Resources, Relationships and Futures

Anne B. Muir

Bath College of Higher Education

How much do we take into account ethical and global issues when we consider management issues, resources and creativity? Professor Anne Muir believes that the answer is 'too little', and that as an area related to people, technology must broaden its perspective.

Imagine sitting down and opening an examination paper with just one, compulsory question: *Discuss the extent to which you can manage the future.*

What would you think about? What would you write? Yet, stopping to think about it, that is the question we face every minute of our lives. Is it possible to 'manage' the future, or does the future just happen to us?

Management in daily life — home, office, factory or classroom — implies a future orientation and involves working with people, young and old, to enable them to understand more about life in some way. Management is said to aim to make the desirable actual, and to aim to minimise risk and uncertainty. We need to have some vision of the future, be it probable or preferable, to be able to conceptualise goals towards which we strive and to comprehend the risks and uncertainties of the future. Such a journey into the future would benefit from a guide book, set of guiding principles or philosophy, to keep the traveller on an achievable, or sustainable, route.

When we work in areas related to people and the resources they seek to acquire to meet their needs or wants, we become involved in short- and long-term decision-making which in turn affects life in a multitude of ways and right across the world. Resources, whether human or non-human, are used and produced by people world-wide in their everyday life and work, and we are all connected by the need or desire for these resources. The quality of the decisions made concerning people and resources determines the quality and nature of change, and the more understanding and insight we have, the more chance there is of envisaging the outcomes and impact of these decisions. 'Decisions create change, and change creates the future'.[1]

Effective management is a highly creative process and is concerned with enabling the release of creative thought — in fact, with creating creativity. The responsibility of releasing creative energies poses the question of the extent to which the moral and ethical issues that accompany that release are addressed. Is it a neutral process from which we can be absolved of responsibility for the outcomes, or should there be a philosophy which sets creative development into a global context of understanding for the common good?

In terms of resources, relationships and global futures, I think there needs to be at least a basic understanding of human rights issues, the reasons for inequalities, both within and between nations, the concept of development for a sustainable future and the notion of interdependence. The rich, minority world exists at the expense of the poor, majority world, dependent upon paying producers low prices for commodities, poor wages for labour in unsafe, unhealthy conditions and condemning them and their families to lives of poverty, without even access to clean water. Their survival is, in many ways, far more creatively managed than any exercise or project we may dream up, but their infant mortality rates and health status demonstrate the true cost of that survival.

Creativity does not take place in a vacuum; it takes place in a context which, more than ever nowadays, is a global context. Concern for both the quality of life and the quantities of life is a major issue because the latter constrains the former. It took from the beginning of time until around the year 1800 to produce the first billion people on earth. Now, world population grows by one billion every 11 years[2] but world resources are diminishing, being used up by the rich, minority world in its culture of consumerism.

If we accept the principles of human rights, equal opportunities and enhanced quality of life, how are the obvious challenges addressed in management, product development and educational programmes? In the global context, what does quality of life mean?

Over ten years ago, Wilkinson (1982) wrote 'People still often talk about the 'impact' of technology, the need to 'adapt' to its demands etc., as if technology was somehow an independent and autonomous force in industry which more or less determines the sort of work which people have to carry out.'[3]

Technological and product developments are a reflection of what humankind thinks is desirable or is persuaded, by marketing and policy, to believe is desirable. The level of such development is 'an indicator of each generation's attempts to manage its own ingenuity . . . Technology is (hu)man-made and reflects the choices and desires of a generation and a civilization'.[4] Design is said to be the solution to a problem, but a lot depends upon whose problem it is and how that problem is

perceived. The UK's biggest export earner is the arms trade and we justify the design and production of armaments for the 'defence' business to solve our balance of payments problems. Although the ends to which developments are put cannot always be foreseen, the social, economic, political and ethical climate within which inventions and innovations reach the light of day will, to a certain extent, determine their application and will certainly enable or discourage debate. Democratic, well-informed debate is still more or less possible within UK society, although the right to information is more curtailed than in many other nations.

To be effective, decision-making requires the fullest, most reliable information, and to be humane, it requires to retain a measure of human concern for the common good. The more it is given over to technology, the more distanced from emerging human concerns it becomes, enabling the concentration of power to be held by the people with the access to the technology. Sound decisions are dependent on openness and humane legislation to support the process.

By now, ecological consideration should be firmly built into the brief for creativity. Putting a code of ethics on to the agenda would provide guidelines to enable professionals and learners alike to find a route towards a sustainable future. In this field, we are really all in the learner's seat for life, and alongside the right to freedom of expressions runs the responsibility for these rights.

Sustainable development in the twenty-first century and beyond depends upon how resources are shared and managed, and how the sharing ethic is demonstrated to children. The twentieth-century way of life did not produce equality and sustainability, and is not good enough for the children of the third millennium. Getting to grips with what we need to debate and how we create a philosophy and set of ethical guidelines is a necessary step in finding a route to a sustainable and equitable future. Perhaps we are into the realms of the debate on the 'meaning of life', but, what is wrong with that?

How would *you* answer *Discuss the extent to which you can manage the future?*

■ References

1. Muir, A .B., 'From Household Economics to Global Resources', a paper presented to the Authors' Forum at the United Nations — NGO World Forum in Malta, 1993 to launch UN International Year of the Family 1994

2. Population Reference Bureau, based on UN and World Bank estimates and projections in 'People, Poverty and Politics' in *PS*, September 1991, p. 14

3. Wilkinson B., 'Managing with New Technology', in *Management Today*, October 1982

4. Muir, A. B., 'Technology — a Resource to be Managed', in the *Home Economist*, Summer 1985, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 3-5

Professor Anne B. Muir is Vice President of the International Federation for Home Economics (IFHE) with responsibility for the European region. The IFHE is a Non-Governmental Organisation of the United Nations (NGO). She works in the field of Human Ecology and Resource Management at Bath College of Higher Education in the UK and is Subject Leader for Global Futures: Resources and Relationships, which addresses the issues raised in this article.