

# Automate or Perish!

Back around the time when the FJ Holden was still on the drawing board and the six o'clock swill was still in vogue, Australia had a chronic shortage of labour. It was needed to meet our nation's demand for building infrastructure, manning (we were allowed to say that back then) our primary production endeavours and manufacturing the goods needed for an optimistic nation of homebuilders. Australia's first Minister for Immigration, Arthur (Cocky) Calwell voiced the call to action to 'populate or perish'. The phrase was actually originally attributed to Billy Hughes, Australia's most controversial Prime Minister who served from 1915 to 1923.



*Our 50 000<sup>th</sup> immigrant, Barbara Porritt  
(National Archives)*

Even in the days before television, cable and late night shopping, it quickly became apparent that the task was beyond our population of patriotic consenting adults.

The assisted migration scheme was introduced and in the period from 1948 to 1950 around 600 000 immigrants arrived in Australia to bolster our labour pool and further stimulate the economy.

Almost 60 years later, we again find ourselves with the supply/demand dynamic that has us crying out for a significant injection of labour. Unfortunately this time, we can't pilfer it from foreign shores. We have to seek different and innovative solutions to the challenge. I believe that now it is time to upgrade our thinking from the cry of half a century ago to populate or perish to something more contemporary. That's right, today we face the choice to automate or perish.

At this point, I hasten to explain what I mean by automation. I'm not suggesting that we create an army of robots to take over our labour requirements or build an assortment of fully automated, lights out factories. To help understand my suggestion I would first like us to visit one of my favourite books, the Oxford English Dictionary. This will remind us that "automation" is about creating systems and processes that have little or no human control or intervention.



*Cutting access track to Jindabyne Dam site,  
1950 (Snowy Hydro's online photo library)*

People are valuable to a business while they are creating value. No longer can we afford to squander human effort on tasks that can be



*Colin Paroz*

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achieved through other means though other means or are indeed unnecessary. Gone are the days of armies of women operating plug field telephone switches like the one shown here.



Technology has advanced a lot since then and nowadays we don't need people to make physical connections between telephone users. Telcos have sophisticated infrastructure that takes care of that. The labour used in this process is now concerned with building and maintaining equipment rather than performing the task. As we march into the future this too will change as Voice Over the Internet Protocol gathers momentum. I believe that in my lifetime the telephone infrastructure as we know it will probably disappear.

So then, how can we reduce human intervention in our own businesses for the purpose of better using the people that we have? I suggest that there are three principal ways. The first is to maximise the value add we create in our business. To achieve this we must understand exactly how we add value from our customer's point of view. Once we understand this, we can work to reduce or eliminate non-value adding activities. That can include simple things like unnecessary travel or pointless meetings, through to highly complex solutions such as process re-engineering and enhanced value chain management.

The second option is the more traditional version of automation. This can include the innovation of products and processes to deliver the same or greater outcome for a reduced labour input.

The third, and I suspect, the least harnessed tactic, is to actually get more from the people we have. For most of my career, I have had to endure the rhetoric about people being our greatest assets, while often watching them being treated with little more than benign indifference. We have now entered an era in which people are demanding more than just a job and a pay packet. Lifestyle has now taken a front seat.

The successful employer of the future will create a working environment that is physically and virtually attractive. They will offer challenging and rewarding work and deliver superior leadership that inspires people to make their best possible contribution.

Business survival into the future will depend on automation to reduce human intervention and control, coupled with getting the most out of our remaining and limited human resource through positive encouragement and support. Finally people will be used in their most productive capacity to create value rather than as a means to a commercial end.

Cocky Caldwell's call to action was probably more emotive and potentially satisfying at a personal level than is mine. I am sure though, that automation can deliver us from our current labour situation just as surely as did boat loads of willing workers and their families all those years ago.

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