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Boldly Building Beyond BRM Brings Big Business Benefits

At LEF, we've written about and followed BRM since the late 90s, when firms were scrambling to prepare their operations in anticipation of the overhyped Y2K crisis. Two decades later, we're still stressing the importance of BRM disciplines, skills and competencies¹. Back in 2005, our first public commentary, *Does your BRM programme deliver the relationships your business demands?* was the formal introduction of our Provider, Promoter, Partner, Peer (4P) model. Since then, we've published several reports, executed dozens of development workshops with a select group of global enterprises and partnered with the BRM Institute.

Firms with a strong BRM capability are well positioned to reap the benefits that technology can deliver for their organization and frequently have a pipeline of talent that gives them the ability to respond to new market opportunities. As Business Relationship Managers develop, they're being rewarded with greater leadership responsibilities. Advanced organizations now require Digital Business Leadership (DBL) skills as they realize technology can be a game changer, potentially vital to their future relevance and existence.

The definition of what constitutes BRM varies, and may include:

- The internal equivalent of transactional sales and account management for IT-intensive projects and operations: understanding internal and external customer needs, agreeing service levels, priorities and delivery dates, checking in with customers about their satisfaction, and addressing issues that arise
- Strategic account management, including understanding customer needs in both medium and long term, and shaping customers' expectations regarding what is possible
- Educating the IT organization about the business context, strategic imperatives and trends in the customer domain, and championing the customer's cause in IT
- In some organizations, the BRM role is combined with project/programme management duties

Many organizations will have people with a title such as BRM (Business Relationship Manager) or BP (Business Partner) whose main responsibilities resemble the above list, sometimes for a specific stakeholder group. But whether or not the organization has people who are called BRMs, the task of BRM must be done, and even if there are individual BRMs, that doesn't absolve the rest of the IT organization from BRM activities.

The question in this highly digital, fast-evolving world, is: *does anything about the BRM picture change?* The short answer is yes.

First, if we see BRMs as mainly focused on passive account management – taking the customers' orders, checking that delivery is on time, on budget and in scope, checking that service level agreements are being upheld, and checking that customers are happy with the service – we may be in trouble. BRMs need to proactively bring the art of the possible to customers, challenging their thinking, exciting and motivating them.

Second, this means that BRMs need to develop themselves, in soft skills such as gravitas and challenging, in business acumen around the organization in general but also in the specific domain of the internal and external customer, and in the digital possibilities and threats coming down the line.

1. <https://leadingedgeforum.com/publication/raising-its-game-through-brm/>, <https://leadingedgeforum.com/publication/brm-self-assessment/>

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Specifically, in terms of the digital possibilities and threats, that means three things:

1. Becoming more digital personally, immersing oneself deeply in both consumption of digital products and services (this is where LEF's *21st Century Human* domain focuses); and also, if possible, in becoming a 'maker', experimenting with creating digitally – for example using many of the open source libraries and tools that the digerati (Google, Amazon, Alibaba, Baidu, etc.) are making freely available.
2. Considering business model analogies, looking beyond 'industry best practices' for innovations that fit with some aspects of your organization's business that could be stolen from other domains. The advantage of business model analogies is that they are likely to bring more value than industry best practices (which is effectively a 'catch-up' strategy), but are less risky than blue-sky innovation/innovating from scratch. (We are reminded here of two famous quotes: artist Pablo Picasso's "Good artists copy, great artists steal" and sci-fi author William Gibson's "The future is already here, it's just unevenly distributed.")
3. Becoming more of a digital resource investigator. Belbin, one of the popular models of team behaviour, identifies nine roles that teams need. Several of the roles (such as *shaper*, *monitor-evaluator* and *completer-finisher*) are core to the transactional elements of the BRM function and BRM roles. When thinking about the more strategic elements, we may think of the *plant* role, which is one of idea generator/innovator. But we must also think hard about the role of *resource investigator*.

In Belbin terminology, a resource investigator "*vigorously pursues contacts and opportunities, and has a finger firmly on the pulse of the outside world*". Of course, this has always been a good and important thing to do, and might even be pejoratively termed 'motherhood and apple pie' because it is such an obvious need. But in a world where an increasing panoply of technology, services, data, people, money and many other resources are available on tap, scaleably and industrial-strength from *the Matrix*, we must shift our organization's effort to spending a greater degree of time on resource investigation – finding out what is already on offer.

Perhaps a simple example, but on a recent LEF study tour, Google showed us the natural language query capability embedded in Google sheets, through which you can say to a spreadsheet "Tell me which products sold best in the fourth quarter." For most of us, despite having had access to that capability for some time, this was big news. When LEF's *21st Century Human* practice visits clients, there are always many of these jaw-drop moments, when we are not talking about the future but demonstrating capabilities that are available to us now, often at little (or even zero) cost.

The bottom line is: *do we make (enough) time for digital resource investigation?* In an earlier research commentary we wrote about digital leaders' use of time², borrowing Michael Bungay Stanier's three-part structure of *bad work*, *good work* and *great work*³. Bad work is work that no-one should have to do, but is unfortunately necessary (think administrative emails, expense claims, timesheet filling.) Good work is work that is core to your role, that you have done many times before, that you are viewed as a 'safe pair of hands' doing. Great work is work that stretches and challenges you, that you learn from and excites you, and that helps you move forward personally and in your contribution to your organization.

Michael's brilliant insight, from many years of coaching, is that we often view bad work as the enemy, but the bigger enemy is good work. If you are competent at your job, good work will be heaped on you until you have no more time or energy to do your great work. Specifically, in the context of BRM, we would argue that in the current context, your great work must include significant amounts of digital resource investigation: finding out what's out there, playing with it, introducing it to others, stimulating conversation, proposing and/or running small experiments.

Maybe even consider running ethical digital business model hacks – creating small teams that leverage digital capabilities in the Matrix to try to demonstrate how a leading-edge competitor could do what you do, better/cheaper/faster and/or safer.

2. <https://leadingedgeforum.com/publication/21st-century-leadership-its-about-time/>

3. Michael Bungay Stanier, *Do More Great Work: Stop the Busywork Start the Work That Matters*, Workman Publishing, March 2010

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The bottom line is that great BRM must involve significant digital resource investigation, and all digital leaders must commit time to that, or risk themselves, their IT organizations and their businesses/public sectors as a whole becoming obsolete. As with everything, what gets measured gets done. Consider keeping track of the amount of time you and your team spend on digital resource investigation, and continually think about whether that is the right amount.

Watch out for the new LEF *Digital Business Leadership* offering later in 2018 as we strive to help our clients move beyond brilliant BRM and harness the potential of *digital*.

About Leading Edge Forum

Leading Edge Forum (LEF) is a global research and thought leadership programme dedicated to helping clients reimagine their organizations and leadership for a tech-driven future. We serve as a strategic touchpoint for CXO teams to provoke and challenge their thinking to help them win in the 21st century.

We believe that as business and IT become inseparable, virtually every aspect of work and the modern firm will need to be reimaged, and this creates exciting new digital opportunities.

Through an annual membership programme of research, events, onsite workshops and advisory services, we support senior leaders in areas such as strategy, organizational change, executive education, talent development and the future of the IT function. Members enjoy personalized access to our global network of thought leaders, clients and leading practitioners.

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