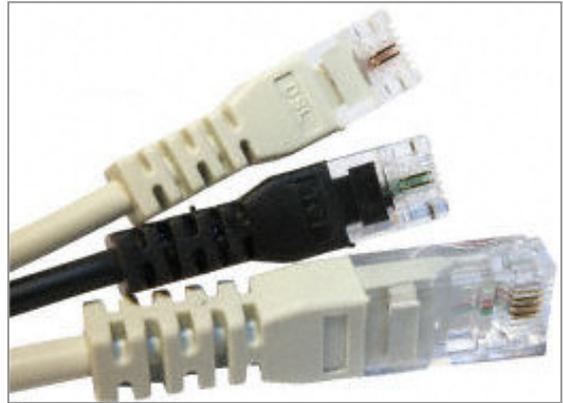


Soft Infrastructure

We would like to introduce an exciting new concept to you, **Soft Infrastructure**.

Governments and most businesses will readily understand the term 'infrastructure'. It is a collective term for roads, railways, airports, ports, telecommunications networks, supply pipelines etc. It is all to do with movement and these networks are all 'hard' i.e. they are made out of steel, concrete and copper and they can all be touched.



These networks all have one other common characteristic, whatever flows through them is rigidly controlled. Sometimes in straight lines and some times curves but always controlled by a boundary of concrete, steel, copper or some other tangible resource.

So what has this got to do with my organisation you may ask? One of the keys to the success of modern businesses, and the way to beat the current recession is Innovation. Innovation depends greatly on assets that are intangible, we cannot touch them. These include creativity, know how, intuition and cultural issues to name but a few. Many would identify these as 'social' or 'human' capital. The exact terminology is irrelevant, it is the ideas and knowledge of individuals that is important which can be enhanced by interaction. It is also independent of work so the term 'social' means inclusive rather than outside of the workplace.

To innovate successfully, these things too must move around both our businesses and our societies. Attempts have often been made in the past to codify these ideas, transmit them to another place and then try and extract both the message and the meaning of what has been received. Try having an email exchange with an angry colleague and you will understand the problems.

When we innovate, we also want things to travel in ways that are not constrained by boundaries and which certainly do not travel in straight lines. Just like the ripples on a pond we might wish some things to be broadcast, such as company culture. And like a networked computer system we will need some sort of storage and perhaps some form of maintenance function to ensure that everything runs smoothly.

When thinking of communicating within a corporate environment we often think of sending things out (pushing) or receiving from others (pulling). What about when things just sort of slosh about, and proceed at their own pace or when disruptive events occur and we need a system that repairs itself? We need a new type of network, one that is invisible and which connects everybody to everyone else. It must allow meaning, intuition, creativity and emotion to flow with no bottlenecks and no burst pipes. What we need therefore is the right sort of 'network' – a **Soft Infrastructure**.

Based on concepts such as coaching, action learning and knowledge agents this might be somewhat strange, but it is all possible. Can we afford not to install such networks in our organisations or in society in general?

Many Innovators or sponsors of Innovation will be keen to extol the virtues of traditional 'hard' networks such as broadband, telephone etc. It is clear that 'soft' networks will work on their own and that their working can be enhanced by technology but it is clear that technology on its own cannot do the job so why spend millions on copper and fibre when the components of the soft networks, people, are already in place? In the current economic crisis surely now is the right time to make the right connections?