Big Brother management
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Farewell performance reviews, hello data systems

In 2016 the job of management will be taken away from managers. For the salt-of-the-earth middle manager, it will be the most painful year on record. The manager’s three main functions—checking up on people, chivvying them and judging how they are doing—will either be deemed no longer necessary or will be given to machines to do instead. It will be the year in which the organisation, which has professed itself to be flat every year since the mid-1980s, actually becomes so.

The new shedding of managers is going to be a departure from the steady delaying that has taken place over the past 30 years. That has been driven by cost, by technology and by a professed distaste for hierarchy.

This time delaying is not going to be about money—and yet it is going to be far more brutal than anything that has gone before. The manager’s rationale will be judged and in the main found wanting: it will be dismissed as slow, bureaucratic and fallible.

The most visible sign of the new world will be the end of the annual career appraisal. In 2016 office employees will no longer have to submit themselves to the cumbersome process in which they set a dozen meaningless goals and were rated on obscure things like “displays pro-active inclusivity”. No longer will anyone have to endure annual discussions of how they are doing—with the inevitable demotivation and disillusionment that follows. The whole bureaucratic, backward-looking charade will be over.

The end started half way through 2015 when Deloitte and then Accenture announced that they were getting rid of their performance review. Deloitte let slip that it spent an unconscionable 2m hours a year to produce yearly reports for its 65,000 people—making it among the biggest corporate wastes of time ever invented. In 2016 the vast bulk of other companies will follow and scrap their own equally hated systems.

The demise of the performance review is part of a bigger aversion to the old style of managerial bureaucracy. Existing systems will be replaced by new ones built on more fashionable qualities: speed and transparency. Companies will stop fussing about inputs (how people do things) and focus only on outputs (what they produce). They will be obsessed with data, losing all interest in anything that can’t be measured. Every employee will be monitored every second; every keystroke and click will be tracked and analysed. Some companies will go further and get white-collar workers to wear sensors that track all movements and measure their tone of voice and the number of steps they take. Whatever they get up to, they will be watched by Big Brother.

Not only will there be little room left for the line manager, human resources (hr) will have less to do. Hr has justified its existence by dreaming up increasingly tiresome initiatives for managers to implement. In the new world there will be a few hr gurus who understand how to gather and manipulate data; the rest will no longer be needed.

In some ways the future will be brighter. Less time will be wasted. It is possible that offices will become less political. There will be no point in sucking up to x just because you know that he is going to be appraising you.

Other things will be better too. With fewer managers there will be less need for pointless management training. In 2016 we will no longer be forced to go to country-house hotels to ask ourselves if we were an animal, which one would it be? The soft side of management—the emotional intelligence that all managers have spent the past decade telling everyone they possess—is going to be out of fashion. Empathy can’t be easily measured, so we are going to hear less about it.

Mentors v machines
In this brasher new world much will be lost. In time we will start to miss fallible managers. While it is true that they dither, cover their backs, show favouritism and are subject to the full range of human weaknesses, at best their very humanity can serve a purpose. A manager can comfort and protect, provide structure and protect the weak. With this comfort layer removed, those who are deemed not to be performing will be cast out with no one to stick up for them.

More alarmingly, without the line manager there will be no one to teach young hires how to behave, no one whose behaviour novices can copy. Instead they will have to make it up as they go along.

Worst of all there is no sign that Big Brother will make better judgments about human employees than its human predecessors. Humans did an indifferent job, but at least when individual managers did an egregiously bad one they usually got fired. Firing systems will be a lot harder.

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