The Expert's Opinion

Dr. Jan Meyer is an associate professor at the College of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota. Previously she served as manager of human resources at United Airlines, where she was employed for almost 18 years.

Interview conducted by Karen Mowery

IRMJ: How did you come to focus on information technology in your work with organizational behavior and international management?

Meyer: My experience with management development consulting brings me in contact with many different people. Through those contacts, I began to realize the extensive impact of information technology on the nature of a company’s organization, how it experiences and deals with change, and so on.

My first intuitive response was: We’re going to have to change the way that we teach organizational behavior and change. I realized too that the way I consult with companies on managing change would be impacted and that the way we structure organizations would have to change. And so, I became very interested in the human side of information technology and the challenges it creates.

IRMJ: What have you found to be the most compelling human issues?

Meyer: My first research project in the area was to look at the issues of managing with information technologies in the future. I particularly looked at it from the general management perspective. What I discovered was that there seemed to be two distinctly different lists of issues for the future, depending on whether we were talking with technically-focussed MIS professionals or general managers. They are poles apart. I’d like to see more interface.

The second serendipitous outcome of that research, which keeps expanding, has been that at first our findings seemed to indicate that perception of computers varied by culture. For instance, I found three possible perceptions of computers and information technology: people can view the computer as superhuman or god-like and they attribute god-like characteristics to the computer—we call that beatification; or they can view it as a person and assign it human-like characteristics like happiness, anger, and so forth—we call that personification; or they simply see it as a piece of furniture, an object that helps do the job more efficiently. In the first analysis, there appeared to be a distinct difference from culture to culture. Americans as a culture are very machine-oriented. We will use any machine that helps us to do things faster and better. Look around our homes, they are filled with gadgets. We also love to count things and we count things easier with machines. So it is not surprising to find that Americans view the computer as an object and don’t give it a personality. Sometimes we do it in fun, but we are not really serious about it. Even when we joke, we refer to it as “it,” we don’t say “he” or “she” when we reference it. I found that 24-38% of people in other cultures, however, view it from one of the other two perspectives. This was very distinct in the first analysis, but we later realized that we needed to correlate perception not just with culture, but with experience. In continuing that line of study we have found there really is a difference between cultures but it is not as large.