The Fallible Future

In George Orwell's novel, *1984*, written 35 years ago, documents travel around the office in pneumatic tubes and Big Brother, the personification of government, watches everyone. In real-life 1984, many are convinced that Big Brother watches, but pneumatic tubes in the office have gone the way of real grass on the baseball outfield. Such are the hazards of writing about the future from the evidence of the present.

Nevertheless, I'd like to risk a creative leap into the future of human resource development from the springboard of the present, warning the reader that my predictions may be the pneumatic tubes of the year 2000.

There are enough variables affecting human resource development to build an enormous matrix of possibilities, but my speculations about the future are limited to three areas: the organization of work, the learning process and the phenomenon of change.

It seems clear that work in the future will be organized around information the way it is now organized around manufacturing. Work for more and more people will consist of gathering, organizing, analyzing and exchanging information—often with the help of a computer. Work based on skills will give way to work based on thinking. Specific skills will give way to general skills such as decision making, group leadership or strategic planning. Training will deal with the invisible.

One does not have to be near an information system to work with it or train others to work with it. But for every forecaster who predicts a rush to the electronic cottage or the disappearance of the traditional classroom, there is another who says that workers and learners will continue to cluster because gathering with other people to work or to learn fulfills important social and psychological needs. So I predict that workers and learners will embrace technology only up to the point that it interferes with choice.

Wars and alliances between learners and technology will continue, but the good news about such confrontations is that they will challenge and improve our understanding of how people learn. Theories of artificial intelligence, for example, near dormant for the past 20 years, are taking life in applications that could affect training. (See Barbara Brown's article on page 68.)

I agree with those who predict that the entity we call the organization will change (Jack Grayson, page 58, says it must)—not in the direction of a single style, a single shape or a single culture, but in the direction of pluralism. The postheroic manager (see page 40) gets my vote as an impor-tant catalyst for significant changes in organizational performance.
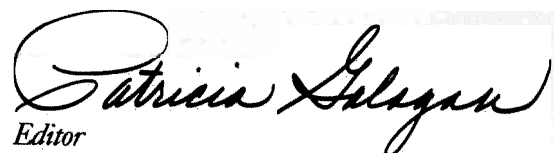
I predict that organizations will become more aware of their human resources because people, not machines or information systems, are the wellspring of productivity. I predict that because of its importance to productivity, human resource development will be linked more often to the goals of organizations. As training goals spread upward into organizational goals and downward into the roles of managers and supervisors, training itself will change.

I foresee training and development practitioners much more heavily involved in planning and anticipating change. You will not only provide training in new skills and advise about future training requirements, but you will increase people's skills at finding satisfaction in new kinds of work. The six billion people who will be alive in the year 2000 will need training to seek, to perform and to enjoy work in a changed world.

What about your own development? What kinds of skills will you need in an information age? Will you embrace technology or just shake hands with it? Computer-based training is growing rapidly (see our new Technotes column, page 21). Videodiscs are appearing on the training horizon like so many high-tech moons. Interactive learning has the behavioralist blessing. The future is wide open for the training professional who can develop courseware or design new applications of computers to the learning process.

Are you prepared to be held accountable for productivity in the work place? To demonstrate the transfer of learning? Would you stake your future on the ascendancy of human resource development?

It should be clear by now that I believe there will be many different futures for the training and development professional. If I am less than specific it is because there is an important, unpredictable variable. The future is always influenced by the choices that people make when confronted with a new development. Such choices can't be predicted by rational means because they are affected by what people value. Neither a thinking cap nor a crystal ball will tell us what will *really* happen in the year 2000, but that shouldn't stop us from trying to imagine the future. Personally, I'd welcome the return of the pneumatic tube.

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Editor