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PREFAB FUTURE

Practices and Rhetorics in an ICT Company

Robert Willim

This presentation is about a Swedish IT-company called Framfab. The name Framfab is an abbreviation for *The Future Factory*. Framfab is a company which is built up around mainly Internetrelated services and products. During some years it was expanding rapidly but in the middle of last year the stock value started to decline. Today it is worth less than it was when it was introduced. The constant growth of the company turned into a downward spiral. Today Framfab is struggling to remain alive and to start climbing again.

In this presentation I will deal with how the rhetorics of expansion and for future growth has been built up at Framfab. These rhetorics has to a high degree been the same during some years. In the rhetoric the future is described as a land to conquer. *I want to stress this theme of seeing the temporal as something spatial*. The future has according to this logic a special form and location.

I then want to relate this rhetoric to how it is reflected at some of the offices of the firm. How does the practices look in a place where, according to the company-rhetorics, the technologies of expansion and of the future are produced. *How are rhetorical claims related to everyday practices?*

Bound for the Future (at Great Speed)

I'll start with a quote from Framfab's presentation of their brand foundation.

Our vision To become the fastest and most innovative Internet consultancy in the world. But we are more than consultants. We are the architects of a new era. In the course of our everyday work, we are drawing the blueprints for the network society and laying the foundation upon which the network economies of tomorrow will be built.

Our mission To create the future by discovering and developing the ideas that drive the network economy. (From: Framfab formula)

In this text the claims to create the future are central. Another central theme is high speed. Framfab wants to brand itself as the fastest and most innovative in its trade of business in the world. This is mirrored in the company's logo. It is the Fast forward symbol (which eg. can be found on different kind of consumer electronics) The icon is combined with the company name written upside down. The fast forward-symbol should of course stand for high speed. The turned over company name should stand for innovativeness. To be able to turn things upside down to find the right way.

So, Framfab wants to create the future and expropriate the spaces of the future network economy. Are they alone? It's time to look around at the corporate climate around year 2000, and a good starting point is the management magazine "Fast Company" and the high speed firms, change agents or change insurgents they picture and promote.

Some say that we now live in "the new economy" which creates a world with a logic that is different from the one of the old economy. At the centre of these changes are information technologies, and the companies that deal with e.g. internet services, e-commerce or wireless technologies. These are often called "Fast companies". These companies are described and aimed at in the magazine "Fast company". The cultural geographer Nigel Thrift has the following to say about the magazine:

Fast company is a cultural weapon aimed at changing business's self image, by focussing the insights of the "new economy", on economy based on constant and unremitting change, high technology and adaption as a way of life. It is both a material and a semiotic manifesto.(Thrift, 1999)

"Fast company" is focused on businesses which are under heavy pressure to continually innovate and to be aware of a ever changing market climate and technological milieu. A central market logic in this context is the need to bring out new products quickly. To be first on a market, often means more market shares. It's not the question whether the best product will win, rather it's the one that first reaches a "critical mass" on the market that succeeds. This idea about the first mover has been criticised, but still it prevails as a rhetorical concept (cf. Porter, 2001).

The Framfab rhetorics should be seen in relation to this kind of phenomena. When talking with one of the managers at Framfab he said that they try to "cultivate the speed myth". *It is important that much within Framfab shall feel fast.* Constant change is nearly an

end in itself. Not least it has been important to communicate to the stock market that you are fast. This is to a high degree a rhetorical as well as *aesthetical* focus on speed and continuous change as something sound and beautiful. In this context speed has got mostly positive connotations. A fast company as well as a fast employee is smart and successful, not rash and hasty. According to this outlook a fast company is the company of the future.

Where The Future is Made.

The question now is how the rhetorics of creating the future and of speeding fast forward is mirrored in the daily work at the company.

Framfab is built up of several quite small offices, in which about fifty people work each. These are called “cells”. I’ve done fieldwork in some of these cells in southern Sweden. In the cells we can find at least one of the two elements of the name Framfab, an Swedish abbreviation for “The Future Factory”. Namely the factory. Here people produce. Mainly by sitting and tapping on keyboards and looking concentrated in through the Windows on the PC-screen.

The PC is an artefact that consumes attention. The attention is directed in through the pane of glass or plastic into the fluorescent electronic representations on the screen. This makes the atmosphere in the Framfab-cells quiet and not very turbulent. Much of the movement in the office appear in the space between user and technology. Many of the signs of high speed and activity we know from the industries, like noise and heavy machinery in motion, are not present.. Instead, the signs of speed are invisible. They may appear in the heaps of empty cardboardboxes that clutter parts of the office. Boxes that has contained the recently purchased and upgraded equipment. *Speed lies in high frequent upgrading of equipment.* Another sign is even more well hidden. It is to be found inside the Framfab-workers. *It is a constant readiness for change.* The employees have to be what Esther Dyson, one of the more well-known debaters of the digerati, has called a performance personality.

People who can think quickly will prevail. Can you respond quickly (rather than think slowly)? In the age of the Net, there will be less time to think, more need for quick response – whether a speedy reaction to e-mail, or a real-time interaction in (electronic)

print or a video-conference. Real-time performance will outrank careful production.(Dyson, 1997:69)

Once again, the need for speed. A demand to be a subject committed to unremitting and constant change. There's a demand for both fast performance in the production as well as ability to quickly shift the mode of attention. To instantly eg. shift from a concentrated coding in front of the computer to answering an e-mail to making a phone call or to look at some presentation on a near-by whiteboard and then dive back in front of the PC-screen. A constant oscillation between modes of attention.

Some of the persons I talked to, meant that this kind of relationship to the work and the workplace bred a kind of tedium. "Just before a deadline you feel like a zombie", someone put it. The constant change and need for speed is experienced as boredom. To be a "performance personality" or in Nigel Thrift's words a "fast subject", in everyday practices often means that you have to become more and more specialized in a skill. *You often have to "go with the flow" to keep up with the needed pace.* As a programmer there's eg. not much time for thinking about business strategies. So the engagement in the direction of the company and the entire business is left to others. *It's a challenge to make everyone in a organisation feel like they are creating the future.* There's a tendency that the organisation in pace with its growth crystallizes into a labour division where: Someone formulate the vision while others are set to accomplish the mission. Someone points out which direction is forward while others speed in that direction.

To be ready for change also means to be adaptable. The demands for speed breeds a certain kind of streamlining. To move fast often means to follow the tracks. To detour takes more time. The organisation has to be fast. How much time is it then for pondering over choice of direction? It can be seen as a paradox of being fast vs. being innovative.

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, has written a couple of books on the future of business and technology. Both of the books represent a fast forward ethos as well as a marketing of Microsoft products. A merging of the titles of his two books becomes a good summary for the logic of the IT-business. It's all about... "Business @ the Speed of Thought" on "The Road Ahead".

Now, one question still remain: Who chooses which way is ahead? Where is the future located?

Speeding Towards ?

Until the end of year 2000 the CEO of Framfab was Jonas Birgersson. During some years he got a lot of media space in Sweden. He then often pushed two themes when he talked about the company. The first was the need for speed. The second that Framfab was creating or designing the future. Framfab as trail blazers.

Framfab's slogan is "creating the future". Someone then has to decide which future to create. And what shall be history. Left behind. Last autumn Jonas Birgersson was replaced as CEO by Johan Wall. The rhetorical focus of the company then shifted a bit from the visionary more towards the realistic. *To reach profitability were the new keywords*. In the talk about healthy business practices terms like downsizing started to be mentioned. The result was a more vulnerable situation for the employees. Change suddenly could mean both growth and decline. This also became a fact for many Framfab-employees. Within some months around 700 persons were laid off. But the company stuck to the speed-oriented rhetorics... With a slight modification. Profitability was now accentuated together with the need for future visions and the need for speed.

How is then this situation related to the concept of "creating the future". That the future is created within the walls of the company. Who's creating the future and who's not? Who's worth to have onboard on the trip to the future?

Let's stop for a while at the formulation: creating the future. It is certainly a business cliché, but it also tells something about the logic of "claiming the future". If we relate this to the conjuring up of constant flux within companies, and to the demands on employees to be "fast subjects and "one with change" a paradoxical image occur.

There's a lot of talk about revolutions in the IT-business. Every new product, even upgrades of recent products are marketed as revolutions. Something Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin has pointed out in the great book "Remediation – Understanding new media". Revolutions and constant innovation. are characteristics often accentuated in IT-business. At the same time the rhetorical focus is on a domesticization or taming of the future. "We create the future today".

In this regard we can talk about a "Prefab Future". The focus on how the future implode in the now make the future to something familiar. Something with a certain already known shape which it is possible to speed towards. This creates the illusion that the future is right ahead. And if we just speed ahead we will end up in the future. *The faster we go the faster we arrive in the future*. This sound like an old modernist ethos, in which the stream-

lined shape takes us into the future. Then what about the constant change and unpredictable complex flux? The ever changing world that is pictured in magazines like “Fast company”.

“Fast forward” can mean that the future is pointed out in the boards of the companies that are said to “create the future”. If this is how it’s done, then it has to be done with a high degree of sensibility towards both the surrounding world and the own organisation. *Otherwise there’s a big risk that a lot of the people working in companies like Framfab feel like victims of changes and decisions all the time made somewhere else.* A kind of invisible hand that once and again shuffles the cards and make the everyday work more demanding. A consequence of this could be that a old ghost from the old roaring industries appear in the fast companies of the so called “new economy”; namely the alienated worker. The stressed employee that is doing her or his task without any idea of why the big picture in which he or she is placed looks like it does.

Sometimes things come back in different shapes and disguises. Just because there’s always something going on, something happening in the offices of Framfab it doesn’t mean that everything is experienced as exciting or fun. Continuous change can also be experienced as boredom, especially if it’s hard to figure out why things change the way they do. The focus on constant flux can disguise the appearance of well-known problems from industrial organisations, such as workers feeling out of touch with the dynamics surrounding the contexts they work in. Pointing at rapid change in one sector draws the attention from lack of change in another. It sometimes seems like the positive valorizations of ephemerality rests on a bed of continuity. In fact, sometimes the future looks more like yesterday than like today.

As ethnologists or culture researchers it’s important that we examine these processes of how the future and the need for speed becomes commodified in the play between rhetorics and practices. How high speed gets aesthetized and also materialised in certain environments. How a sense for the “future right ahead” or already here is conjured up within the so called fast companies.

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