

No Road Not Taken

I know nothing about art. To be honest, I know nothing about science either. I am a licensed accountant, so I would say I know something about that. However, if business school taught me something, it's how true the adage "the more you know the less you know" is.

Initially, I felt like I knew a lot. Business and accounting was my major in university, I prepared and obtained my license on it, and my entire experience revolved around it. I then perceived the business world as a world of patterns. There is a concept of "best practices" that we emulate, benchmarks, comparatives, the list goes on. Continuous improvement taught me that I need to understand the process so well that I can improve on it. Indeed, management guided by the organization's vision and goals have long been prevalent, but as it trickled down the organization, our world has become inundated with standardization, work manuals, and whatever concept of how things should be done. However, as our world is being disrupted, the focus on the goal as opposed to the process is becoming more and more paramount, with the process becoming less defined and less structured. Unfortunately, pursuing and managing based on these goals only works if one actually knows the goals. Ninety percent of the time one doesn't¹.

Industry lines are blurring and being redefined, or even totally losing its definition. The disruption not just with technology, but with ideas. Even the concept of businesses that pursue profit are being shaken by organizations pursuing creation of shared values. To which industry should we apply the so-called "best practices" and benchmarks then?

The world is getting bigger, and radical change has become the norm. Entire specializations and fields are being created as each day goes by – a couple of decades ago we likely would not comprehend the concept of the internet much less of a virtual currency. And yet here we are today. Billions of people across the globe connected through Facebook, and would likely be using its cryptocurrency of choice in a couple of years.

Given this backdrop of the current world where computers are even needed to help us spell, who can qualify as a Renaissance Man?

The Renaissance Man

Technology's disruption provided anyone access to the world's information in a blink of an eye. Tutorials abound. Answers to about any question one can imagine and then some, are ubiquitous. In a way, wouldn't that be an argument that everyone having access to such technology a "polymath"? Each of us is now "all knowing". If I am not feeling well, I'll google my symptoms. If I need to write a code, I'll google what I want and there'll be a video tutorial that will tell me how. How would Leonardo da Vinci fare in our world as it is now, I wonder? Would the world still celebrate his genius? Is a polymath needed at this point in time?

In the present we have now, the pursuit of this holistic development can be easily seen with the youth. One has the normal school load, but some schools offer advanced classes. There are club activities for sports. Piano and ballet lessons are taken after school or weekend activities, and so are second or third languages. Some seven year olds I know have it tough.

A couple of decades back, when it was my turn to be seven, my main concern was whether I'll be home in time to watch the afternoon cartoons. I was struggling to learn my own language's letters,

¹ John E. Flaherty, "Peter Drucker: Shaping the Managerial Mind", 1999

much less another's.

As adults we were not expected to be the jack of all trades. We were expected to know one thing and do it well. Now, however, it seems that the trend is to create holistic, well rounded individuals, which makes sense. The future is not as clear cut now – one cannot simply say that they want to be a doctor when they grow up. As Professor Drucker said, “The only thing we know about the future is that it is going to be different”.

What does one do then? What we do now is create a level of flexibility that allows us to respond to the changing environment. Having merely one specialization exposes us to the risk of obsolescence. The lack of even one makes us useless.

We still need a specialization. It shall become our value in an organization in that our in-depth knowledge allows analyses beyond the surface level. At the same time, we need to see beyond our specialization and know that the world is becoming more interconnected and our specializations are spilling over other fields the same way other fields are spilling into ours.

But that's the catch – we have “our fields”, and that will be our bias. Da Vinci wrote, “All our knowledge has its origin in our perceptions.”³ Our perceptions. Our worldview. Our knowledge base. Our specializations.

Hence a true polymath, the Renaissance Man, will have enough comprehension of the different specializations and yet have no ownership of any. He can therefore hopefully make decisions that are less biased and less anchored to personal competencies and agenda, which is an invaluable contribution to an organization.

The Renaissance Man can do a lot of things, and do them well. Unfortunately, we are not all da Vinci. But that doesn't mean we can't be our own version of a Renaissance Man.

The Journey to Everywhere

I appreciate how Professor Drucker focuses on self-development and self-empowerment. We can decide who we want to be and create that version of ourselves. In saying that “No institution can possibly survive if it needs geniuses or supermen to manage it. It must be organized in such a way as to be able to get along under a leadership composed of average human beings⁴.”, he encourages us to be leaders who are made, not born. As with leaders, Renaissance Man, I believe, can be created.

But that was not the case in the Philippines.

Being a Renaissance Man was not a priority in my home country. A decade or two ago, outsourcing of the West's back office services drove the country's growth. (Perhaps it was also thanks to Professor Drucker?) Go back a couple of decades, and everyone was trying to be a nurse or a caregiver abroad. As Filipinos, “creating the future” was not a priority. We were too busy trying to survive. Our priority was clocking in and out. I'd say we were generally not knowledge workers, much less executives. We didn't care what we are doing, as long as we are doing it right. Quite simply, we were cost centers. Obviously, our organizations were not great either.

² Peter Drucker, “MANAGEMENT: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices”, 1973

³ Jean Paul Richter, “The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci”, 1883, as translated into English by Mrs. R. C. Bell and Edward John Poynter

⁴ Peter Drucker, “Concept of the Corporation”, revised ed, 1972

But the world is shifting for the Philippines too. And as a culture that followed trends, we have become quite adaptable. Knowledge workers are needed, and knowledge workers we are becoming. The interesting thing is that once one becomes a “knowledge worker”, it opens an entire new world of empowerment. As someone who was raised to follow a specific path, empowerment showed me opportunities that I never thought exist, much less something I had the option to take. As a “knowledge worker”, I now refuse to stop at my “designated” point in life. I see how the world is changing, how that one specific path is a mere result of society-imposed blinkers.

If I’ll try to imagine the path of pursuing being a polymath, I’d say it is akin to refusing to choose a turn in the road, and deciding to take them all. Now, if one is not born with the genius of it, as da Vinci and a mere handful of people are, then taking this journey to everywhere will take a lot of planning and effort. Is it an impossible road? Well, whether you think you can or you can’t... chances are you’re right⁵.

Putting Them All Together

Professor Drucker defined an effective manager, and said that “Intelligence, imagination, and knowledge are essential resources, but only effectiveness converts them into results⁶”. It is like a web, with the effective manager right at the center managing the web of resources that cover various specializations. The effective manager has to manage the web, and ensure that the web thrives in the environment it is in. The effective manager is, in one form or another, a “Renaissance Manager”, capable of multidisciplinary thinking, understanding how each aspect complements the other and putting them all together.

I see the value of a Renaissance Manager, but I wouldn’t presume to know how to create one. I wouldn’t presume to know how to choose to take all the forks in the road instead of selecting the “right” one. But the current changes in our world also redefines the definition of “right”. There is no right formula at this point – there will always be a pro and a con.

I used to know nothing about accounting. I know quite a bit about it now. I still know nothing about art. But the journey’s not over yet.

⁵ Caskie, “The Gaffney Ledger”, 1966 August 3

⁶ Peter Drucker, “The Effective Executive”, revised ed, 2009