

## Keeping Skills Updated in a World that Won't Stop Changing

By Madelyn Blair

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Business & Technology Review recently interviewed Madelyn Blair, President of Pelerei, Inc. a management consulting firm here in Frederick County that helps organizations become learning organizations. Among the many courses she teaches, the most successful one in this area is called, Making Information Your Competitive Edge. She works with clients around the world and recently spoke with B&T to discuss what it means to expand and update your skills.

**B&T: Why is it important for everyone to not just update their skills but even expand them.**

**Madelyn Blair:** There are three reasons driving this need. The world is changing, the competition for skills and jobs is global, and information is growing in size and accessibility.

The world is changing rapidly. Some say it is because technology is forcing the changes; some say it is just the speed of business that is going faster because we can communicate so rapidly today. It doesn't matter which is the cause and which is the effect or if either is, the pace of work and even change is indeed increasing. And keeping current is the one thing that is becoming harder yet more and more important.

The majority of workers in the last century were engaged in agriculture. Today that figure is two percent. In 1980, US Steel had 120,000 employees producing steel. Now 20,000 produce as much steel more effectively. By 2020 we will see the virtual elimination of the blue collar factory worker. Yet, the top 20 percent, the knowledge sector, is doing well all over the world and the bottom 80 percent, the industrial work force, is not. And there will never be enough jobs in the emerging knowledge sector to replace the jobs lost in downsizing the blue and white collar work force. This is the information age in more ways than one.

Competition for skills and the resultant opportunities are global. The global workforce means that more variety is available in the workplace, not just competition. This variety brings new ideas and skills to the table. This is great for businesses that must compete on ideas as well as price.

The global workforce also means that you could be competing with someone in Jamaica or Hong Kong or Ghana. But it also means that you have those



choices to move to another country. Today people move from country to country almost as easily as people moved from village to village in years past. But no matter where you go, you have to bring something to the table, and it has to be current.

Information is growing in size and accessibility. There is more information in the Sunday edition of the New York Times than a 17th Century man learned in a lifetime. Information is growing faster today because the edge of what we know is larger than it was yesterday. It's sort of like a vast balloon that just keeps expanding. After all, there are more people creating new knowledge, and much more of it is accessible today through the Internet and the vast libraries of resources we tend to forget about in the age of electronics.

There are more and more media from which to choose, and it is not all the same information on all of them. ListServes are highly specialized, and the information contained there is rarely found in books or even the most recent articles because people are talking about what they are thinking as they write on a ListServe. And that doesn't count all of the video and audio information that we can have access to as well.

There is one unfortunate result of this. Because there is so much information at our fingertips, you are expected to know it, too. We have placed our own demands on ourselves, built the capability to make it happen, and now we are beginning to expect everyone to live up to what we imagine can be done, namely, absorbing all this information. This is where the push for staying current comes from. In the past, there were many excuses you could give for not having it at your fingertips. There are no excuses anymore.

### **B&T: But what about the short shelf-life of technical products?**

**MB:** You are right. I haven't even talked about the shelf life of technical products. And the shelf life doesn't seem to correlate with just new products -- although it is surely related. How do you predict which of the products will be here next year, let alone which will dominate? Who predicted that WordPerfect would have to compete with MSWord, and that the turnaround would be so rapid. (Actually, I knew Word was the superior product in 1988, but I never thought my rebel approach would end up being finally understood by the market!)

How do you keep yourself agile enough to pick up new products quickly? There is also the issue of a feature in a new product that suddenly allows an application to become a reality, and the product takes off like a shot. I remember when email was being introduced to companies. They didn't think it would change things when they saw it. They just thought it was another form of memo. Wow, were they in for a surprise! Some new application simply take over like that. So it is application as well as products that stimulate the change



of products on the scene. And as a result what you have to keep in mind when you are thinking about keeping up to date.

**B&T: You've convinced me that I have to stay up to date, but how do I do it?**

**MB:** You can be overwhelmed by what you see in the world today or you can see it as an opportunity. Sherry Turkle of MIT, the wonderful author of The Second Self and other things, talks about these times as a *liminal* (in psychology, from the German word *schwelle*) moment -- the moment when you are standing in the door way looking at the next room and not yet stepping over the threshold. There are so many possibilities during that moment. Historically, these kinds of times have seen creativity increase and everything becoming new. How do you stay current? The quick answer is to learn how to learn. The longer answer is something like this: Select wisely what you specialize in rather than taking the shotgun approach. Keep your finger on the pulse of change. Build a strategy for finding the most useful sources of the information you need.

Follow your strategy. Keep your finger on the pulse of change. Adjust your specialty based on what you see happening. Refine your strategy. If you see some repetition here, you are right. This is not a one-time thing. And it doesn't remain static. Sort of like how the world changes as you watch it -- your strategy, including your objectives change as you see what is happening.

Keeping current means building a strategy for doing so. Trying to keep up with everything -- even in one field -- is now virtually impossible. There is just too much data and information around to be had. Selection of what to specialize in is becoming more and more important to make sure that you can keep current in something of value. And value is an important word here. If you are trying to remain employable, then you are trying to stay current in areas that have economic value. But some of us also want to stay current in areas of purely interesting stuff. You wouldn't believe some of the books I spend time reading just because I am interested in the subject.

This implies that you must be sure of what to specialize in and anticipate that the specialty will become a sub-specialty over time. We are just learning too much. This implies that you know how your specialty fits into the bigger picture. And so you must keep an eye on the big picture, too.

**B&T: How do you build a strategy for keeping current?**

**MB:** Begin with your own desires and how you think they will serve you in the future. Begin with thinking about what you want to know. Spend some time to determine if this is something that will build to a future. Learning everything there is to know about 300 baud modems is likely not a forward looking activity for most people. Explore articles on where the world is heading -- take them



from anywhere and everywhere you can. Take time to immerse yourself into the ideas of other people and where they think the world is heading.

Now, relate what you are interested in with where you think the world is headed. Does it still remain an area you would like to invest time in learning? And don't feel that you should only be interested in what others say are going to be the trends, but feeling, rather, that you see how it is moving into the future. That's the key.

Okay, you now have the two most important pieces of your strategy figured out. What you are most interested in and why. Select the possible sources of on-going information. Make a list of all of the possible places you can find good information about your topic. Make a list of all the people you know who are interested in the subject who would talk with you on the subject. (Personal contact is always a powerful way to gather new information.) I always start here. And when I don't know if someone else is interested in the subject, but I think they might be, I ask them. People love to be asked questions about themselves and their expertise.

Courses are always a great starting point -- check out the academic or commercial sources of these. Don't neglect books when you are looking for something that requires understanding concepts. Explore other publications -- journals, magazines, newspapers that would carry articles on your topic area. For example, the Tuesday issue of the New York Times is a great place to get a view of the latest news in science. The articles are in depth for a layman. Check out the video resources at the library or from professional sources. Check out your TV program listings. Yes, keeping current even involves watching TV in some cases. Sometimes it is just important to know what others are learning about your topic via TV. Think about it.

Go to a book store and just browse the shelves for topic ideas. I find this really important when I am exploring a new area and don't even know the language of the topic. Once I spent months looking for a topic thinking that no one had done any research on it. Much to my surprise when I asked a friend about it, she laughed at me and told me how it was described in the literature. She was right. There were tons of materials out there for me to find once I searched using the right key words. Ask everyone you know where you might find more information on the topic of your interest.

Search the electronic databases of libraries. Libraries have always been storehouses of information, but if you haven't gone lately, you are in for a great treat. The number of on-line data bases that catalog millions of books, pamphlets, articles, etc. etc. is phenomenal. There is one called WorldCat that catalogs all publications. Another is called ECONLIT that looks only at the economics literature. Access to these kind of data bases is a wonderful start.



And the data bases are easy to use. You just need a library that has access to them.

Lastly, search the Internet. I know everyone thinks that there is everything on the Internet -- and maybe there is. But it can be buried where you will never find it if you don't know something about your subject to make an intelligent search for it. (I teach a course on how to make good searches on the Internet, and students are always amazed at how much they were missing before.) Check into "agents" that will search the Internet for you. But again, you need to be using the right key words. They search the news wires on Internet very effectively. Some of these have a cost associate with them, but I have found them worth it.

Cull the sources to those that are the most useful to you. Having found sources of information does not mean that they are useful to you. They have to have a high percentage of information that is relevant to you or they contain very timely information on your topic (even if you have to search it out) or they are the most detailed source of the information or... In other words, there has to be some real reason for using the source, because what you don't want to have happen is to have so many publications hanging around you begin to feel guilty about not reading them all. Then you find that you don't read any of them rather than what you should read. Also, the information should not be so much that it overwhelms you.

I have known people who got on ListServes on the Internet and quickly became swamped with hundreds of email messages a day. They just didn't know how to cope with this. So, if it turns out that there are 3 magazines, an occasional book, and a good network of colleagues to talk with that will suffice, decide then to make them a part of your life. Subscribe to those magazines and read them - - at least peruse them when they come in to capture the most relevant articles and read them quickly. Ask others on your network if they have found any good books or articles that may help -- or just if they know more about such and such a topic. Build time in your day (or week may be more practical for you) to get the reading and contacting done. By the way, I know no one who finds only 3 magazines and an occasional book satisfactory to keeping current. Alas!

And you're not done yet. Keeping current requires a continuous review of whether the topic is still relevant in the larger scheme of things. That means that you have to develop another strategy to keep you current in world events that impinge on your area of interest. If it is technology, then there are certainly standard newspapers and magazines that cover the direction and trends in the industry well. But this is only the start. Keep casting out your net into other areas now and then to keep yourself 'plugged in. Remember, it is how your ideas fit into the world that is important. So check out other areas that you would not normally consider your specific area of interest. And see if they spark



any new thoughts in your mind. I read all manner of materials to keep myself current in my field. But I read even more to keep current in other areas so that I am constantly looking at the materials from my area of interest with fresh eyes having looked at other areas. You'd be amazed at how different the world looks to an economist versus a gardener. Both views are valid but see the world through very different lenses. Taking a moment to look through those other lenses means that you can come back to your area (say it is desk top publishing) and suddenly see a new application of your skills or an area where you might need to fill in.

Specialties will evolve over time. If you are keeping current, you will discover that over a course of a few years your emphasis has changed even if the main topic of interest is the same. Computer programmers spent a lot of time talking about structured code not too many years ago. I don't hear that anymore. They are all talking about applet. And those who were keeping current found that they had naturally shifted to applet without much effort because they were keeping their hand on the pulse of things.

Looking for a time when you won't have to do anything anymore to keep current is just not going to happen. In today's world, relaxation has to come from something that gives you pleasure. So, learn to enjoy learning!

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