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Adapt your business to technological change



E-BIZ

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Several weeks ago, this column focused on digital video editing technology that has recently become available for use on personal computers. It suggested entrepreneurs could begin exploring this technology to determine how it might be applied as a business tool. Applications include creating promotional, training, educational or other types of videos.

The article generated quite a response, for this is certainly a hot technology. Yet reaction was decidedly mixed; in fact, two particular messages stood out. One reader perceived digital video editing as a threat to his livelihood, while another saw opportunity in it.

Comparing these two responses helps put into perspective the broader issue of how small businesses can survive in a world characterized by constant technological change. Indeed, all of us must adapt to a continuous influx of new technology and be prepared to cope with forces that may change the very basis of our livelihood.

Yet some people don't take kindly to new technology and fall prey to sentiments expressed by poet Ogden Nash: "Progress was great once, but it has gone on far too long."

Certainly this attitude was represented in responses from people working in the video production field, who admonished the column for suggesting that entrepreneurs could take the task into their own hands. Indeed, one fellow with his own production company went so far as to say the article would cause him to lose business.

What he may not yet recognize is that he will probably lose business regardless of what he does — people are going to investigate and use this new technology. So he should figure out what to do to keep his business thriving.

It was fairly easy to demonstrate the folly of his thinking by taking his E-mail message and substituting the phrase "desktop publishing" in place of "digital video editing." Quite a few people in the printing and graphics industry (many of them small businesses in their own right) reacted with alarm in the mid-eighties at the emergence of desktop publishing programs and laser printers.

They were concerned that the technology would let many people, particularly small businesses, create their own brochures or other printed materials. They tried to ignore what was happening and saw a drop in business as desktop publishing took hold.

Yet others in the printing and graphics industry adapted. They started accepting computer-generated files provided by entrepreneurs so that they could at least keep the printing end of the business.

Creative graphics designers set out to convince people that while they could produce their own brochures, they should look to professionals for guidance and design skills in putting together materials that were effective.

The bottom line? Rather than fighting the technology, many within the industry adjusted their revenue model to the explosive growth in desktop publishing.

There are some valuable lessons in these examples: in a world of constant change, you must be prepared to adapt. Keep an open mind, be prepared to change the way you work and if there is a fundamental shift in the very nature of the industry where you work, figure out how to capitalize on it.

That's the perspective found in another message received with regard to the video column — it was from a recent film graduate who was having trouble finding work in that industry. His attitude toward the emergence of PC-based digital video editing was that it presented opportunity.

"Your article has given me a newfound interest in becoming an entrepreneur," he wrote. "Making small promotional videos for companies is a wide open market . . . Thanks for the inspiration."

That's the right attitude. In every degree of technological change, there has to be a silver lining.

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