TWENTY MINUTES FROM NOW

Mark Oehlert

The Department of Defense (DoD) acquisition workforce is reaching a point at which change—rapid, relentless change—will become the norm. The global marketplace and the billions of consumers that make up the cyberspace called Web 2.0 will drive this change and wield influence over its features, products, and capabilities available to the DoD enterprise—capabilities represented by words such as Twitter, Wikipedia, Flickr, Firefox, RSS, or blogging. To fully realize the potential of these technologies, even within the very real boundaries of policy and technology within which the defense acquisition workforce must operate, the author advocates in this article a degree of re-thinking about how business is conducted, both internally and externally, and even what the definition of that business is.

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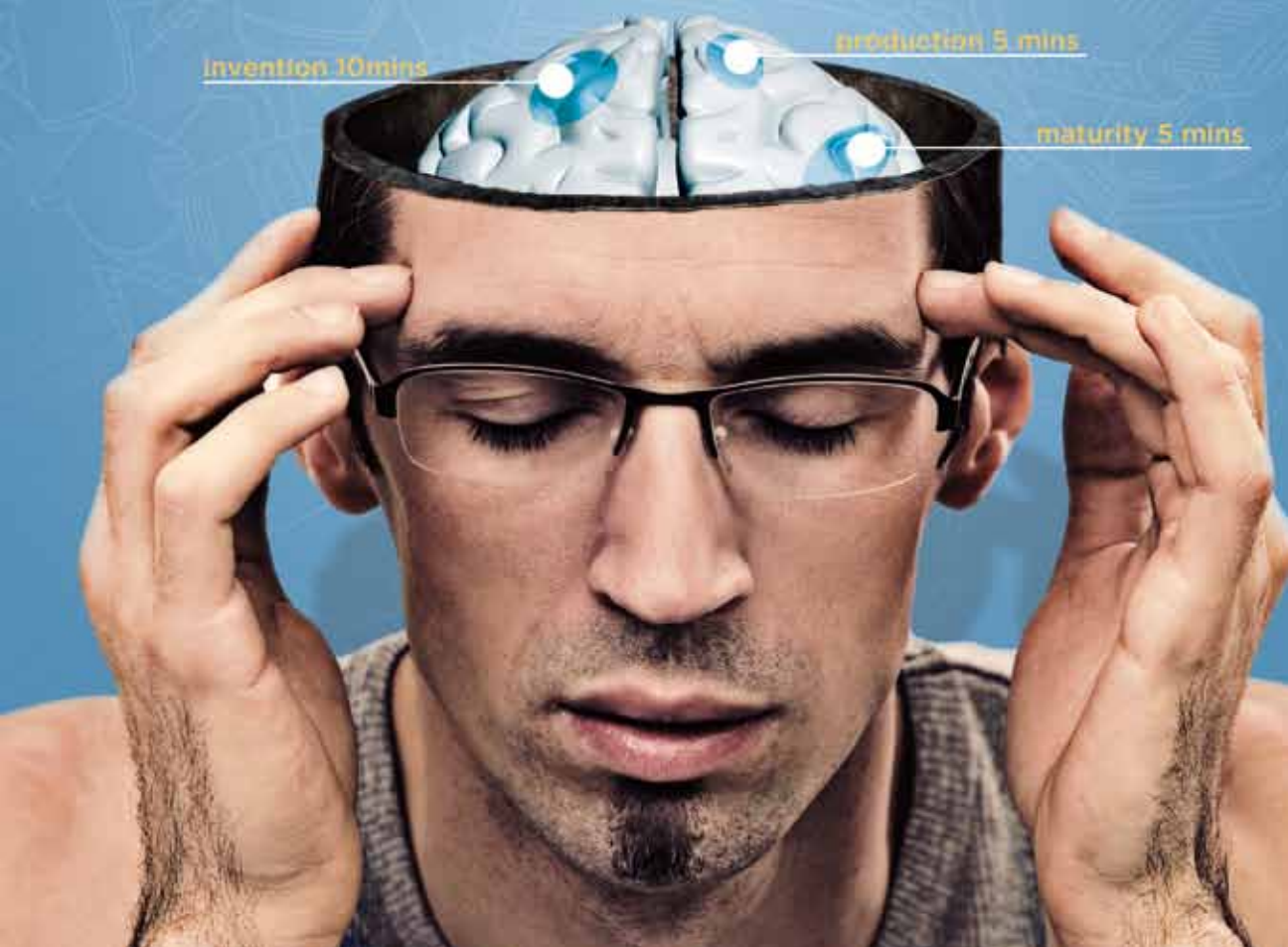
Image designed by Harambee Dennis »

"The future is already here - it is just unevenly distributed."
William Gibson, noted author

20 minutes from now

situational awareness



The future is already here—it is just unevenly distributed.

William Gibson, Author

We tend to overestimate the effect of a technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run.

Roy Amara, Past President, Institute for the Future

Discussion about the "pace of change" that is currently gripping the technological landscape has so permeated the ranks of the defense acquisition workforce that it risks becoming a trite cliché. But discuss it we must. Ray Kurzweil, noted futurist, author, and inventor, argues that while we understand that technology is changing rapidly, we fail to understand that that very change is causing an even more exponential acceleration. One way to think about this phenomena is that faster computers help build faster computers faster. That is, each generation of improved tools, helps us build the next generation of improved tools even faster. Cycle times for such things as invention to production to maturity are becoming radically shortened. The bar has never been set lower

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for entry of new companies into these technology marketplaces. The products themselves—when viewed through the lens of the impact they can have on an organization and their absolute price—have also never been cheaper.

The vectors are all converging, and we are coming to a point at which change—rapid, relentless change—will become the norm. There will be no plateaus where we will be able to pause and catch our organizational breath—the acceleration will be constant. It will also not be the government driving the pace of change. It will be the marketplace—the global marketplace and the billions of consumers that make up that space. They will wield influence over the features and products available to the Department of Defense (DoD) Enterprise in a way and with a strength previously unheard of; in fact, they already are.

How does all of this sound? Does it sound positive? Does it sound challenging? Does it maybe sound scary? It's actually all of those things.

The U.S. Army defines *situational awareness* as "the ability to generate actionable knowledge through the use of timely and accurate information about the Army enterprise, its processes, and external factors" (Deputy Under Secretary of the Army Knowledge Center, n.d.). That seems to be a fairly accurate description of what people are lacking when confronted with this new technological landscape. How do you find out what capabilities are represented by words such as Yammer, Twitter, Wikipedia, Flickr, Firefox, RSS, blogging, Digg, and mashups—much less begin to be able to craft a strategy that includes the relevant, productive portions of this new world while simultaneously addressing issues of privacy and security? The defense acquisition workforce needs such a

strategy. As noted Knowledge Management (KM) practitioner John Bordeaux (2009) recently argued as it related to DoD-wide KM strategy:

> The focus should not be on the KM troops or the CKO [Chief Knowledge Officer]. DoD has arrived at the notion that KM is essential, and has moved therefore to secure the position of KM across the department. This, sadly, removes the focus from what works and from the warfighter. A focus on a large KM program, careers, etc., is to focus on a structural fix to a behavioral and technology problem. Worse than not fixing it, these structures work against the very types of initiatives that succeed on the ground. (pp. 2–3)

Substitute "social media" or "Web 2.0" for KM and it's the same argument. Specifically related to social media, Mark Drapeau of National Defense University and Lin Wells, the former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Networks and Information Integration), the Acting DoD Chief Information Officer, and the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Command, Control, Communications, and Intelligence) have asserted that:

> Social software, if deployed, trained on, monitored, managed, and utilized properly, is expected to yield numerous advantages: improve understanding of how others use the software, unlock self-organizing capabilities within the government, promote networking and collaboration with groups outside the government, speed decision making, and increase agility and adaptability. (Drapeau & Wells, 2009, p. vi)

One dynamic that has become increasingly clear is that today, the actual technology—the software or the hardware—is usually the smallest part to understanding the potential impact that it could have on an organization. Other facets include the organizational design and change management issues. One of the defining characteristics of a number of these technologies is that they are not culturally neutral—that is to say, by deploying them within organizations they will, by their very presence, change the culture of the organization. Wikis—online collaborative writing environments—as an example, tend to both reduce e-mail traffic around the creation of a new document and democratize the editing process so that not only does everyone have the ability to author new portions of the document, but everyone can also have the ability to roll back the document to prior versions.

This is a step away from the old routine of attaching the document to an e-mail, sending it out to the writing team while appointing someone "version master," and then making sure that everyone applies the "Track Changes" feature of the software to the document. The new arrangement, while possessing favorable attributes (reduction of e-mail for one), can also be troubling for those who perceive a potential loss of control. The dilemma is clearly apparent: We have a technology that is incredibly simple and cheap (if not free) to deploy, but that carries with it some real potential organizational issues that must be addressed

if the technology is to be successfully deployed and employed.

These are not culturally neutral applications. The very way in which social media operate means that they step outside the boundaries of traditional silos, departments, and regions. To fully realize the potential of these technologies, even within the very real boundaries of policy and technology within which the defense acquisition workforce must operate requires a degree of re-thinking about how business is conducted, both internally and externally, and even what the definition of that business is. Imagine that "the grapevine" is not a poisonous plant to be cut off at the roots, but a natural source of vitality to be cultivated and nourished. Imagine that it's branching, intertwining shoots are the natural pathways through which information and energy flow in the organization. Consider that these informal networks of learning conversations are as much a core business process as marketing, distribution, or product development. In fact, thoughtful conversations around questions that matter might be the core process in any company—the source of organizational intelligence that enables the other business processes to create positive results (Brown & Isaacs, 1996).

Gibson and Amara, authors of the two quotes that introduce this article, are both right. The future is here, and we are both overestimating its impact in the short run and underestimating its impact in the long run. Are these technologies dramatically impacting our business today? They are just starting to. Would it be wise to begin to seriously consider how to deal with the impact of these technologies when they are adopted at an enterprise-level? Yes.

The eLearning Technology Center (eLTC) at the Defense Acquisition University is exploring a number of ways to increase awareness of the potentials (and pitfalls) of emerging technologies like Web 2.0 among both DAU faculty/staff and the much larger defense acquisition workforce. We welcome your comments, support, and involvement.

Author Biography

Mark Oehlert is a recognized expert, author, and speaker in the fields of innovation, emerging technology, and game-based learning. He has worked in the e-Learning field for 10 years, bringing his unique insight as a trained historian and anthropologist to a range of challenges from performance support to mobile computing and learning strategy development. Oehlert now serves as an Innovation Evangelist at the Defense Acquisition University.

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