Dilbert and Dogbert in the Information Age:
Productivity, Corporate Culture, and Comic Art

Karen Langlois  
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

In the cartoon strip of the same name, Dilbert, an engineer, contends with the complexities and challenges of technological change and corporate restructuring. The cartoon, a satire on modern corporate culture, criticizes the pervasive influence of the business efficiency movement known as Total Quality Management. The issue of productivity in the post-modern age holds particular relevance for educators at a time when institutions of higher learning seek to restructure themselves in the image of the modern corporation.

Introduction

In the past decade the cartoon strip Dilbert has become a phenomenon of popular culture. Created by cartoonist Scott Adams, it has become the fastest growing comic strip in America. Dilbert, the cartoon’s protagonist, is a naive, introverted engineer, toiling in the wasteland of American bureaucracy. His sardonic pet, Dogbert, is employed as a part-time management consultant. For the modern employee Dilbert and Dogbert have achieved the status of cultural icons. Confronted with the information revolution of the nineties, a transformation greater in scope than the industrial revolution, these new American (anti)heroes contend with the complexities and challenges of technological change and corporate restructuring. The identification of the public with the plight of the cartoon characters is evidenced by the craze for Dilbert and Dogbert merchandise. In addition to a television show and best selling books, Dilbert mania has created a market for Dilbert and Dogbert apparel, desk art, and dolls.

Over the years the cartoon’s focus has evolved into a preoccupation with the workplace. The main emphasis is on how to survive in the modern, corporate world. Some of the threats include downsizing (“Knock, knock.” “Who’s there?” “Not you, anymore.”), stupid bosses, “clueless” business practices, and the latest management fads. The nature of corporate thinking or the corporate mentality is an important focus. To drive home his themes, Adams sometimes utilizes the setting of “Elbonia,” a fictional country that is supposed to be more primitive than America and just beginning to enter the modern age.

Adams is a former applications engineer for Pacific Bell, and has an MBA from UC Berkeley. His strip, with its off-beat humor and characters, has been compared to The Far Side by Gary Larson. The strip began syndication in April 1989. Adam’s first book of Dilbert cartoons, entitled Build A Better Life By Stealing Office Supplies, was published in 1991. The cartoon, now available on the Internet, is repeatedly copied on electronic bulletin boards. It appears weekly in Sunday newspapers as a color cartoon strip with eight panels. Weekdays it appears with three panels in black and white. In some newspapers, such as the Los Angeles Times, it is published in the Business Section. Dilbert mania also includes a Dilbert Newsletter with both snail mail and e-mail delivery.

Themes

The dialogue or “joke” comes mainly from the situations. In the Dilbert Newsletter Adams tells his readers that “good themes also have a built-in emotion or human shortcoming. Always focus on the human element.” The Dilbert strips are self-contained or conceived as serials, with the themes carrying over several days. Some standard old joke situations appear in the comic, such as the rebellion against authority. The workers are frequently portrayed as the
hapless victims of an evil empire, in this case the corporate world. Some of the characters are recognizable prototypes. For example, the nameless Boss, or authority figure in the strip, is depicted as perverse, and his physical and mental characteristics are caricatured. Adam’s depiction of the Boss relies on exaggeration. Over the years his hair, which grows in two patches on either side of his head, has evolved into two horns. He is a satanic figure, a devil (in one cartoon he is dressed in a Satan suit), and the modern workplace is purgatory or hell.

In addition to Dilbert, his colleague Wally, and various other employees, there is an assortment of animals in the strip, including Dogbert, Catbert, Ratbert, and Bob the Dinosaur. These talking animals are frequently smarter than the human characters. A dog, instead of being man’s best friend, is now his colleague in the workplace, perhaps a comment on the necessity for everyone to get a job in the new economy. Dogbert, Dilbert’s sardonic sidekick, has been noted for having a Machiavellian personality, and aspires to become “the Supreme Ruler of the World,” or of the workplace. Logically, his followers would then become the new ruling class. Adams confesses that Dogbert is his “alter ego” and allows him to inject his own commentary into the strip. Dogbert takes pride in his extreme cynicism regarding the workplace. For example, in one strip he observes to Dilbert that “Most business plans fail. Obviously, success is not a realistic goal. But the people who manage the most spectacular failures get promoted first because of their experience.” “That is the most cynical thing I ever heard in my life!” replies Dilbert. “Thanks,” says Dogbert proudly. “I’m blushing.” Intrinsically to the humor of the strip is the fact that while Dogbert expounds his cynical insights, Dilbert plods faithfully onward. As Adams says, “He’s the perfect company man. He does what he’s told” (Lamb, 1992, p.28).

Nevertheless, if Dilbert is a nerd, he’s no nitwit. In fact, he is depicted as having a degree in electrical engineering from M.I.T. The strip is set in an educated, white collar environment, and the reader can presume that Wally, the Boss, and all the other engineers are college educated. However, many of them, including the Boss, are foolish, and the strip repeatedly satirizes their stupidity. For example, in one of the strips a new employee is proudly introduced by the Boss as having “an MBA from Harvard University.” “You mean ‘Harvard’, don’t you?” asks Dilbert helpfully. In another strip the Boss says, “I’m starting an interdisciplinary task force to study our decision making process.” Dilbert complains, “So, you’re using a bad decision-making process to decide how to fix our bad decision-making process?” “I don’t know how else we could find the source of our problem,” replies the Boss.

Besides questioning the intelligence of management, the cartoon raises the issue of the value of intelligence in the workplace in general. “You seem like a bright fellow,” says a co-worker to Dilbert. “Have you considered joining MENSA?” “Is that the group with genius IQs?” asks Dilbert. “Precisely correct,” says the co-worker. “I’m the president of the local chapter.” “If we’re so smart, why do we work here?” asks Dilbert. The co-worker replies, “Intelligence has much less practical application than you’d think.”

Indeed, the strip depicts employment in the corporate world as having an adverse effect on intelligence. As Dilbert laments, “I’m getting dumber by the minute. My brain is starting to shrink like a raisin.” If intelligence is lacking or useless, knowledge isn’t of much value either. As the Boss says to Dilbert, “We just had a meeting and decided to change your project substantially. We didn’t invite you to the meeting because things go smoother when nobody has any actual knowledge.” Indeed, the entire concept of the educated knowledge worker is satirized. In another strip Dilbert’s mother observes, “I’ll never understand what you do for a living.” “I told you I’m an engineer, Mom,” replies Dilbert. “So, you say. But you also say you spend all day in meetings. When do you do any engineering?” “Good point,” says Dilbert. “Let’s just say I’m what the experts call a ‘knowledge worker’.” “What’s the name of the product you’re working on?” she inquires. “I don’t know what the acronym stands for,” he confesses.
TQM

One of the aspects of today’s corporate world that the cartoon satirizes is Total Quality Management. TQM, as it is known, is a program to ensure quality control. Its goal is to achieve standardization and uniformity in production. It roots are in the concepts of “scientific management,” which were developed in the early 1900s by Frederick W. Taylor. He stressed the importance of inspecting manufactured parts to ensure their precision. (In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries craftsmen produced items in small numbers and by hand. However, with the rise of mass production parts had to be interchangeable. Uniformity became an important issue.)

In 1931 the engineer W. A. Shewhart published Economic Control of Manufactured Product, which defined quality control. His work was based on research done at Bell Laboratories on the ways to improve quality. American munitions manufacturing in World War II intensified the quality movement. Then in 1956 Armand Feigenbaum proposed “total quality control.” It relied on planning, coordination of efforts, quality standards, and continuous improvement. The zero defects movement of the 1960s stressed the elimination of variations in production and in the product. The goal was to identify problems at their source.

One advocate, Philip B. Crosby, proposed perfect quality, as opposed to the principle of acceptable quality. In the Dilbert cartoon strips the pursuit of quality in any form is a subject of satire. As the Boss explains, “I’m assigning each of you to a separate ‘quality’ initiative.” “Is there any risk this will devour our productive hours, lower our morale and have no impact on our profitability?” Wally asks. “And we’ll have a contest to come up with a name for the overall initiative,” continues the Boss. “How about ‘qualicide’,” volunteers Wally.

By the 1980s courses in quality control emphasized strategic planning to align employee efforts and to develop a company wide quality ethic. Businesses were restructured to lower costs, increase productivity, and improve customer satisfaction. The customer became the judge of product excellence. The manufacturing and management model was customer driven. Quality was defined as determining the customer’s expectations and meeting or exceeding them. Based on these ideas, in America corporations such as Hewlett Packard and Xerox overhauled product design, manufacturing, and customer service. Leading companies in the quality movement were considered models of excellence.

The principles of total quality caused a paradigm shift in industry, and resulted in the development of a new vocabulary. The proliferation of TQM buzzwords and slogans is an important theme in the Dilbert cartoons. The use of the terms “quality,” “excellence,” and “team” is mercilessly satirized. For example, in one strip the Boss asks Dilbert, “Could you do a demo of the new product for our VP next week?” Dilbert pensively replies, “Well. . . That would delay the ship date, lower morale and create an unending demand for more unproductive demos.” But the Boss interrupts him, enthusiastically shouting, “And we’ll need a banner that says ‘quality’.”

“Buzzwords are valuable for intimidating outsiders and making them think you’re smarter than you really are,” explains Dogbert in one strip. The next panel illustrates his point as the Boss declares, “We’ve proactively prioritized our quality mission objectives and reached a breakthrough strategic consensus that our bottom line would be negatively impacted by that path forward.” Furthermore, as the strips repeatedly show, no matter how “clueless” you are, if you are in management it is important to act like you know more than you do. The appropriate rhetoric can help you do this. Of course, there is a questionable relationship between “corporatespeak” and standard English. Nevertheless, as the strip shows, there is a heavy reliance on what has been dubbed “a corporate devil’s dictionary” (Torre, 1995, p.9). As the
Boss knowingly instructs Dilbert in one strip, “Good report, but change the word ‘use’ to ‘utilize’ in each case.”

Some of the other workplace evils that the comic strip satirizes are corporate bureaucracy, paper pushing, and a ceaseless emphasis on productivity. In one strip Wally asks Dilbert “How’s the new guy doing?” “He’s extremely productive,” replies Dilbert, as the new employee, shown in the background, flings a huge pile of papers around on his desk. “We think he’s one of those bureaucracy savants.”

**Information Overload**

Many of the recurrent jokes in the strip concern the explosion of information in the post-modern age and the fact that it is easily accessed, reproduced, and indiscriminately dispersed. It is the age of information. The question is posed, however, as to whether people are making use of the information that is already available. As Dilbert informs Wally, “I just read that in a few years you will be able to access all of the news and information of the world from your personal computer. You probably saw the same article in today’s newspaper.” “I don’t read a paper,” replies Wally sheepishly.

The proliferation of information, of course, is made possible by modern technology. Individuals are encouraged to master high powered computers, and sophisticated information management and retrieval options, even if they can’t possibly make use of the massive amount of information these produce. “This is my new optical disk player for the computer,” explains Dilbert proudly, showing it to Dogbert. “Now I can instantly access the words of Shakespeare or study the history of Greece.” “How often do you need to do that?” inquires Dogbert. If, on one level, the comic is a satire on the glorification of information, it is also a powerful social criticism of the new age. Dilbert exists in the popular imagination as the symbol of the new reality – an era of global corporate markets in which all things, including knowledge, aka information, are perceived as commodities to be efficiently produced and commercially marketed. It is an age in which the very notion of thinking has been transformed from an intellectual process into a manufactured artifact.

There is a sense that any problem can be solved if only one has the facts and figures. Furthermore, data is important because it can supply evidence that performance objectives have been met. In one strip the Boss discusses the latest problem. “I recommend we build a tracking database,” suggests Wally. Dilbert chimes in, “We can put it on the network.” “Would you like to hear what the problem is first?” remarks the Boss impatiently. “We like databases,” replies Dilbert, ignoring the Boss. Another related theme is the obsession with computer programs and hardware. Dilbert is passionate about software and obsessed with technology “toys.” One strip compares the lure of software to a lover. It shows Dilbert saying, “Look what I got for my computer! It’s a romostatic real-time data compression processor! Oooh . . . I can’t wait to plug you in, my little darling. I’ve waited so long. Oh Yes! Yes!” he exults. “Does the church know about this?” inquires Dogbert dryly.

**Form Over Substance**

Closely connected with this theme is the fascination with reports that are beautifully produced, whether or not they have any usefulness. It is a criticism of the reliance on fonts and formatting, which results in the elevation of form over substance. The focus is on packaging, not content. For example, in one strip Dogbert, holding a report, observes, “A well-formatted, stupid proposal will get farther than a good idea that is poorly formatted.” “At first I thought your proposal was ridiculous,” confesses the Boss. “Then I noticed now well-formatted it is, your
creative use of italics, the high quality of the plastic cover. . . I must say it swayed me.” The strip ends with a jab at the Boss’s stupidity and an example of Adams’ sharp wit. “Wait…” says the Boss, as he examines the report. “What’s this little two-dotted thing?” “It’s a colon, sir,” says Dogbert. “They’re all the rage.”

The strip criticizes business situations in which intelligence and knowledge are rarely put to good use. Instead, thinking is all too often an exercise in “non-think.” As Dilbert informs the Boss, “To the untrained eye it might look as if I do no work.” Pointing to his head he declares, “But inside here is a raging sea of knowledge management and strategic thinking.” “Did you hear that girbling sound?” he asks. In the cartoon strip answers to problems are frequently sought in quick fix formulas and management fads. Systems thinking, the study of how things fit together, interact, and form a whole, becomes a reductionist enterprise. The workplace is to function like a smooth running machine. The production process is one of fitting things together so that they function effectively. This may be most easily achieved in an atmosphere of not thinking, or, at least, not thinking too deeply. Instead, there is a emphasis on thinking that promotes the company strategic plan. Thinking should lead to solutions that advance the institutional mission and bring about corporate objectives. The implementation of “teams” and the utilization of “teamwork” facilitate an integration of strategic activity.

The strip mocks mind numbing TQM employee training programs. In one cartoon Dilbert observes to the Boss, “The only way to get ahead in this company is by getting promoted to management. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get promoted. I want to follow in your footsteps.” “But,” he muses, “I’m wondering if a lobotomy is actually necessary.” “No,” the Boss assures him. “We’ll just run you through ‘quality training.’”

There is also a cynical depiction of the indiscriminate boosterism that frequently occurs in TQM. As the Boss enthusiastically observes, “I’ve come up with a new name for our group. From now on we’re the ‘engineering science research technology systems information quality and excellence center’.” To which Wally helpfully replies, “You should throw efficiency in there, too.” One of the criticisms made against TQM is that it is anti-intellectual and devalues the deeper meanings of language, ideals, and human achievement. For example, in one cartoon strip Dilbert summarizes what he has accomplished during the past year. “I used my empowerment to create a new paradigm. And I teamed across functional boundaries to improve quality. I dare say I was customer-focused and market driven! I proactively found excellence in the midst of chaos! I re-engineered my core processes and embraced change! I give you — Dilbert — the perfect employee!” At which point the Boss asks pointedly, “Was that sarcasm?” Dilbert confesses that he doesn’t know.

TQM and Universities

TQM has crossed over from the business world of IBM, Proctor & Gamble, and Motorola into the realm of service industries such as health care. It has also found a place in the university. Books such as Total Quality in Higher Education explain why and how to use TQM techniques in institutions of higher learning. Its authors, Ralph G. Lewis and Douglas H. Smith, claim that “Excellence can be achieved through a singular focus on customers and their interests as the number one priority” (Lewis & Smith, 1994, p. viii). As they point out, the four-step process of Total Quality Management: (1) plan, (2) do, (3) check, and (4) act, is the same process as the scientific method of the university: (1) analyze, (2) experiment, (3) review, and (4) implement-evaluate. The principles of Dr. W. Edwards Deming, an internationally known popularizer of the principles of TQM, are promoted as being “compatible with the best traditions and practices of higher education” (id., 1994, p. 10).
Lewis and Smith explain how the university can achieve quality by perceiving the student as the primary customer and university education as the product or service. The external customers in the education business are the employers of the students. As Daniel Seymour argues in *On Q: Causing Quality in Higher Education*, “Developing a lot of happy, satisfied customers” should be the goal of the university (Seymour, 1992, p. 24). For the university the ISO standards system is another potentially important aspect of quality assurance. It is part of the global quality effort to maintain product uniformity and predictability. ISO 9000 is a series of quality system management standards that have been adopted by many countries. Its implementation “could become a requirement for any university wanting to do business in the international marketplace” (Lewis & Smith, 1994, p. 276). Three basic principles underlying the application of ISO 9000 to an institution of higher learning are that the university focus on its market niche, focus on its competition, and focus on its competitive strategy. Survival requires uniformity and standardization in production, i.e., in teaching and in curricula development. Suppliers — the university and the professors — will only succeed in the market if they can improve quality control. A significant factor in the success of ISO 9000 is its process of detailed documentation. As Dilbert explains in one strip, “Each of you will create an insanely boring, poorly written document. I’ll combine them into one big honkin’ binder.”

In response to growing pressure universities across America are restructuring and implementing total quality management. Administrators and university professors attend TQM conferences and workshops and read books by gurus in the field. Colleges and academic departments construct mission statements, a fundamental tool of quality improvement. They determine their strategic goals and objectives, identify market share, develop action plans, and organize teams. They are encouraged to view themselves as “enlightened corporations” being led by CEOs and participating in the “education industry.” In the classroom and, increasingly, on-line, (through web-enhanced or distance learning courses), the professor acts as “knowledge coach,” with “knowledge,” aka information, rapidly becoming a crucial commodity. Professor driven values are replaced with customer driven values. Productivity is detailed in performance assessments. A business-minded ethos prevails. As Christopher Lasch observes, “Inexorably [the market] remodels every institution in its own image” (Lasch, 1995, p. 98).

**Summary**

Corporate America has become for the American university what Dilbert is for the Elbonians. A messenger who has come to show the way — to explain the product, and how to become more productive. To identify the customer, and how to better meet the customer’s needs. To give the university the key to success in today’s competitive educational marketplace. As universities seek to restructure, indeed to reinvent themselves, in the image of the successful modern corporation, Dilbert has a particular relevance. Our university culture has shifted to a new paradigm based on a manufacturing and marketing model. As we laugh at Dilbert and at what goes on in the cubicle culture of corporate America, we should remember Scott Adams’ central premise, “Civilization exploded. Technology was born. The complexity of life increased geometrically. Everything got bigger . . . Except our brains” (Adams, 1996, p. 9).

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References


