

Dirk Wagner

The Graceful Degradation of the Knowledge Worker?

On getting back the attention of what used to be your most valuable resource

Abstract

The term graceful degradation emerged in the information technology sector. It describes a functionality implemented by software programmers to help avoiding catastrophic failure when two machines interact: one machine (e.g. a sophisticated current state of technology website) will gracefully degrade and maintain limited functionality when interacting with a poorer equipped machine (e.g. an outdated Internet browser). Inspired by Schirmacher (2009), who describes the experience of permanent ungraceful degradation of brains in relation to existing information flood, degradation can also be observed to take place when machines interact with humans. This is of relevance to management thinkers and practitioners as it has adverse effects on individual knowledge workers and on organizations.

To explore these effects, a conceptual framework is offered that is differentiates direct and indirect degradation along one dimension and self-degradation versus imposed degradation along a second dimension. The framework allows for an analysis of emerging management challenges as well as for an exploration of possible managerial approaches to cope with these challenges.

Regarding the effects it is shown that degradation may seem to be graceful, but it is not. Building on existing studies from different areas as well as on commonly known practical examples, it is argued that when machines and knowledge workers interact, degradation can lead to a loss of productivity, a loss of competency, avoidance of responsibility and ultimately a loss of freedom.

It is concluded that whereas the concept of graceful degradation in information technology has become a useful engineering principle, in management it is a socio-technological phenomenon which has to be taken into account. Explicitly focusing on

degradation means to re-think management from a new perspective. It is proposed that with this focus in mind managers can build on techniques they have become reasonably good at over the last decades: to manage occupational health (**P**rotection), to responsibly manage productivity (**R**esponsible **P**roductivity) and to manage creativity and innovation (**P**ro-activity). Achieving 'PRPP' at the human-machine interface serves to help minimizing degradation by cutting through a cording up electronic encapsulation of today's knowledge workers.

References

Schirmacher, Frank (2009): Payback. Warum wir im Informationszeitalter gezwungen sind, zu tun, was wir nicht tun wollen, und wie wir die Kontrolle über unser Denken zurückgewinnen. 1. Aufl. München: Blessing.