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Book Review – Delivering Digitally: Managing the transition to the knowledge media

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Delivering Digitally: Managing the transition to the knowledge media

Editor: Inglis, Alistair , Peter Ling and Vera Joosten (2002). *Delivering Digitally: Managing the transition to the knowledge media*, 2nd Edition. London: Kogan Page. ISBN: 07 4943 4716

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We know that significant organizational change must have roots both at the top of an organization and "in the trenches" amongst those who must implement the change. In the middle lies a critical group of middle managers, directors and unit coordinators who are charged with defining and implementing both the broad plans and the minute details that create and sustain any change. It is to this later group that the second edition of *Delivering Digitally* is targeted.

In general, this book succeeds because it adroitly mixes the administrative detail necessary for anyone whose job depends on getting things done and producing results, with a deeper understanding of the culture, tradition and values that uniquely define public university education systems. This second edition of the text adds two features to the 1999 edition. Short cases studies are added to most chapters, which provide a useful, practical context and exemplar of the content covered. The second feature is a list of Web links that seem to add little value – first because the list itself is not organized in any logical fashion, and second because a Web address is not provided, by which I can spare myself the agony of typing in long www addresses.

The book has four sections. The first section overviews the context of digital delivery covering the origins of the Net, the forces driving educational change, and a general introduction to theory and practice of learning in a digital age. Each of these chapters is broad yet detailed enough to provide a good background to the "big picture." I was surprised to see no reference to some of the latest buzzwords such as "learning objects," the "educational semantic Web," and "mobile computing" in the technology chapter, but maybe this is too much currency to ask of a print text!

The second section gets down to business with two great chapters on that topic of most interest to managers – money! These are followed by chapters on the necessary technological infrastructure, staff training and workload issues, and courseware production and learner support services. This infrastructure section concludes with a discussion of ways and means to evaluate innovations using knowledge media. This chapter is informative and covers a great deal of ground, but seems to too quickly focus in on detailed work of formal evaluators and their theoretical perspectives and frameworks, while missing the sense that stakeholders and their unique interests are usually the best (or at least the most important) criteria upon which to base a practical evaluation. The final, rather short chapter, in this section overviews project and change management, providing a nice overview of the critical management issues that can so easily decide the fate of educational innovations.

Of particular interest is the author's acknowledgement of the two current paradigms that dominate distance education and often confuse students, administrators, and researchers. First are systems that develop independent study packages that maximize student control of time and space. Second are those distance education systems that focus on interactive communications (in either synchronous or asynchronous modalities) between and among teachers and students. The authors note that likely some mix of these two paradigms will be adopted by most institutions, but they skirt the issue of just which type of context is more likely to result in most successful distance education systems. To be fair, they note that: "the approach that is most important in each situation will depend upon an range of factors such as the nature of the subject, the backgrounds of the learners, the outcomes being sought and the context in which the program is being offered" (p. 44). These are nice generalities, but not much of a guideline for busy managers trying to make the single best decision.

The third section contains a single chapter on "quality management." This is a most useful chapter, especially for North Americans who are often far behind Australian and European administrators in detailing the process by which quality is measured, best practices defined, and systematic improvements are made to higher education. The final section – a single chapter very briefly introduces some of the newer technologies of the Web – including three paragraphs on the learning objects I noted missing earlier! Don't buy this book for a look into the crystal ball of emerging technology— but do read it if you want to learn how to better look at, understand and consequently improve your own education system.

All of which to say, this is a useful text that will find a home on the shelf (and reasons for regular retrieval to the desk) of many education managers. For those forced to "do something and do it right" in regard to e-learning, there are few books that offer content that is more thorough, practical and still highly readable.

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