

The acceleration trap could kill your business

Greater effort to lift profit could bite back, consultant warns

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IN THESE times of economic downturn, businesses are trying to do more, with fewer resources, to cut costs to the bone while still maximising profitability.

The result is that they are being caught in an acceleration trap, which, ironically, makes greater activity produce fewer results.

That's the view of Consultant Powerhouse's Vanessa Bluen, who believes that companies, and employees, need to look at ways of powering down, rather than accelerating, if they want to succeed.

Bluen refers to a Harvard Business Review article titled "The Acceleration Trap" that explains how, if you demand the same level of accelerated effort from your employees, day after day, they will eventually crack under the pressure, their performance and productivity will suffer and your business will ultimately fail.

"That article goes on to explain how leading global organisations have learnt that, to succeed, they have to cut back on what they do," Bluen explains.

"Often organisations go on a big expansion drive in good times, only to realise that they do not have the



TAKE CONTROL: Vanessa Bluen believes it's time to power down, not accelerate.

resources to sustain the expansion.

"It's even worse when, as is the case now, new projects are being initiated at a rapid pace in an effort to survive, and when they are being instituted when cutbacks are occurring and when there is no money available for the kind of staff development required to make the new projects work."

There comes a time when organisations need to put a hold on new projects and seriously re-evaluate operations to see which ones they can do without in an effort to make

the others more effective.

"The critical issue facing chief executives these days is how to create capacity. The dominant logic is getting everyone to do more, but that can be counter-productive.

"The most talented employees are going flat out simply to keep their heads above water, without having time to do what they are good at. This stifles creativity and innovation.

"The answer is to put a hold on new projects and to go back to basics."

Bluen is concerned about the effect of all of this on the individuals who work in these over-stretched organisations.

"The demands on individuals have become so severe that they do not even have time to spend on time management any more," she says.

"We have to accept that the external factors being brought to bear will not change soon, and that the demands made by clients will not decrease or become more reasonable," she says.

"So, while it's easy to say that we need to escape the acceleration trap and find ways of powering down – to be more effective – just how we do it is not so simple."

The key, Bluen believes, is to make sense of the manageable, to realise that being more busy does not necessarily mean that you are achieving more.

"You need to take control of yourself," she says. "For the sake of your own health in the first instance, and then for the sake of the business.

"You need to simplify your working day and then make it workable," she says.

Traditionally the response to this has been to implement time management tools, to organise your day in a way that allows you to fit everything in.

"That cannot work when you are caught in the acceleration trap," Bluen believes. "The demands are growing and you are expected to fit more into the same amount of time,

every day."

The answer, she believes, lies in re-evaluating what you have to do.

She proposes a buffer, free time and focus model. The core is to create free time for yourself so that you can relax and recharge, increasing your productivity.

The buffer acts on activities in your day and the ones you absolutely have to do. "These are the tasks that will derail you if you don't complete them," she says.

The focus time is the time you use to plan your activities and find ways of completing the buffer activities quickly and efficiently.

"That's the key: find ways of turning buffer time into focus and free time," she says.

And the idea is that you divide each hour of your day into those three activities.

"It allows you choices with your time, and when you have choices you are in control," Bluen says.

"Having choices builds resilience. We can't do anything about the things we have to do. But we can, by stepping back and focusing, have some control over how we do them.

"Organisations that eliminate tasks that are not adding value allow employees to focus in this way, increasing productivity and profitability," says Bluen.

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