



## The Future Does Not Compute: Transcending the Machines in Our Midst

by Stephen L. Talbott  
O'Reilly & Associates  
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### The Future Does Not Compute

This is not a book about computing, but it should be read by everyone involved with information technology. It's about ourselves—as people, not technologists—and our relationship with machines. It's about what kind of future we might expect if we allow current technological trends to continue. And at the deepest level, it's about who we are as human beings and who we might become.

Talbott's view is both chilling and inspiring. It will not sit well with staunch adherents of global networking and its ability to make the world a better place. Essentially, Talbott concludes that if we keep on our present course of adapting our lives to computer technology, we will gradually yield more and more of our humanity, allowing machines to take over huge segments of ourselves that once related to people and the world outside. In the end, he says, we will lose ourselves.

The book is inspiring because Talbott puts his finger on an awareness that, at some level, everyone who has used a computer has felt—that if we have invested the computer with such power that it has the potential to revolutionize the world, perhaps it will change us. If it changes us, will we be happy with that change? Talbott offers compelling arguments that we will not, unless we come to grips with that potential and escape from technology's stranglehold.

## The Digital MBA

edited by Daniel Burnstein  
Osborne McGraw-Hill  
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One by one, he debunks assertions of champions of information technology:

- That computers will liberate us from hollow tasks and allow expansion of our awareness. Instead, he says, computers restrict our freedom and have a deadening effect on our perceptions.

- That networked computers will have a democratizing effect on the world. On the contrary, Talbott says, "The view that a technology can be 'democratizing and leveling' testifies to a radical alienation from everything that constitutes both the inner life and culture. When we take such a stance we confirm that we have lost sight of our own creative responsibility for the substance of community."

- That children will automatically benefit from having an intimate relationship with computers in the classroom, piquing their curiosity and stimulating deeper learning. Rather, Talbott asserts, "The crucial requirement is not that the child receive maximal impact from some display, but rather that he actively discover within himself a connection to the phenomena he is observing."

- That access to an almost unlimited amount of information in our own homes will empower individuals. While true on the surface, that concept divorces us from our humanity, which relies on our relationship to what's real in the world, not to information about the world or power over it. "[This] objective aura is achieved by eliminating from view everything related to the content of information," Talbott says. "This raises the question whether the com-

ing age might actually be the Age of No Content or the Age of Meaninglessness."

- That the Internet will facilitate one-to-one relationships and international understanding. Not true, Talbott says, because the network can contain only a projection of ourselves, not what we really are. "If we choose to reduce ourselves more and more to bodies of information, then it will eventually become true that we can reside on the Net and discover all there is of each other there. Our projections of ourselves will have replaced ourselves."

### Intellectual and Controversial

Talbott's approach to the subject is intellectual and his style a little scholarly and somewhat off-putting in the early going. The language, while stilted in places, has an elegance that tends to impel the reader even while struggling to grasp its meaning. Talbott's first chapter is so theoretical that the reader would do well to start somewhere in the middle and come back to Chapter 1 when ready to digest the rationale behind it all. The curious reader will become so wrapped up in Talbott's penetrating analysis that it will be impossible not to finish the book.

Many will disagree with the thesis of the book. Potential for controversy abounds here, but that is Talbott's objective: Without controversy, without a penetrating look at our mechanized world and especially at the way we are employing the computer, we have no chance of regaining ourselves. "I am absolutely convinced that redemption—sometime, somewhere—is possible," he says. "But I also know that a society can choose to make a pact with the devil."

It is easy to dismiss this kind of statement as paranoia. But without considering Talbott's thoughtful analysis, no one who is serious about the future can consider himself or herself as advancing with open eyes into the Information Age.

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By Don Dugdale and Jim Johnson

## The Digital MBA

The downsizing trend of the last several years has left in its wake fewer managers filling more roles than most of us would have dared to predict. Those who have kept their jobs have had to learn many things in a hurry—things that probably weren't included in their graduate studies. Markets and technologies continue to change so quickly that it's questionable whether even the best universities can provide the necessary support in adapting.

Enter MBA-Ware, an emerging class of management software that editor Daniel Burnstein defines as knowledge-driven without being academic; providing day-to-day, solution-oriented assistance; and including an expert system, hypertext, use of algorithms, or possibly all three. Burnstein is president of the Management Software Association, a nonprofit organization formed in 1993 to help MBA-Ware find its target market and to give greater prominence to the general concept.

The term was coined by William Bulkeley in a June 1992 article in *The Wall Street Journal* to describe the use of planning software by entrepreneurs. MBA-Ware may be considered a kind of electronic performance support system (EPSS), software built around a just-in-time learning philosophy. As compared to tutorial software, EPSS focuses not on just teaching but actually assisting users who need guidance for a particular task. It does this by providing both a structure for the task at hand and context-sensitive information about specific situations faced by the user. In the case of MBA-Ware, users are managers facing common situations for which they may not be completely prepared. This scenario is particularly relevant to the computer industry, not only because of its rapid growth but because many managers who have come up through the ranks of software development frequently are unschooled in management concepts.

*The Digital MBA* is a compilation of 13 articles written by authors and executives of companies that produce products of this

type; the book comes with a CD-ROM that features demonstration versions of all of the programs detailed in the book. In fact, about 30 percent of the book is devoted to tutorials for the software demonstrations included on the disk; in this sense, the book is a work of marketing, and prospective readers should be aware of that. But approximately 70 percent of the book is devoted to an overview of late-breaking advances in management thinking and tactics. Bundled with the empowering promise of MBA-Ware, the reader gets an upbeat, optimistic message that technology and enlightened thinking can make anything possible in today's business.

Part One is devoted to managing people and projects and covers topics like goal-setting for subordinates, developing performance reviews, managing occupa-

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tional illness and injury costs, negotiation and creative problem-solving. It includes "guided tours" of software products.

Part Two covers strategic financial planning; it addresses in depth industry structure analysis, strategic business planning, market-driven change, and business plans, and again actual software is reviewed.

Part Three covers business process modeling, explores decision analysis and reengineering and offers product tutorials. Part Four looks into sales and financial forecasting, including risk analysis, and demonstrates several applications.

Throughout the book, references and quotations from the gurus of the day punc-

tuate key points. Burnstein has included a comprehensive bibliography, organized chapter by chapter. One of the final pages refers readers to a forum on CompuServe (GO MBAWARE) where users may follow recent online discussions with the author, including plans for a sequel and downloadable files of yet more information on MBA-Ware.

Because the book is an anthology, the presentation of the material differs from one chapter to the next. Some of the authors render their topics more comprehensively than others, and a few points are made redundantly. But all of the material strikes a balance between usefulness and ease of reading.

The biggest hazard in reading this book may be its built-in temptation to pick up the phone and buy all of the programs. (The coupons in the back offering discounts for full-featured versions of the demonstrations should remove any doubt that selling software is part of the author's purpose.) But the marketing emphasis remains a minor portion of the book's impact. What makes the biggest impression is the readable, comprehensive presentation of the perspectives of current management luminaries and how their teachings have been integrated into powerful software that is designed for maximum utility and minimum learning investment.

Those who have recently graduated from far-sighted MBA programs may not find this book particularly useful, and those who carefully watch the latest trends in organizational effectiveness also may find nothing new here. But most of the managers in our industry do not fall into the first category and are too busy to do the second. Even if one restrains the urge to buy even one of the featured programs, this book represents an important resource for struggling managers. ■

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