



Management Gurus: How good are they at seeing the future?

Human Times powered by slice

Predictions, imaginations, and warnings about the future of work have been a constant in the [Human Times](#) newsletter since its inception in 2016. Robots, remote working and AI are the current leading discussion points in this regard, but I wonder how the forecasts of the past have shaped up to the reality of what happened?

In the late 1980s as a young manager in the media sector I embarked on a distance learning Master of Business Administration (MBA) course with the Open Business School (OBS). There was a growing recognition by corporate Britain that it needed to invest more significantly in training, and I took advantage of that trend by persuading my employer to fund me.

“Management gurus” were a thing then – they’d be called “thought leaders” today – and guys like the Americans Peter Drucker (*The Changing World of the Executive*) and Tom Peters (*In Search of Excellence*) were idolised. Lee Iacocca’s books on how he turned around the American car giant Chrysler topped the best-sellers’ lists on both sides of the Atlantic, breaking through into the mainstream. However, the “guru” that the OBS championed and encouraged its students to study and heed was an unassuming Irishman, Charles Handy, and he made a big impression on me.

Handy was unafraid to put his head above the parapet and his management thinking went far deeper than the pursuit of profits and bottom lines, I recalled. He had strong ideas and visions about the direction of travel for organisations and the world of work, so I decided to burrow into my library and dig out the book of his I remember most, *The Age of Unreason*, and see how it had stood the test of thirty years of time.



Become a smarter human resource professional in two minutes. [Sign-up](#) to the Human Times for brief daily summaries of useful news and actionable information for HR professionals.

The Times They Were a-Changing

The underlying premise of the book was that change was changing. That change had sped up dramatically, but there was no need to be frozen like a rabbit in the headlights of change and organisations and individuals could and should use the accelerating upheaval to their advantage. The Age of Unreason is a positive book signposting an age of new discovery, new enlightenment, and new freedoms. Handy was right about that change momentum gathering speed. For example, of the original one-hundred 1983 constituents of the FTSE100 index only about 25 survive today in any recognisable form. Yet in 1983 many of those constituent companies were already a century old.

On The Money

Handy predicted that mobile phones would become mainstream and revolutionise the way we work at a time when few people owned such a thing, and the devices themselves were almost as big and unwieldy as an office worker's briefcase.

He will be encouraged that, as he forecast, women make up a much bigger chunk of the workforce now than they did in the late 1980s but would have been frustrated that it would be another seven years from the publication of his book before Marjorie Scardino became the first female CEO of a FTSE company and frustrated, perhaps, at the still painfully slow closing of the gender pay gap.

He also foresaw the internet in this book, two years before the terms "worldwide web" and "information superhighway" entered everyday parlance. He saw it principally as a game-changer for the retail industry commenting that personal shopping on the High Street will become a leisure activity. He also talks of computerised autoguidance screens inside cars fifteen years before Tom Tom came along. Handy anticipated disruptive technologies before they started really disrupting without coining the term.

I wonder what innovations you think will have revolutionised the world of work 30 years from now and what their impact may be?

Human Times editor edmund.torpey@earlymorningmedia.co.uk would be pleased to hear from you and will feature some of these thoughts in future editions of the newsletter.

Charles Handy was concerned that only 14% of our young adults were going into further education at the time and a clarion call of the book was to drastically increase this if we were going to build a generation of talented individuals for the knowledge-based corporate economy he saw coming down the track. An ambitious young opposition politician by the name of Blair would change that in due course. Tony Blair may also have shared Handy's other concern about a missing generation of workers caused by a falling birth rate and that worry may have helped shape the future Prime Minister's thinking on immigration policies.



Become a smarter human resource professional in two minutes.
[Sign-up](#) to the Human Times for brief daily summaries of useful news and actionable information for HR professionals.

The Shamrock Organisation

The Age of Unreason is at its best, though, when the author alights on the final days of the then typical organisation and what this meant for people. In 1989 there remained a rump of the workforce who had worked for the same company all their careers and thought they would serve to retirement and carriage clocks. Handy predicted the transformation to what he termed the “The Shamrock Organisation” - corporations that maintained a much-reduced permanent headcount while co-ordinating a network of temporary workers and contracted professionals. Large, sprawling, shiny head offices did not figure in the corporate world Handy was envisaging. Language is important to him and he believed that words like “worker” and “management” as opposite tribes would become obsolete, as would “retirement”.

Hand in hand with the Shamrock Organisation came the Portfolio Career. Handy believed that professionals would be essentially self-employed and needed to invest in themselves and develop skills and talents that they could change and refresh as their customers’ – the Shamrocks – needs and demands changed. He saw and hoped that we would enjoy varied careers but with much more control of its structure and intensity and achieve a genuine desirable work/life balance. He held out the hope that workers had a real chance of ascending to the top of Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs. There is a way to go but as usual Handy was on the right track.

He may not have been as intuitive in regard to another of his strong beliefs that quality will always out. Will always win through. Handy argued that organisations stayed in business by being the best, not the cheapest, and taking the customer seriously. What he would have to say about a world where companies can stay in business even though they have in some parts of the service economy removed themselves from direct contact with customers and subjecting them to recorded messages, piped muzak and soulless electronic contact would be interesting.

Managing Expectations

One of Charles Handy’s greatest hopes back in 1989 was that MBA students became more prevalent. He worried that the UK was falling behind in this regard. Only 1,200 MBAs students graduated in 1987 in the UK compared to 70,000 in the USA. That UK figure is now 10 times higher. Charles Handy, who is now approaching ninety years of age, would be quietly pleased with that. The man is still active and forthright, and his latest prediction as told to Management Today (before the Coronavirus pandemic really got in its stride) was the “disintegration of everything we’re used to”. Now might not be the right time to go into that. Handy is also scathing about the corporate quest for virtue, real or imagined:

‘You can’t survive long term if you don’t make a profit. Forget about all of this PR stuff; writing grand visions and mission statements in your annual report does not inspire anyone. The first duty of any business is to do its job.’



Become a smarter human resource professional in two minutes.
[Sign-up](#) to the Human Times for brief daily summaries of useful news and actionable information for HR professionals.

I never completed my MBA, by the way, Charles Handy and the Open Business School provided me with some of the tools and confidence to leave my organisation and start up a small business. That business became so busy and demanding I just did not have the time to finish the course. So, I guess it did the job.

One final footnote. Although The Age of Unreason references the Personnel function there is not one mention of “Human Resources” as a profession, discipline or office department in the entire book.

Martin Knight, Industry Slice.

For the latest HR news, views and intelligence [sign-up to the Human Times here](#). It's the easiest way to stay on top of trends and opportunities in your industry.



Why Industry Slice?

Industry Slice makes you more informed in minutes. Our expert team of editors and smart AI make sense of the abundance of information delivering you concise news bespoke to your profession.



A daily digest of your industry's most important news, delivered to your inbox.



Website:

www.industryslice.com



Contact:

+44(0)207 186
1060



Email address:

info@industryslice.com



Become a smarter human resource professional in two minutes. [Sign-up](#) to the Human Times for brief daily summaries of useful news and actionable information for HR professionals.