

New Ideas hidden in the Fog of Change



We all need access to useful, relevant and current information to help us make decisions and manage in an ever-changing world!! And to compensate for the ever-accelerating rate of change¹, more than ever, the information needs to be clear, concise and accessible. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Far too many good ideas are hidden in a fog of academic prose, technical jargon and/or dense, complex writing.

From the perspective of minimising the time and effort needed to keep up with the learning workload authors, academics and other writers would do well to consider the following adaptation of an article by John Huston, first published in the Civil Engineer Magazine, 1981:

'Stop the world I want to get off'

There are two management worlds, the 'real world' and the 'other world'. The 'real' world has 95% of the total population the 'other' world 5%.

The 'other-world people' (OWP) have little to do with managing actual day-to-day work but make themselves known by producing learned books and articles. 'Real-world people' (RWP) are busy managing the actual work and don't have time to write much. When they do get some spare time, they would rather spend it in reading to improve their knowledge to manage in the real-world than writing, but all there is to read is OWP writings, which they cannot understand.

The difference is professional standing! If a RWP wants to add 1 and 1 they would simply do it by saying $1 + 1 = 2$. OWP would find this simple solution professionally embarrassing.....

To produce a professionally acceptable solution for peer review, OWP would know all of the other OWP know the following two facts:

$\ln e = 1$, and also that $\sin^2 x + \cos^2 x = 1$

Therefore, they can express the solution as: $\ln e + \sin^2 x + \cos^2 x = \int^2 0x dx$

Really clever OWP can even improve on this (but I can't even type the multi-level formula – you will need to read the scanned version of the original²).....

With the simple $1 + 1 = 2$ elevated to an acceptable 'other-world' (OW) level, the OWP feels secure, the article gets published in a learned journal and unfortunately, the RWP who may have been able to make use of the information cannot understand it. But the OWP keep on writing and their writings are placed in indexes and are then used as references for other OWP writings. And this continues ad infinitum.

Some OWP are actually RWP hiding out in the OW and from time to time produce really useful materials and manage to retain an OW identity – this appears to be a very difficult balancing act, too much usefulness can see an OWP kicked out into the RW.

¹ See: **Communicating in a rapidly changing world:**
<https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2013/05/26/communicating-in-a-rapidly-changing-world/>

² See the **original article** at: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1013_Stop_the-world_Orig.pdf

Fortunately, the OW is taking some notice of this problem, in 2012, 'The Academy of Management Learning and Education' (USA) in one of its OW journals did publish a series of papers looking at topics such as 'the gap between management research and practical relevance', the production of 'non-actionable articles' (the cost of which was estimate at \$600 million per year and growing) and recognising the 'decades of laments about the relevance of [management] research' to practicing managers. Unfortunately, the articles seem to have been indexed and filed in the OW – not much has changed in the articles I've seen published in the interim.

At its root, this is a communication problem which applies as much to technical experts in management disciplines such as scheduling and risk and stakeholder management as it does to academics and researchers. In an ever-accelerating world, the communication of complex ideas simply and elegantly so the RW managers can make effective use of them is essential.

Traditional 'sophisticated OW' writing fails this test. But simplistic is dangerous and simple elegance hard to achieve; as Einstein once said, 'If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough'. He also cautioned 'For every complex question there is a simple and wrong solution'. Management and technical writings need to hit the sweet spot between these two options.

We all fall into the 'OW' from time to time by using our specialist jargon and focusing on looking 'clever' rather than focusing on clear communication. The challenge is to simplify complex concepts to make them useful and usable by the people in the rapidly changing RW. And the key question is if RW people cannot quickly assimilate the ideas in your writing is there any point in writing? OWP and RWP will probably answer this question differently.

One of our overriding considerations in developing these blogs, our published papers and our White Papers is to take sophisticated concepts and make the ideas both practical and usable. The other has been to develop an indexed structure in the PMKI that makes the information easily accessible and findable.

But our good intentions are not enough! If you see 'OW' concepts creeping into any of these blogs don't hesitate to post a comment – we are much happier in the 'Real World' helping RW people improve their understanding of project and business management.

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