

Like nobody's business

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‘Clean my coach’ is a mobile app proposed by the Indian Railways which, according to news reports, will enable you to get your railway coach cleaned ‘in a matter of minutes’ (precisely 15 minutes, they specify). This is straight out of ‘I Dream of Jeanie’.

Presumably, how this works is — a passenger logs an SMS complaint and their coach and berth number is forwarded to the train attendant who makes sure it is cleaned. How this doesn’t work is, if the attendant of the coach was doing his job in the first place, there was no need for this app. The rationale for this app is that there is housekeeping staff on the trains but the passengers aren’t able to ‘find’ them. Why should passengers have to find anyone to get them to do their jobs? If the attendant and the housekeeping staff are not doing their work, the question is, will an app make them do it?

Then there is the job of the passengers. I got into a train at 11 pm for an overnight journey. The family that disembarked and whose place we occupied, left the berths filthy — sheets and blankets trailing on the dirty floor, empty packets of chips and mineral water bottles littered about.

How will an app make unwilling employees and callous passengers keep Bhartiya Rail 'aapki apni sampatti', clean? In the end, all one will have is another app on the phone that creates a false sense of control. If people refuse to work, technology at its best can be rendered ineffectual.

Also, the use of technology has to be judicious. In our country of 1.2 billion people, around 40 million are unemployed. We have all the manpower to deal with all the work if people are willing to work and give it their best. But the will to work is missing in an environment that does not recognise or reward a job well done. "The society which scorns excellence in plumbing as a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy: neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water." (John W Gardner, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare under President Lyndon Johnson)

Technology promises to put one in touch with modern day genies, but we all know that it's easier to find a long-lost kindergarten back-bencher than to be able to get a service centre employee at the other end of the phone line to guide us in pulling the lint out of the washing machine.

Use & throw

We now have the convenience, at one tap of our smartphones, to have someone come home to pick our shoes to clean; to have special meals delivered for the family pet; to clean our bathrooms and fans; or to convert the minutest of our balconies into a haven of greenery. Yet, the more dependent we're becoming on these services, the less dependable they seem to be.

When it comes to quality and dependability of the new range of services being offered, we are always circumspect. We have learnt to keep our expectations low and are always prepared for the worst — there is a 50 per cent chance that the launderette will run a smouldering iron on the polyblend shirt giving it frown marks; and there is a 100 per cent chance that the hotel one checks into is a pidgin version of what one saw while booking it online.

In a mad rush to innovate, implement, digitise, automate we are expecting and demanding less from human skills. Organisations, governments and businesses do not grow in size or value with technology alone. Why then, when we think of growth and development, do we focus increasingly on automation and less on human intelligence and skills? Why is efficiency increasingly being attributed to technology and less to people? A recent Princeton University study about the American millennial generation found that they are among the world's least-skilled workers and fall short, among other things, in 'problem solving in technology-rich environments.'

This is very telling of the times we live in. "This is solid, don't replace it," the washing machine service person told me every time I called him over to mend it. I was tired of it constantly breaking down, but he warned me that the newer ones would be less dependable. The life of everything we buy today is much shorter than it was earlier.

When we were small, we heard googly-eyed of how 'abroad' household goods gone kaput were trashed and I still remember seeing pictures of mountains of used refrigerators and cars. Our humble iron box weighing one ton, the groaning refrigerator, the oven that sat on the gas stove and baked the most fragrant and moist cakes saw at least three generations around them as in bits, their parts were replaced or mended.

Getting a product serviced has become the greatest challenge of our times. Is it a wonder that so many gadgets and appliances are junked, more than ever before, in our relatively poor country?

Illusion of service

How easy is it to get a gadget repaired? From logging a service call the challenges are unforeseeable and frustrating. There is no guarantee of how well a product will be serviced and how much longer it will work. In this fast-paced life, where time is money, it makes better sense to trash, than to mend. The irony is that everything 'seems' so easy. Handymen may be a click away in the fuzzy app-world, yet getting a skilled worker is still 'bhagwan bharse'. Just as the work skills are missing, so is the will to do a job well. Technology creates efficiency, but it cannot replace the human element in service business.

A decade ago, large chain bookstores came to our metros. It was an amazing experience exploring rows and rows of tidy bookshelves. But the charm wore off quickly. The smartly-dressed, English-speaking store attendants could not help locate books because they had no understanding of the business of books. It was frustrating when they could not even look up the online inventories properly to help. It wasn't difficult to leave those brightly-lit, air-conditioned bookstores for the smaller, friendlier ones where one's joy in the discovery of books is shared by the proprietor who thinks nothing of dropping everything to help locate a book or recommend one. Is it a wonder then that so many of those large bookstores have shrunk in size and opulence, or have had to close shop?

Recently, at a mall, after going through miles of shiny shoes, I selected one and showed it to the attendant, asking for my size. He was standing with other attendants in a group, chatting. He threw one cursory look at the shoe in my hand and said my size wasn't available, returning to his conversation. Having come to understand the way this workforce functions, and not wanting to let go of a good shoe, I came back to the shoe aisles a little later and asked another attendant if I could have the shoe in my size. He immediately disappeared into the warehouse and bingo! there it was. This person even took the trouble to take it back to the warehouse to adjust the fitting for me. The second salesperson changed my shopping experience.

Advantage no one

The superstores, megastores and hyperstores employ an army of shop attendants with little or no knowledge of the products they sell. Most times, when asked basic details about a product, they are unable to help the customer. Soft skills in interacting with customers and a will to genuinely assist them are missing, leading to unhappy customers.

So, who are these young men and women who control our buying or servicing experiences? Men on two-wheelers balancing oversized delivery bags, negotiating the impossible traffic, often taking calls or asking for directions on their mobile phones while driving are the commonest sight these days. We are promised delivery in half-hour when the traffic moves at 15 km per hour. How realistic are the expectations set by the service providers? The booming retail and service industry has created a huge job market. But in reality, they are offering work and not jobs or careers.

The competition is cut-throat, costs have to be minimised and the return on investment in imparting skills and training is not great. Most of the delivery boy or shop floor attendant jobs that these markets demand are contractual, which means that this enormous workforce does not get employment benefits like provident fund, leaves or overtime; has no loyalty towards their company or brand; and lacks a sense of belonging. They switch jobs for a slight raise in salary because salary is all they get from a job.

As for customers, it is ironical that when every product is designed around 'user experience', so little is the user accounted for when it comes to buying or servicing. Customers can cry hoarse about call centre complaints being 'closed' without resolution, redress is rare.

Many start-ups and new entrepreneurs, in their enthusiasm of the vast playing field that has opened out to them online, have created business facades and illusion of services that do not exist. A latest mobile app that promises handymen for all jobs has none of these on their rolls, nor is the workforce that they promise authenticated by them for workmanship or trust – the app owners work as middlemen, albeit in a virtual world where the customer as well as the service provider is faceless. Having the power of an app may make us feel 'empowered', but in reality, it is superficial. Our personal details flash on the mobile phones of cab drivers engaged by companies that have no physical presence and take no accountability for the person or service they supply. The consumers are so addicted to convenience that we don't think twice before compromising our personal safety.

Focus India

It is the people who must fill the lacuna that technology creates. Technology cannot be adopted in standalone environments. People and processes have to be aligned to technological advancement so as to achieve optimal advantage. Presumably, the Railways will spend Rs 700 crore from the Nirbhaya Fund to install CCTV cameras in trains for security. A June news report from Bangalore tells us that 500 BMTB buses were outfitted with two cameras per bus for women's safety. It solves little as the process of retrieving CCTV footage is marred by red tape; footage is preserved for only 15 days; there is no real time monitoring; the CCTV cameras cover only the front and back of the bus and cannot effectively monitor rush hour. At best, this step may act as a deterrent for these crimes. But if people decided to not be mute spectators of harassment, the problem would not exist. Life today has been simplified by digital, automated solutions. The commonest being the booking of an LPG cylinder. It takes a minute to book if the phone number is

aligned to the consumer number. There is an app developed in Telangana by the transport department, designed for parents of children using school buses. On keying in the registration number of the bus, a parent can access all details, including the names of the driver and conductor; the condition of the bus — whether the bus has a fire extinguisher and first aid kit; as well as track its route on the Global Positioning System (GPS). Fifteen-year-old Trisha Prabhu, angered by the suicide of another young girl due to cyber-bullying, has developed a software program that through text recognition, prompts a potential bully, if they want to send the message. It makes them think it over. New-age problems need new-age solutions. There has to be a breakthrough in our thinking, in our prioritising to keep the humaneness alive in our technology-driven lives.

Our local radio ran a story for days that shook the conscience of the city — of a young man narrating his harrowing experience of taking his unconscious father to hospital in an ambulance. People did not give way to the ambulance and his father could not be saved. Doctors said he was late by just five minutes. Yes, we have become self-centred and apathetic. But it is also true that we are confined by very trying circumstances of our super-crowded metros. Most times there is no place on the road for vehicles to move and give way. Among the well-known corruption practices is the way driving licenses are issued. How many drivers know what they should do when they hear an ambulance or fire engine stuck behind their vehicle? Are the traffic cops doing what they should in these situations? Very rarely have I seen a traffic cop help clear way for an ambulance. But I have once seen on M G Road, a group of young boys who swung into action, stopping the traffic instantaneously and moving the barricades to allow an ambulance to drive away, finding its way on the other side. Tech is for us, not we for tech. We're increasingly adopting technology without embracing a culture of working, of thinking as humans. Digitisation has to come in where people cannot. It must enhance the value of our lives — to help create way for an ambulance, to stop rail accidents.