The KrehbielLetter

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Dear Publishing Professional,

Happy New Year! Cheers to another trip around the sun, and may this next one make you happy and prosperous.

Be careful with 2025 predictions

It's not clear who said it, or if this is the right wording, but I like it. **"Everyone overestimates what will happen in one year and underestimates what will happen in ten."**

I think that's a good rule to consider, especially with all the turbulence expected from AI. It's likely things will change less than expected in 2025, but more than expected by 2035.

How old are your website visitors?

Consider verifying the age of your web visitors. New laws aimed to protect minors from online harm might affect your ability to use features such as continuous scroll or autoplay, to recommend content for users based on their online behavior, or to send notifications during certain hours. New laws in California and New York may start a trend towards more restrictions on "addictive" techniques, and those restrictions might affect you.

My take: **it's past time we started restricting underage access to the internet.** Even if you don't publish anything inappropriate for a child, keep one eye on these restrictions and the other on technologies to verify the age of your web visitors. You might need to add that soon.

AI curses and blessings

There's a saying: "Write your troubles in sand. Carve your blessings in stone." Maybe for your life, but maybe not for business strategy. Here's a scorecard to consider for AI. **Review the list and see if it sparks any ideas.** Even curses can have a silver lining.

Curses

- The "tsunami of bullshit" AI will be able to create
- Increased competition from AI-generated content
- Erosion of the value of content
- Loss of reader trust because they'll assume you're using AI (which may impact on subscriptions services)
- Convincing fakes
- Brain drain – talented people may leave the publishing industry
- Over-reliance on AI tools may lead to a lack of real skills
- Yet another technology in your stack, which will make it all the harder to switch to another platform, or manage a merger or acquisition
- Increased compliance risks
- Questions of data ownership

- Disruption of traditional roles and barriers (e.g., editorial and marketing)
- AI will ruin metering because AI will scrape your content and people will get it in other ways
- Questions about bias and fairness
- Intellectual property concerns
- Aggregators and agents

Blessings

- Increased productivity
- Better personalization
- Advanced analytics
- Better segmentation
- Workflow automation
- Improved ad targeting
- Easy conversion into different formats, including assistive features
- Enhanced search capabilities
- SEO optimization (if SEO still matters)
- Improved content moderation
- Better and more responsive customer service
- Increased idea generation
- Better collaboration tools
- Behavior monitoring and prediction

What a NASA Engineer Can Teach Martech

My good friend John Ruffa recently published *Nice Guys Finish Last and other Workplace Lies,* which is available on Amazon. John had a long and successful career as a NASA engineer and learned a lot of important lessons about how to get things done. Some of them seemed particularly applicable to technical projects I've worked on, or been associated with.

Ready, Fire, Aim

Some organizations like to foster an "inclination to action." Challenge assumptions, they say. Break things. Be disruptive and see what happens.

That attitude works well with some kinds of projects. You have to go to market with something and see what happens. It clearly doesn't work when you're launching a spaceship, which can't be brought back in for repair or fixed along the way (with minor exceptions).

It's very important to know which kind of a project you're working on. If you're creating something for doctors, don't hire people who cut their teeth working on Facebook or TikTok.

A "ready, fire, aim" attitude illustrates one of the big problems in getting marketing to work with technology departments. **Systems people need to create a stable product that works. Marketing often wants to try something different.** Those attitudes frequently collide.

In this and in so many other ways, it's not technical expertise that wins the day.

Soft skills

The biggest challenges technical teams face are non-technical people issues, such as poor communication, turf battles, conflicting agendas, conflicting cultures, lack of team cohesion, poor leadership, and conflicting personalities.

It's easy to get technical people to understand the need for documented procedures to diagnose and solve technical problems. That's catnip for them, and they take to it easily. Sometimes they aren't as quick to solve the people-related problems, which are the cause of most of the blunders.

For that reason, **don't forget to evaluate new tech staff on soft skills**, including creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. It's easiest to do that when you're promoting from within, where you can watch how a person handles adversity, or at least get testimonials on how he works with people. When hiring off the street, you need to make soft skill questions a priority when you check references.

That's not enough. **Include soft skill training** as part of your employee onboarding, as part of employee reviews, and as part of your ongoing training regimen. It's tempting to focus continuing professional education on hard skills, but it's the soft skills that are most likely to bite you – or help you create a dynamic and effective team.

Build a network

You don't need to know how to do everything, and if you think you do, you're probably flattering yourself. It's important for technical people to create a list of go-to resources for advice on key issues. You're better off showing your wisdom by surrounding yourself with experts than by trying to be the expert on everything yourself.

Managers in technical fields shouldn't be loners. They should have a network of trusted colleagues they can rely on.

I heard that if you wanted a job in the first Bush administration, you had to prove that you'd maintained at least one friendship from high school. That might sound irrelevant to professional life, but it's not. The skills necessary to maintain a friendship over time are important. Maybe that's a better interview question than "what's your biggest weakness?"

Also, remember the lesson of Socrates and the oracle at Delphi. Socrates was the wisest man in the world because he knew the limits of his own wisdom.

Communication

John was shocked to hear NASA's chief engineer say that "virtually every NASA failure could be attributed to a breakdown or failure in communication." Not in technology. Not in materials. Communication.

Engineers and technical experts are often not the best communicators. It may be a right- and left-hemisphere thing, or a matter of personality or culture, but that's the way it works out. One of the top ways that communication fails is when people don't share, question, and challenge assumptions. E.g., "of course they're using the metric system," and then the Mars Climate Observer crashes into the planet.

A remote work environment can exacerbate communication failures. John mentions wearing out the carpet between his office and some key collaborators. It's harder to get the same interaction over Zoom. Communication is especially difficult across time zones,

languages, and cultures. In that sort of environment, extra steps need to be taken to ensure proper communication.

Systems engineering is a technical task, but it is also essentially a task of communication. Systems have to work with other systems.

"The number one thing an effective leader can do to set their team up for success is to create an environment characterized by clear, open, honest, and effective communication." But don't assume your methods are working. Follow up with team members to make sure there aren't any hidden issues or concerns.

Don't tell the boss

One big problem with communication is built into the hierarchy of an organization. Some people are reluctant to take their problems too high up the chain. While problems fester at the lower levels the upper levels are unaware of the disputes, the trouble is mistakenly attributed to the wrong source, and lots of resources are spent solving the wrong problem.

Make sure there are intermediary steps where problems can come to the surface despite the (sometimes scary) nature of the hierarchy. One way an executive can facilitate that is to develop friendships at every level of the organization. Layers in org charts can create invisible barriers to communication that can doom projects. Make a concerted effort to talk to people up and down the org chart.

Test, but test your tests

One anecdote that caught my eye involved testing a system in space-like conditions. The system failed, which meant scheduling delays, long hours, and budget problems.

Except the system hadn't failed. The tester failed.

Don't forget that when a system fails a test, it might not be the system's fault. Testing procedures might not have been followed correctly.

This is also a lesson in testing your assumptions. Our brains can only process so many things at once, so they filter out lots of information and take shortcuts. Sometimes those filters and those shortcuts make us blind to the important details we need to know. Learn to question assumptions and listen carefully when other people question them.

Put down the tech books for a minute

Tech professionals need to be expert in their field, so they should spend lots of time studying and keeping up. Having said that, my friend John reminds us that this isn't enough. **Many of the problems that bedevil projects are people problems.** So send your tech people to get training in soft skills.

Sincerely,

Greg Krehbiel