me. Those who complain, teach me how I may please others so that more will come. Only those hurt me who are displeased but do not complain. They refuse me permission to correct my errors."*

I was careful to be balanced in my comments, remembering the words of the American businesswoman, Mary Kay Ash, to “*Sandwich every bit of criticism between two thick layers of praise.*”

A problem not faced by 18th century priests was having a woman come to confession to ask if it was a sin to make G-strings! It seems that developments in the traditional lace making industry in the deeply Catholic Polish village of Koniakow have caused quite a stir.

Artisans in this 200-year old industry who used to create gowns and altar cloths now craft lingerie for sale all over the world. The renowned lace makers have found that traditional lace craft was too expensive, so it wasn't selling anymore. They say the underwear is quicker to make and easier to sell than traditional goods such as tablecloths.

Of course, being thoroughly modern, they have a website ([www.koniakow.com](http://www.koniakow.com)) which, in the interests of business research, I had to visit! I just can't quite get my head around a vision of some very old lady in traditional Polish costume making some of the items shown!

I think that this is a wonderful account of developing to meet the challenges of the modern world. It is this creative approach to seeking out new markets and new ways of doing things that may allow many traditional businesses to survive and prosper in the 21st century.

#### **7th February 2007 - Friendly websites, faceless companies, email nuisance**

Go to the *Contact Us* page on the website of electronics company, Wood & Douglas and you find the following:  
'At W&D we still believe a friendly voice should be the first thing you hear when you call us. We have therefore tried to avoid a '1' for this and '2' for that approach. When you call you will hear Jackie who will connect you to the correct team member. At peak times it can be a very busy switchboard so please be patient.'

I like that. It immediately gives me a warm feeling about the company. Interestingly enough, Madeleine McGrath posting on the Tom Peters website blog commented:  
“I well remember the frustration of one former client, who, on introducing a highly efficient CRM telephone system found that although performance efficiency improved, customer satisfaction plummeted. Although customers previously had to wait to get service, when they eventually did get through, they felt well treated. The new system made them feel 'processed'.”

A little earlier today I was looking at the Virgin website. Among the gems I found were:

*Bath time fun - The worst thing about business travel can be being away from home. We hit on the idea of putting a rubber duck in the bathrooms of Virgin-owned hotels, as a small gesture to help a harried businessman feel more at home. Who wouldn't love a rubber ducky?*

*Virgin Atlantic Cargo - Top class treatment for cargo (minus the in-flight massage!) Offering comprehensive services for all your cargo needs.*

Tabs entitled *Company blurb* rather than the more conventional 'Corporate Information'.

And in the 'hot jobs' section: *Finally, we know that not all of our companies are big enough to have whizzy websites of their own, but that doesn't mean they're not on the look out for fab people to join them.*

I like websites like these. They give the organisations a human face and make me feel that I would like to do business with them. One thing that frustrates me about websites, especially those of large companies, is the fact that they are very coy about listing their board of directors. Of course, any of us can go to Companies House and pay the small fee for company information that will tell us, but why the big secret? Is it that these people are afraid that a disgruntled customer may want to speak to them or a mad inventor may pester them with his latest invention?

Customer services, customer support, help desks and the like are all very well and good, but sometimes you want to go directly to the person responsible for a particular branch of the organisation. Some help desks are very good and will give you the relevant information, others can be very evasive. Again I ask, what's the big secret?

Moving from websites to emails, I tend to get quite a few from business organisations that take the form of a newsletter, often with interesting/useful information. I don't generally mind these providing that they are not too frequent - once a month is fine. A good, and always welcome example, is John Niland's Success 121 monthly bulletin which contains interesting information, tips for business efficiency and a joke or funny story, as well as promoting John's latest courses ([www.success121.com](http://www.success121.com).)

Then there are companies that you have used to buy stuff over the Internet so, of course, they have your email address. They just want to sell you something else so they email their latest special offers. Well providing that they only do it every few weeks, I can just about cope with that. But with some I get emails arriving every few days. So what do I do? That's right, I unsubscribe.

I just wonder why the marketing departments of these companies think that anyone wants to be bombarded by their emails. A simple test that all companies should apply to all of their activities is to ask the question, if I were the customer, what would I think?

#### **14th February 2007 - More on email nuisance, unruly politicians, the Chancellor and skills.**

I talked last week about companies that abuse email access to potential customers by bombarding them with 'junk' emails. Normally I only name 'goodies' in Random Ramblings, but I'll make an exception this week to 'advise' about a company called PhotoBox. Just be warned, once they get your details you will be plagued by emails from them. So what do you do - that's right, unsubscribe. Ha, if only it were that simple. Amazingly, although they can start to bombard you as soon as they get your details, the unsubscribing process 'can take up to a month' to complete!

I wonder whether their marketing department really thinks about the image that they are creating for their company. As I said last week, put yourself in the place of the customer - would you really want to receive advertising every couple of days?

Talking of nuisances, I was reading an article on the BBC website about problems in India caused by first-time flyers who don't understand 'the etiquette' of flying - things like not trying to get off the plane when it is on the move for example! According to the BBC's Damian Grammaticas, it is reported that although troublemakers were often first-time fliers, bureaucrats, politicians and other professionals had also proved unruly. Politicians unruly, surely not!

Now I would never suggest that Gordon Brown is an unruly politician (despite what Mrs Blair allegedly thinks of him), but he is worried about Indians and Chinese - not unruly ones but well educated ones. In fact many people are now warning about the staggering level of skills and graduate output in these countries.

Mr Brown believes "we cannot continue in the modern world with a situation where so many people in the UK have got no qualifications because we know they will soon become unemployable". The Treasury's estimate is that while there are currently about six million unskilled workers in the economy today, by 2020 we will need only half a million.

Last week my friend Trevor Gay was a facilitator at a conference, attended by the Chancellor, called *The Skills Challenge: A Public Debate* - a debate about the challenges faced by the UK economy following the publication in December of the *The Leitch Review of Skills*. Random Ramblings on the 13th December reported the view of the Leitch report that the UK is "on track to achieve undistinguished mediocrity" if it fails to upgrade the skills of its workforce by 2020.

Whilst this focus on ensuring that we have a skilled workforce is to be welcomed, I believe that we need to be careful not to confuse academic qualifications with appropriate skills and aptitude for the job. Clearly the two can, and often do, go hand in hand. But I have come across many people with relatively poor qualifications who would stand very favourable comparison with those possessing a string of academic qualification.

I think that it is important to recognise that gaining qualifications should not be about 'ticking boxes'. This applies to those seeking the qualifications and, perhaps more importantly, those setting the syllabuses. I have been on courses where the relationship to the real world was hard to grasp. This is a shame; a missed opportunity.

My recollection is that a certain Mr Branson, sorry, Sir Richard, did not score too highly in the academic stakes, not helped by his dyslexia, but he did recognise that to be successful you have to try very hard to please your customers and look after your employees. Of course, he is not the only one to recognise the importance of people - customers and employees. Sadly, many companies still don't seem 'to get it'.

### **21st February 2007 - 'Phone experience, market research and more on skills.**

It is reported that the backlash against foreign call centres is forcing more companies to change their policy and reintroduce UK based centres. I think that this may miss the point. When I phone an organisation I want to talk to someone who I can understand and who can deal efficiently with my query, and preferably, someone with whom I can have a bit of light-hearted banter. The fact that a call centre is based in the UK, whilst a good start, does not automatically give me these things.

Madeleine McGrath commented on the Tom Peters website blog: *"I well remember the frustration of one former client, who, on introducing a highly efficient CRM telephone system found that although performance efficiency improved, customer satisfaction plummeted. Although customers previously had to wait to get service, when they eventually did get through, they felt well treated. The new system made them feel 'processed'."*

And that is the point, I do not want to feel processed, I want to feel and believe that I matter to the organisations that I deal with. I have been having an exchange with Trevor Gay on his Simplicity blog [www.simplicityitk.blogspot.com](http://www.simplicityitk.blogspot.com) (19th February) about customer service, or so often, lack of service. I have made the point that the best organisations empower their employees to make their own decisions on what is required to keep the customer happy.

By empowering people, giving them responsibility to use their own judgement, you are much more likely to end up with happy employees. In turn this will rub off on the customers who will also be happy with the service that they receive.

While drafting this Ramble I received a phone call. It was from a company claiming to be doing market research on small businesses. Foolishly I agreed to answer a few questions. Only then did it transpire that the research was being conducted for a major bank. From the questions asked I can only conclude that they are trying to determine the most effective way to bombard small businesses with even more advertising.

I found the process most frustrating. I would have happily talked about how they could improve their services but all they wanted to know was whether I had heard of a long list of banks and how much I knew about them. I ventured the view that I knew enough to know that they are all crap! I accept that this is a somewhat sweeping statement and possibly not even totally accurate. However, I suspect that not many people would say that dealing with their bank was an entirely satisfactory customer experience.

In fairness, the direct contact with the staff in mine is pretty good once you can get to speak to them. It's things like having to make an appointment to see them via a call centre in India that frustrate me.

Last week's Ramble reported that the Chancellor of the Exchequer believes: *"we cannot continue in the modern world with a situation where so many people in the UK have got no qualifications because we know they will soon become unemployable"*. This week a survey for Learndirect, the adult training agency, highlights the extent of weaknesses in English and maths with: *"millions of employees believe that their lack of basic skills has lost money for their companies and themselves."*

The survey projected that 14.6m workers had lost their firms money because of literacy and numeracy mistakes. It also suggested two-thirds of people relied on computer spell-checkers. Personal experience suggests that this is a dangerous approach. Unless you have a sound grasp of grammar and spelling, some of the suggestions offered by these checkers could lead you astray in a similar way to using a dictionary to translate into a foreign language.

A bientôt

## 28th February 2007 - Apprentices, Dragons, standing room only and road congestion

Last week I went to a business exhibition at the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham. The reason I go to these exhibitions is not to visit the exhibitors' stands, but for the seminars given on a variety of subjects. I never fail to learn something.

I learned from Alan Sugar's Apprentice, Michelle Dewberry that he is just as blunt in real life as he is on TV. More importantly, Dragons' Den multi-millionaire Peter Jones pointed out the importance of credit insurance for businesses that have one or two principle customers whose payment terms mean that they always owe their suppliers large sums of money. It was one such company going out of business that brought down the first business empire of Peter Jones, causing him to lose everything, including his house.

I also learned the stupidity of rules and regulations. When visiting the NEC I usually drive to Hampton-in-Arden and catch the train from there. It is only four minutes away from Birmingham International station and from there it is a covered walkway into the exhibition centre. I just missed the train that I had intended to catch so arrived in the exhibition hall moments after the first seminar had started. The attendant on the door wouldn't let me enter as there were no seats left. I said that I was quite content to stand at the back of the room, but he said that Health & Safety rules did not allow that.

So I cannot stand at the back of a seminar room but it is quite OK to stand on a moving train. Many thousands of people do it each day on the Underground in London and commuter lines into our big cities. In fact only recently a Government minister stated that people should not expect always to have seats. So how come it's safe to stand on a train?

It is extremely fortunate that the Virgin train that was derailed at speed on Friday evening wasn't packed with standing passengers, otherwise the casualty figures would have been much higher. I also reflected that if this had happened not too many years ago, rather than one person being killed, there would have been dozens, possibly into the hundreds. It is a testament to the design and enormous strength of modern trains that it was not so much worse.

Over the last week or two there has been much attention given to the Government's proposals for road pricing and the petition against it. Perhaps we have to accept ultimately that some sort of pricing is necessary, but it would be much more palatable if it was part of a comprehensive, integrated transport policy. A first, and relatively easy step to take, would be to make better use of the roads we have. In the UK politicians and civil servants from the highest to those in local councils have an obsession with telling us what to do. Have you noticed more and more painted lines on our roads, more signs, traffic lights, speed humps and the like?

In Drachten, Holland, they have tried a different approach, one of decluttering the streets and allowing pedestrians and cars to share the space, rather than separating them. This includes a very busy junction near a large bus garage. All conventional traffic signals have been taken out and thanks to subtle detailing and paving, traffic flow has been improved. The attractive design, featuring fountains that increase in height with traffic flows, has encouraged people back into the area, and the bus garage reports that in the three years since it's inception, the average waiting time per bus at this busy junction has dropped from 55 to just nine seconds. And better still, the accident rate for vehicles and pedestrians has been reduced.

Perhaps there is a lesson for leaders and managers. Provide the right environment for people to operate in but don't try to regulate every last detail. I'm sure that the guy at the NEC was quite capable of deciding it was safe to admit one or two people to stand at the back of the room but that allowing the aisles to be packed out could be dangerous. It was interesting to note that, when Peter Jones was on stage, it was OK to have a television crew in the aisles plus several 'organisers'. Presumably if you are an organiser or a cameraman you do not create an obstruction!

### **7th March 2007 - Celebrity, well known to the informed, informative information, less is more.**

Last week I reported on the business exhibition that I had attended. One of the seminars was presented by Michelle Dewberry, for a brief while, an employee of Sir Alan Sugar, having won the prize to become his 'apprentice' in the TV programme of that name. Another contestant in The Apprentice was Jo Cameron who was also at the exhibition, fronting a show called The Midas Touch, which is run on similar lines to Dragons' Den in that would be entrepreneurs pitch their business ideas to a panel of investment angels. The longest queue by far for a seminar was for that given by Dragon Peter Jones.

All of this set me wondering about the cult of celebrity. I have just finished reading the autobiography of another Dragon, Duncan Bannatyne. In it he comments that becoming a Dragon and appearing on TV opened up all sorts of opportunities that probably would not have come his way otherwise. Rather amusingly, this public exposure of his enormous wealth made him suddenly attractive to women who had been unimpressed with him previously!

So why are we all so impressed by celebrity? After all, these people are no more or less able (or no more or less attractive) now they are well known than they were before. But who or what is a celebrity? When Tom Cruise (who I had heard of) married Katie Holmes (who I hadn't heard of), the BBC just referred to them by their names. Yet when they talk about Tony Blair they feel the need to remind us that he is the Prime Minister. Perhaps that's in case we thought that Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, had already taken over!

So there we have it, people are only well known if we know about them. Likewise information is only informative if it tells us something ... or to be more accurate, something useful in a form that we can understand. There is no doubting the meaning of signs around my local town. They point to the community hospital and inform us that it has a minor injuries unit. So far all useful stuff. However, the qualifying comment, Not 24 Hours, renders it next to useless. What sort of half wit decides on a sign like that?

Still, although it doesn't tell us anything, at least it is concise. In preparation for setting up a company with a couple of other guys, I have been doing much reading and research. In the course of this I came across the esoterically named:

APPENDIX 2—COMPANIES ACT 1985

TABLE A

COMPANIES ACT 1985 TABLE A

(SI 1985/805, Schedule)

TABLE A

REGULATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT OF A COMPANY LIMITED BY SHARES

INTERPRETATION

I wonder why it is felt that we need to be told so many times that it is Table A in relation to the Companies Act of 1985. However, it was that last word that made me smile - Interpretation. According to my dictionary, interpret means to clarify or explain the meaning of. Well, if the 19 pages of Table A clarify the situation, I would hate to read the unclarified version!

I think that it was Oscar Wilde who said something like, "If I'd had more time I would have written less." Indeed, conveying information with clarity and conciseness is a difficult art. Therefore I am impressed and intrigued to have heard of companies that mandate that inter-company memos should be restricted to one page. Even those requesting funding for new projects have to comply. The Brazilian company Semco is one such. Their format is to have a banner headline as a newspaper would, followed by the key facts required to make the decision.

Up to this point this ramble is 600 odd words long. If I had more time I would take up the challenge to be more economical in my use of words. Next week perhaps!

#### **14th March 2007 - Rich people and toys, children and BT, demented mechanical clatterings, the cost of cost saving and quality yoghurt.**

Membership of the world's billionaire club has swelled to almost 1,000, while members' net worth has risen by 35% on last year, according to Forbes Magazine.

A record 946 billionaires - worth a total of \$3.5 trillion (£1.82 trillion) - now exist, up from 793 last year. Microsoft founder Bill Gates held the top spot for the 13th year in a row with a net worth of \$56bn. London alone is home to 34 billionaires.

Perhaps it is the thought of all these rich potential customers that convinced the Dave Richards led consortium that buying Aston Martin from Ford is a good investment. Good luck to them and all those working at AM, some of whom I have worked with in the past.

The sale of Aston Martin was, presumably, not too difficult for the Ford PR department to handle - well compared with some of their other problems anyway. I can imagine that the BT PR team are not feeling quite so comfortable after the company managed to score a spectacular own goal when it announced a penalty for those who do not pay by direct debit. At this point I feel compelled to turn to one of my favourite quotes, by a guy called Victor Palmieri, a corporate turnaround specialist:

*"Strategies are okayed in boardrooms that even a child would say are bound to fail. The problem is there is never a child in the boardroom."*

So that's where BT got it wrong - no child on the board. As any child would have pointed out, you don't penalise a group of customers for not paying the way you want, you reward with a discount those who do pay by direct debit. Duh!

I was out rambling on Sunday - well a short walk round the lanes - when I was passed by an old Porsche 911 idling along, with the driver obviously looking for an address. On a slack throttle, the sound emanating from the engine was that of a very sophisticated and beautifully organised bag of nails. Minutes later it passed me again, now complete with blonde in the passenger seat. This time it was accelerating firmly to the accompaniment of a symphony of lump hammers from that fabulous flat six engine. I do like Porsches!

Porsche has always spent a huge amount of money on research, development and the quality of its cars. It is one of the reasons that their resale value is rock solid. BMW has a similar policy of being fanatical about quality. On the other hand, Mercedes Benz is having to work hard to return its reputation to where it once was. In launching the new C Class it claims to have reverted to its previous strategy and has spent huge sums of money on developing the car.

They may find that the damage of the past few years, where they cut costs for short term profit gains, could well take more than one new car launch to repair. Presumably there were no children on the Mercedes board when they endorsed the disastrous cost-cutting policy, described by The Telegraph's motoring correspondent, Andrew English, as *"the company's disgraceful past decade"*.

Gary Hirshberg, who describes himself as the father of three teenage yoghurt-eaters, is Chairman and Chief Executive of US company, Stonyfield Farm, the world's leading organic yoghurt producer. His philosophy is: *"Quality, quality, quality: never waver from it, even when you don't see how you can afford to, keep it up. When you compromise, you become a commodity, and then you die."*

Maybe there are three teenage yoghurt eaters on the company board.

### **21st March 2007 - Ninety percent businesses, lunch with a tiger, bitten by a tiger and linguistic perils.**

I'm not sure how it came into conversation, but we were discussing organisations that get most things right but neglect the final details - what I would term 90% businesses. Often it is this missing final ten percent (or an even smaller percentage) that makes the difference between success and failure. And, frustratingly, often they have done the hard part and then fail with the easy stuff.

The chances are that your competitors can get 90% right as well as you can, so it is the company that can deliver on that final few percent that will be the winner ultimately. Think about organisations that you have dealt with recently. I bet that you can think of areas where they could improve their service. Now have a look at your own to see if you fall down in these same or, indeed, other areas. Don't forget, you have to look at your organisation as you would if you were the customer.

Tigers seemed to loom large in my life last week. In mid-week we were up in Yorkshire for a meeting. Coming off the motorway we were looking for somewhere to grab a bite to eat when we spotted a sign to The Tiger Inn. We took a chance and dived off the main road down a couple of miles of country lanes. We were just beginning to think it was a mistake when we arrived in a pretty village with a rather fine pub. We informed the landlord that we only had 25 minutes before we had to head off for our meeting. No problem, the food was served quickly and the bill prepared in advance ready for a speedy departure. On the ball people providing a good service. Maybe the chips were a tad over cooked but overall a good performance.

However, we needn't have risked indigestion by rushing to our meeting as the sales director we were due to meet was ... still out at lunch! OK, the MD looked after us, made us coffee and chatted to us for twenty minutes before his man arrived, but that wasn't the point. We were (still are) potential customers and he couldn't be bothered to be there on time. I am still wondering if they are a 90% company - will they only ever perform at the 90% level? See how something as simple as not checking your diary for a meeting start time can undermine confidence in the whole operation?

On Friday my wife returned home a less than happy bunny, as the Tiger car wash at the local Esso garage has ripped the rear wiper off her car. In fairness, the Esso insurance department has agreed to pay for the damage, but I can't see that the Tiger will be seeing her car again. It probably didn't help that I had recommended this particular car wash!

Generally it is reckoned that the difference between a good organisation and an indifferent one is how they handle problems. It is at this point that you have the opportunity to cement your relationship with the customer. However, as demonstrated by the car wash incident, sometimes you only get one chance.

Some interesting things come my way, occasionally they are informative, even helpful. Press releases don't always fall into that category. Certainly not one that advised me that:

*According to city dealers who revealed that the animals are dealers who are part of the network from Fiat, Yang also partly from the network, and to attract the best dealers to join. In some places were taken even Lord "exclusive" approach. Were related to the current city layout of the network is launched, more than 40 dealers in the business work has been basically completed. Some have entered the construction phase.*

And, indeed, felt it worthy of note that:

*Compared with SAIC, South steam process to be more slow. To name Lord, South steam undergoing a difficult "elephant turned" : to some poorly managed companies Youchao plans, including some parts companies resell leap to 100. Lord name in the project, has invested 3.6 billion Southern Steam normal investment projects, investment is still view.*

Just in case you are slightly confused, these gems are providing information about the progress of the Chinese automobile industry - I think. I am sure that there must be an ancient Chinese proverb that warns about PR companies that use a random word generating dictionary to translate from Mandarin to English. Just make sure that your PR efforts in foreign lands are a little more professional. At least 90% would be good!

I'll leave the final words to George Bernard Shaw:

*The biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.*

**28th March 2007 - John Lewis, Chinese slavery, dangerous Italians, alarming customer service and David supports Goliath.**

When Sir Stuart Hampson was interviewed on retiring from the chairmanship of the John Lewis Partnership (which also owns Waitrose), he claimed that the reason for the success of the business and the high level of customer and employee satisfaction was the fact that all permanent staff are partners in the business. All 60+ thousand employees have a say in the running of the business and a share of the profits. This enlightened approach was first introduced by John Spedan Lewis in 1914, so it is no modern day 'trendy' initiative, but an integral and fundamental way of doing business.

How this contrasts with the lot of many thousands of employees in China. It is ironic that at a time we are commemorating the abolition of the slave trade that it is actually 'flourishing' in modern day China. Although the state has legislation in place to protect employees' basic rights, it is frequently ignored by many large companies. In many cases the unfortunate employees of these companies are effectively held captive and are forced to work in inhuman and dangerous conditions.

We are increasingly urged to ask our food suppliers about the origins of their produce to ensure that it comes from ethical or environmentally sustainable sources. Perhaps it is time that we started asking the same of suppliers of toys, electrical goods, in fact anything originating in China.

Talking of dangerous foreign places, I note that the Italian government is trying to reduce the carnage on the roads of that country. New legislation has been brought in to attempt to bring some sanity to the roads. For example, the use of a mobile phone while driving will incur a £400 fine and a six month driving ban. Excellent, why can't we have similarly tough action against this stupidly dangerous practice?

However, I do just wonder how effective will be the new legislation; whether the average Italian will take any notice. I have only visited Italy once, on a business trip many years ago. We had been to the Italdesign studios of Giorgio Giugiaro in Turin. The great man's nephew had taken us to lunch in a Turin restaurant prior to driving us to the airport. We were still in the restaurant when we should have been checking in, but our host was completely relaxed about this. Eventually we persuaded him that we should leave.

We set off at breakneck speed down the back streets and alleyways of the city, some so narrow that anyone so much as sticking their nose through the front door would have come to grief. I relaxed slightly when we gained more open streets ... until we went over a set of traffic lights on red. I politely asked whether a red light didn't have the same meaning in Italy, only to be told that if nothing was coming they were considered to be on 'pink'!

We finally reached the motorway standard Tangenziale ring road. Any thoughts that we might be on safer territory were dispersed when we encountered an old man coming towards us .... in the fast lane .... on a bicycle! Oh, by the way, we made our flight - just!

A word of warning - no not about Italian drivers - if you use Zone Alarm software to provide your firewall and virus protection, be aware that there is a problem with the latest programme update. Apparently there is a glitch which causes it to block email access. I was about to download the update when I received the following message from my IT advisor:  
*“Still no fix in place with Zone Alarms. The forums are going mad with people that have upgraded and now can’t get emails. To make things worse it seems that they won’t acknowledge that there is a problem and are refusing to help people. Excellent customer service!”*

I despair. Why do companies pretend that there isn’t a problem with their products when it is plain for all to see that there is? Don’t they realize that the Internet means that there is no place to hide any more; that the news spreads like wildfire?

A final note on the quality/customer service theme: Porsche has now raised its stake in Volkswagen to 30.9%. Porsche boss Wendelin Wiedeking said the move was designed to stop hedge funds dismantling VW, which is Porsche’s most important partner.

So how does tiny Porsche get to own 31% of mighty VW? Well because Porsche is the world’s most profitable carmaker. A position achieved over many years of investing huge amounts in research and development focussed on delivering iconic cars with a rock solid reputation.

#### **4th April 2007 - Seeking inspiration, communication, startled rabbits, football and the community and fast trains.**

Generally during the week I come across issues that spark thoughts for the weekly Ramble. Often as I start to put pen to paper - well, fingers to keyboard - other ideas start to emerge. The BBC business website is often a source of inspiration. This week is no exception, with two disparate items starting a thought process.

Over the last week or so, the BBC’s respected economics guru, Evan Davis, has written a number of articles about Chancellor Gordon Brown’s budget and his style of presentation. There are two key issues. Firstly that the presentation style makes it difficult to follow, as ‘facts’ and figures are poured out in an endless stream. Secondly, over the ten years of his budgets, the positives have been highlighted but he has avoided mentioning the negatives.

One is tempted to think that the two may be linked. Present a great deal of complex information and it is difficult for anyone to spot the weakness in the argument that you are putting forward. The problem with this approach is that given time, you will be ‘rumbled’ once the experts have time to analyse what has been said. The net result is a distrust of the presenter and his motives. Of course, the Chancellor’s apparent unease in front of a microphone doesn’t help with his image or the message that he is trying to convey.

The strained relations between the press and England football manager, Steve McClaren, are another aspect of communication. PR expert Max Clifford was hired by the Football Association to work with McClaren when he was appointed. Clifford terminated the arrangement after three months because his advice was not being taken on board by the FA. He had wanted McClaren and the FA to work with the journalists and to help them do their jobs by providing information to them on a regular basis.

Because of the failure to build up a working relationship, it has been far easier for the press to criticise the team's performances, which has built up the pressure to the point that when they go out onto the pitch, they now have a greater resemblance to rabbits caught in a car's headlights than to highly skilled footballers.

Continuing with the football theme, Liverpool Football Club has now reached agreement with the city council for the development of their new stadium in Stanley Park, and the parallel regeneration of the Anfield area of the city. The importance of this to the economic development of the area and the city in general cannot be underestimated. It is for this reason that the city council has also been working hard to try to retain the Everton ground within the city boundaries.

The current plans for the replacement for Goodison Park see the club move to just outside the city at Kirkby. However, despite the best efforts of the council to broker a ground sharing scheme with Liverpool, this now will not happen. But the council is still determined to keep Everton's new home in the city and so is offering to provide alternative sites that would benefit from the consequential urban regeneration.

Outside of the Merseyside area, it is the site for the Olympic Games in East London that is attracting more attention. As well as the development of new sporting facilities, it is excellent transport links that are so vital to the future economic success of the area. It is interesting to look at the new route that the Eurostar will take from its new terminus at St Pancras on its way to the Channel Tunnel. It heads in a more easterly direction than at present, going via the new station to be built at Stratford, East London, a key part of the Olympic transport infrastructure, before heading off to the south coast and its trip through the tunnel to France.

If only British trains could operate at the same speeds as the French TGV. On a special run on the Paris - Strasbourg line yesterday, the TGV yet again broke the world record for a train running on rails, when it clocked 574.8km/h (356mph). The French are now within a whisper of the absolute train speed record set by a Japanese magnetic levitation train (581km/h).

Whilst this run was part of the certification process to allow running at 320km/h on the recently opened Paris-Strasbourg TGV Est line, it was also part of the promotional effort to secure sales for its makers, Alstom, in the most important markets for high speed trains, China, South Korea and Taiwan.

**11th April 2007 - Seven day weekend, working in the garden, benefits of deadlines and real or imaginary illness.**

Yesterday I met up for a coffee and natter with Trevor Gay (Simplicity Is The Key), management trainer, author and fellow ranter about poor management, poor customer service and the like.

[www.simplicityisthekey.com](http://www.simplicityisthekey.com)

[www.simplicityitk.blogspot.com](http://www.simplicityitk.blogspot.com)

Amongst other things, we discussed the benefits of flexible working and how some people find it difficult to believe that you are working if you don't go to an office or factory.

The reality is that more and more people are working from home. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, more people are becoming self employed as a result of the shift away from traditional large manufacturing industries. Also, communication technology now makes it possible to operate effectively remote from 'head office'. A third factor is the need to offer flexibility to recruit and retain good employees.

In his book, *Maverick*, Ricardo Semler points out that we are adults - we can vote, we can get married, we can buy a house - until we turn up for work, then we are treated like children. We are given lots of rules to abide by, we are told what to do, what not to do, what to wear, what not to wear, our work is checked, we are timed in and out, in fact given very little scope to express our personalities.

So why do companies feel the need to treat employees like children? I guarantee if you ask, they will say that it is necessary to make sure that they do the job properly. So how come we can do all of those other grown up things without supervision? If we work for ourselves we have to be responsible for our own work because there is nobody else checking it for us. So why should it be different in the office or factory?

I am firmly convinced, and there is evidence around to support this, that giving people responsibility for their own destiny will lead to them taking a more responsible attitude. So what if they choose to go for a walk on Friday so long as they finish that report on Sunday? And does it matter if they sit in the garden and enjoy the sunshine if they have a wireless laptop and mobile phone? Semler's follow up to *Maverick* is *The Seven Day Weekend*, where he talks at length about the benefits of working flexibility. Of course, it could have been equally titled 'the seven day working week'.

Flexibility is great, but self-discipline can be difficult to achieve at times. I have been promising myself that I will finish a particular piece of work for several weeks now. My solution for my failure to complete the task? I've given myself a deadline of the end of the week - and I've told someone that they can see it then. So even if it means working after 'normal office hours', the work will get done ... just about ... I think!

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has published a report that indicates that we are taking off more time through illness, although there is a suggestion that some of this is not because of genuine ailments. Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, the public sector suffers considerably more than private business.

My guess would be that there are two factors. Government agencies do not go out of business and sackings and redundancies are not particularly common. And these same agencies have far more in the way of policies and procedures and have many more layers of management than the average company. So the scope for their employees to have any impact on the organisation is severely limited. Likewise, a day off 'sick' is unlikely to have much effect on the smooth running of things. They also tend to be badly paid compared with the private sector, so the likelihood of disenchantment is somewhat higher.

**18th April 2007 - Shaking books, gorillas, a kiss from Debs, taking responsibility, and challenging the mighty.**

There are lots of places to buy books, but I bet not many do it quite like BookShaker.com. Recently I had an email from them - you know the sort - this month's special offer etc. However, two things struck me as unusual. Firstly, the sender, Debs, added an 'x' after her name, secondly there was a line that said, 'Wondering why you're getting this email?' Well, actually I was, but then it went on to explain that I'd had dealings with them before. OK, so that was reassuring.

Of course, I couldn't resist looking at what was on offer and decided to buy a book called The Gorillas Want Bananas - trust me, this isn't a wildlife book! Anyway, there was a bit of a cock-up with their website systems that thwarted my attempts to make the purchase and left me pretty frustrated.

Next day I received an email from them to say that they noticed that I hadn't completed the purchase and was there a problem? Do I need an opportunity to tell someone where they are going wrong?! My emailed explanation of my purchasing frustration signed off with a suggestion that I might be assuaged by a free book and another kiss from Debs. Hey, guess what? The aforementioned lady responded with an explanation of why things had gone wrong, a promise of a free book AND a kiss! Now that's what I call customer service! Check out Debs, gorillas and bananas at [www.bookshaker.com](http://www.bookshaker.com)

It is two years since MG Rover, the last major British car maker went out of business. MG R was the last remnant of the once mighty British Motor Corporation, which four decades earlier had over 40% share of the UK market, was a major global player and the dominant seller in a number of European markets.

Could this also be the fate of the US car industry? Chrysler is up for sale, Ford and GM are closing plants and losing money at an alarming rate. There are successful manufacturers in the US. Just like in the UK, they are Japanese. Toyota is the fastest-growing car company in the United States, and it is building a new factory every year to keep up with demand. It has overtaken Ford and is set to overtake GM this year as the world's largest car company.

A lady working at one of the US Toyota plants commented that more is expected of workers at Toyota than her previous job, but she doesn't mind taking responsibility. For example, Toyota encourages workers to take personal responsibility for defects, and to work together to fix them.

So there we have the key aspects of business success. Taking care of the customer and encouraging and trusting employees to take responsibility. This is very much a follow on from the theme of last week's Ramble.

Another mighty organisation, although much more recently on the scene than the car industry, is everyone's favourite search engine, Google. A bit like the PC and mobile phone, it is difficult to imagine how we got by before it came along. It seems that I am typical in that I use Google exclusively. Not surprisingly, the other search facility providers are getting a little fed up with this state of affairs and are looking at ways to respond.

It will be interesting to watch the battle and to see if, just like in the car industry, eventually the mighty Google is toppled from its perch by an upstart that is better able to offer the customers what they want. Listening to your customers and giving them a kiss now and again goes a long way in my book!

PS - Isn't it interesting that Microsoft's spell check does not recognise Google!

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