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The Power of Little Things

Details, details, details! Most of us get annoyed with them sometimes, but we ignore them at our peril. We only have to make sure that they don't become an end in themselves. Otherwise, we should show a respect for little things, because they are crucial to living. Especially to living happily...

Nuclear scientists are more conscious than most that the smallest things in existence are, in a sense, the biggest. The energy released by splitting atoms is, of course, the strongest force ever produced by artificial means. On top of that, physicists are convinced that the inconceivably tiny bits of matter they call elementary particles are the basic building blocks of the universe. Without them, nothing else could exist.

Science in general holds many lessons in the importance of little things. Perhaps the greatest advance in medical history came when the French chemist and biologist Louis Pasteur proved that microscopic organisms cause disease and death among animals and human beings. Having hunted down several strains of infectious microbes in thousands of experiments, Pasteur was able to develop safeguards against them. More than anyone else, he was responsible for a near-doubling of the average human life span since he did his work in the latter part of the 19th century.

Through his painstaking methods and towering prestige, Pasteur pointed the way to the modern approach to research. It is based on the simple principle that nothing that is big enough to be detected, if only partly, can be overlooked. The same respect for detail shows in the statistical analysis of observations which often leads to scientific breakthroughs. Today, researchers in various fields spend prodigious lengths of time peering through super-powered microscopes at minute samples of material and recording and cross-referencing masses of data. They are aided by computers, which draw their wonderful capabilities from an electronic application of the power of little things — lightning-fast iterations of the two smallest digits, zero and one.

As in science and technology, so in the rest of life: little things cast long shadows across whole range of human activity. The wisdom of the ages proclaims that we should never disparage objects, acts, or circumstances because they look minor in our own fallible eyes. Folk sayings stress that the little must come before the big: the oceans are made of drops of water; a single seed can create a forest; pennies saved yield a harvest of dollars. Again and again, the Bible reminds us that we ignore details at our peril. "He that despiseth small things, shall fall by little and little," the Book of Ecclesiasticus warns.

It might be thought that, having been so thoroughly exposed to such advice, there would not be a literate person alive who does not pay the keenest attention to detail. But we all know from experience that this is far from the case. Many, if not most, people are ready to brush it off like so much dandruff. Samuel Taylor Coleridge may have been right when he wrote, "there is nothing insignificant — nothing." But many of us are willing to take a chance that he was wrong.

If the words we use to describe objects and conditions are any indication of the way we feel about them, it would appear that people are quite hostile to minutiae. The English language contains few favourable descriptions of small matters, but many disparaging ones. In a typical thesaurus, for instance, the word "little" calls forth a string of pejoratives: "inconsiderable, insignificant, unimportant, petty, slight, trivial, scanty, weak, small (in force or efficiency.)" The chief synonym for something small is a "trifle." The same thesaurus aligns that word with "triviality, bauble, nothing, thing of little value or consequence."

Why should little things provoke such linguistic abuse? Maybe because we know that, besides their other powers, they have the power to upset us. When details come in numbers, they can be as pestiferous as a swarm of those supremely objectionable little things, black flies. We associate details with having to do what we would rather not do, like budgeting or conforming to petty rules and regulations. A tax form is perhaps the leading symbol of our aversion to the picky little details that are demanded of us.

Thus, in the increasingly complex and highly

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regulated life we lead in western countries today, we may feel, like Henry David Thoreau, that "our life is being frittered away by detail." The difference between us and Thoreau is that he lived in the

relatively simple world of 19th century New England, where he was able to get away from it all by going to live alone beside a pond.

Today, it seems, one could not escape the tyranny of detail even by going to a South Sea island. In fact, it is almost a rule that the less industrially-developed a country, the more intrusive and ubiquitous is its bureaucracy. And the more literal-minded are the officials who, one after the other, check and double-check the forms and documents that abound.

Calcutta boasts what is perhaps the world's most famous shrine to petty bureaucracy, the Writer's Building, named for the job title which the East India Company once gave to the clerks who recorded its every transaction in multiple copies. Now the administrative headquarters of the West Bengal government, the Writer's Building is the workplace of hundreds of civil servants known as "babus" who keep churning out fat files tied up in red tape which have overflowed in dusty piles into the corridors, never to be opened again.

But a person need not be one of India's notorious functionaries to build a career around the useless accumulation of minutiae. No matter where in the world they live, some people are babus at heart. They are the bane of the lives of their less fastidious colleagues, who want to get on with the job with a minimum of fuss.

Babu types are by no means confined to government service. Wherever business of any kind is conducted, they can be found picking nits (nits are "the eggs of a parasitic insect"), building paper empires, and exerting a drag of affairs. In their exactitude, they often present a case of "being wrong

by the rules," following the letter of the rule book when common sense would dictate other courses of action. The book saves them from the rigours of independent thinking: as long as there is a form to cover every procedure, there is never any need to depart from established practice or look further into a case.

That being said, it would be a mistake to believe that everyone who gives the appearance of fussing over little things is necessarily being counter-productive. One definition of the verb "to fuss" is to "pay close or undue attention to detail." The operative word is "undue."

Every organization needs people who can tell the difference between those details that are worth worrying about and those that are not. They perform an indispensable service. It is unfortunate that the professional dealers in "administrivia" tend to give all workers who deal in the finer points of administration a bad name.

At the height of his glory, Napoleon observed that an army marches on its stomach. It was his way of saying that, before there can be a victory, somebody has to attend to the million-and-one particulars that go into making sure that the front-line troops are fed and otherwise supplied. It is worth noting that, in times when armies are not being called upon to fight, they observe detail with near-religious fervour.

*If you let
George do it,
it may not
get done*

Ordinary soldiers are subjected to a relentless routine of drilling, cleaning, and repetitive training.

Their comportment and quarters are inspected constantly, and heaven help the

hapless private who is found with anything out of place.

Rank-and-file soldiers in peacetime camps may curse the seemingly senseless spit and polish, but it is all to a purpose. It is practised to instil in them an automatic regard for detail when they are called into action, either in warfare or in civil emergencies. For an army to mobilize properly, everything must be in the right place at the right time, from gigantic prefabricated bridges to spare bootlaces. In circumstances where a grain of sand may cause a weapon to jam, or the failure to take a pill at the right time may bring on a tropical disease, habitual attention to detail could mean the difference between life and death.

In military and other large organizations, people are assigned especially to see that details are attended

to in the various departments. As long as they are seen to be doing their jobs, most of their co-workers are willing to emulate Louis XII of France. Faced with dealing with what he considered minor affairs of state, King Louis would say, "Let Georges do it," Cardinal Georges being his prime minister. In the English expression that has emerged from this, "George" refers to anyone who looks after the little matters that others cannot be bothered with.

Many have found to their grief, however, that when they let George do it, it never gets done at all, and that they must then clean up the mess caused by the omission. Experience teaches that no one is exempt from having to care about little things. Managers who rise high in organizations may think that they have reached a level where they can forget about detail and concentrate on broad policy. But they will find that, when the details are neglected, the policy cannot be carried out.

Organizations have been likened to machines, in which the smallest cog is as critical as the main drive-shaft. It is up to the person in overall charge of the machine to make sure that the cog is oiled or replaced in time so that the whole thing keeps running as it should.

But then, the people in charge are likely already to possess what Daniel Webster called "the spirit of detail." According to the great American statesman-philosopher, that spirit will carry a person farther in the working world than others who have done better in school. Those who deal in details will be dealing with the bulk of any business, because details come up constantly. Though they may matter little in each individual occurrence, "the sum total of their continual repetition is of the highest consequence," Webster wrote.

The Book of Isaiah says that "precept must be upon precept; line upon line; here a little and there a little." No surer formula for the acquisition of knowledge or expertise has ever been proclaimed. By following it, Elihu Burritt went from being an apprentice blacksmith in Connecticut to a famous linguist, lecturer, and leader of the international peace movement in the 1840s. "All that I have accomplished, or expect or hope to accomplish, has been and will be by that plodding, patient, persevering process of accretion which builds the ant-heap, particle by particle, thought by thought, fact by fact," he testified.

Obviously that is not an easy way to lead one's life. To advance in barely perceptible steps requires extraordinary patience. Impatient people find it hard to work a little bit at a time, resisting the temptation

to take a short cut to get a job over with. Their more practical colleagues know that the job will be completed more quickly by sticking to it than by skipping the details. Often, trying to do something too fast results in spoiling it and having to do it all over again.

Impatience is the besetting weakness of the young, whose physical vigour may mislead them into believing that anything can be accomplished quickly and easily. Youth bursts with creative energy, and young people may find it difficult to reconcile flights of creativity with slow-going meticulousness. But they can take the word of William Blake that art "cannot exist except in minutely organized particulars." Blake was a poet and painter of soaring imagination. But he was also a master engraver who brought the spirit of fine craftsmanship to all his work.

Creative-minded people of any age are sometimes inclined to look down on details and the people who deal with them. Mundane matters, they may say snobbishly, are for mundane minds. Influenced by images of maverick artists who flout convention at every turn, they like to think of themselves as free

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from the pros*

spirits with a fine disregard of petty rules and regulations. The very idea of creativity promotes a certain disdain for precision and the niceties of form; creation is supposed to be spontaneous, isn't it?

Truly dedicated practitioners of any art or craft have always known better than to believe that an excess of talent can compensate for a shortage of assiduous application. Certainly nobody had more talent than Michelangelo, but he is quoted as saying that "trifles make perfection." Michelangelo is perhaps the greatest exemplar of the saying, "Genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains."

In almost any activity, it is that capacity which separates the professionals from the amateurs. It is understandable, of course, that professionals should be more painstaking in their work than those who do the same thing as a hobby. The former are paid for the time they spend concentrating on details; the latter do so on their own time and at their own expense.

Professionals also have more at stake in getting things just right; somebody playing the piano at a house party will be cordially forgiven for hitting a wrong note or two; to a concert pianist, the same mistakes may spell the ruin of a career. But in



addition to the practical reasons for their diligence, professionals are conscientious out of an honesty which prevents them from short-changing those who pay for their efforts. Their pride and integrity makes them sweat over the fine points of a piece of work until they get it right, no matter how frustrating and uncomfortable that may be.

Willa Cather might have been speaking of any profession when she wrote that the essence of writing lay in "finding... what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole." Miss Cather's approach brings to mind Mark Twain's jocular advice, "First get the facts, then you can distort them as you please." First get the details and examine every one of them; then and only then can you eliminate those that are not absolutely relevant. In any creative pursuit, some selectivity is necessary to allow for the inspired generalizations that lend a work style and vigour. But one should never reject or pass over any details when starting out.

Selectivity is also necessary, of course, if attention to detail is to be kept within reasonable limits. Like anything else, it can be carried to harmful excess. In the professions especially, there is always the danger of developing a microscopic mind, so tightly focussed that it cannot see anything around it, including the moral implications of what is being done.

How we can duly attend to little things and still "think big" is a tricky question. The English author Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton suggested an answer when he wrote: "He who esteems trifles for themselves is a trifler; he who esteems them for the conclusions to be drawn from them, or the advantage to which they can be put, is a philosopher." In other words, details should never be treated as an end in themselves. They are only significant when they can be used as the means to an end.

In business, details present the same challenge as in art—how to take them all into account without detracting from the performance. For example, products and services should be made as uncomplicated as possible, so that technical niceties are always the concern of the seller, not the buyer. Customers dealing with a company should be exposed to a minimum of paperwork and a minimum of staff; nothing puts a customer off so thoroughly as being passed on from one person to another. Complaints should be dealt with in a straightforward manner, without a lot of bureaucratic obstacles which are likely to give the impression that the company believes that complaining customers are in the wrong.

On the other hand, details which affect customer satisfaction should rate the very highest priority. The presence or absence of little conveniences, little courtesies, may spell the difference between a disgruntled ex-customer and one who will be loyal to a company for life. And every little point that could possibly affect quality must be constantly monitored: the future of a business can stand or fall on the smallest omissions. With the wide range of options open to them today, customers no longer have to tolerate sloppy service or workmanship.

The basic thrust of the "excellence" and "total quality" movements so dear to the hearts of corporate managements these days is to inculcate a habit among everyone in a company of never taking the slightest thing for granted. The heroes of the excellence movement preach that a concentration on

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little things is at the heart of the competitive battle. One of these is Jan Carlzon of Scandinavian Air System, who is quoted as saying: "We don't seek to be one thousand per cent better at any one

thing. We seek to be one per cent better at one thousand things."

So anyone in business who wants to stay in business would be well-advised to exercise the greatest respect for detail. But it would be a mistake to think that close attention to little things is a duty imposed upon us as a condition of material success. For little things are a rich source of pleasure: it is the subtle little touches that give style and delicacy to music and other art forms. In cooking, a little extra care and time make for delicious dishes. In handicrafts, sports, or learning, attention to the finer points is behind the satisfaction that comes with doing something particularly well.

But the finest benefit from attending to the little things lies in our relations with other people. It is in the day-to-day practice of small attentions and considerations, "mere trifles," as Lord Chesterfield called them, that we best express the affection and appreciation we feel. The great scientist Sir Humphry Davy showed that he had a deep knowledge of human reactions as well as chemical ones when he wrote: "Life is made up, not of great sacrifices and duties, but of little things in which smiles and kindnesses and small obligations, are what win the heart and secure comfort." Among the many powers of little things, the power to make people happy must be the greatest of all.

