A Three Rs Antidote for Technology Revenge

Steve Montague, August 1998

In his Ottawa Citizen article of December 27, 1997, 'High-tech Revenge', Robert Sibley references Heidegger regarding technology's 'challenging' of nature. He further quotes Carleton political philosopher, Tom Darby, on the perils of technology in terms of focusing people on 'efficiency'. Sibley quotes Darby as follows:

"Technological systems, including computer systems, are valued in terms of their efficiency. "The rational relation of practices and perceptions is the meaning of efficiency, and the result of efficiency," says Mr. Darby, "and technological systems always tend towards maximum efficiency." In short, the more efficient the system, the better. Or, efficiency is equated to good."

Source: *"High-tech revenge*," Robert Sibley, The Ottawa Citizen, December 27, 1997, pB1.

Sibley (Darby) goes on to comment that a measure such as 'profit' is taken to be the ultimate efficiency measure and therefore the ultimate measure of success in economics. In computing, processing and transmission speed measures connote efficiency and therefore success.

These analysts have a point. A technology driven focus on efficiency is too narrow. But, we needn't be so dire as to accept the tendency towards efficiency-focus as a given. (see The Three Rs of Performance Montague, 1997).

A more balanced conceptual model - such as offered by the Three Rs - can help put efficiency into perspective.

The key to the Three Rs model in fact is to double team the technocratic 'efficiency' focus (profit, processing speed, 'efficiency' and 'productivity' are all **RESOURCES** measures in the Three Rs model) with measures of **REACH** and **RESULTS**.

The Three Rs approach can provide a balanced perspective in both the examples of economics and computer systems put forth by Darby (Sibley). Consider the Three Rs performance areas for a small professional services firm and an electronic procurement system - these examples are both excerpts from Appendix A of The Three Rs of Performance, Montague, 1997. Note how important concepts like serving a critical mass of potential users (Reach), satisfying needs and providing real value-added to people (Results) serve to balance the 'efficiency' measures listed under 'Resources'.

The point is that the technology-induced preoccupation with efficiency is really just a mental block. Efficiency measures seduce us because they are simple and readily available. The route to overcoming this mental block involves posing key reach and results questions (e.g. Are we providing appropriate access to all intended users? Are we resolving real user needs?). In this way The Three Rs can serve as your 'checklist' antidote to the 'Technology Revenge' imposed by a misaligned devotion to efficiency.