



Review of: *The Support Economy: Why Corporations are Failing Individuals and the Next Episode of Capitalism* review by Peter Morville

The Support Economy: Why Corporations are Failing Individuals and the Next Episode of Capitalism by Shoshanna Zuboff and James Maxmin. ISBN:0-670-88736-6, \$27.95 Viking Press, 2002

If you have ever wondered why most companies fail to embrace user-centered design, you must read this book. In *The Support Economy*, Zuboff and Maxmin deliver a brilliant treatise on the inherent defects and imminent demise of the reigning corporate paradigm of managerial capitalism, and then daringly propose a new enterprise logic that combines an economy based on relationships and the ubiquitous Internet to provide advocacy and deep support for individuals.

In a recent interview, Don Norman blames slow progress towards usable computers and gadgets on "the fact that the usability advocates don't understand business." I respectfully disagree. We are not the problem. The barriers to usability are rooted in today's models of corporate governance which fail to align the incentives of powerful executives and stakeholders with the long-term interests of customers, employees and shareholders.

As Zuboff and Maxmin explain, no visionary executive or strategy consultant (or usability advocate) can spark a customer-centered revolution as long as they operate from within an organization that is based on current corporate structures and goals. This chilling assertion is not served up carelessly, but is grounded in the results of Zuboff's exhaustive research conducted between 1988 and 1994, sponsored by the Harvard Business School.

The book opens with this declaration: "People have changed more than the business organizations upon which they depend. The last fifty years have seen the rise of a new breed of individuals, yet corporations continue to operate according to a logic invented at the time of their origin, a century ago. The chasm that now separates individuals and organizations is marked by frustration, mistrust, disappointment, and even rage. It also harbors the possibility of a new capitalism and a new era of wealth creation" (p.3).

Following up on this opening, Zuboff and Maxmin describe the individual as "history's shock absorber," trapped between opposing historical forces. While individuals search for psychological self-determination, organizations sap time and freedom from employees and withhold

service and support from consumers, all in the merciless pursuit of cost-efficient (read value-starved) transactions.

The authors argue that this "transaction starvation" leads to loss of care, and explains the callous shrugs we receive from airline employees during our frantic attempts to negotiate airline bureaucracies when our flights are cancelled. Airline employees are not bad people. They have simply entered a state of learned helplessness. This also explains our frustrations with the healthcare industry, corporate web sites and customer service in general, and suggests that our rising appetite for large houses, home schooling and self-employment are actually indicators of people seeking refuge from a growing societal malaise.

Anyone involved in designing the "user experience" should read this book, if only for the critical analysis of obstacles to customer-centered design. But Zuboff and Maxmin step beyond gloomy prognosis to boldly predict a new episode of capitalism that incidentally holds great promise for those with a passion for designing useful, usable and desirable information systems, knowledge networks, and social software.

They cast the revolutionary zeal surrounding the Internet in the 1990s as a symptom of "pent-up demand for sanctuary, voice, and connection" (p.290). They also contend that a pervasive digital medium is a necessary but insufficient ingredient in the recipe for a new economy.

Transformation from the self-support model of today's Web to the deep support model of tomorrow's "federated networks" requires a new enterprise logic. Zuboff and Maxmin propose a set of principles that describe this new enterprise logic, and that place individuals at the center and organizations at the periphery of wealth creation processes. This is a Copernican revolution for the economy that is "the commercial equivalent of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall...(which) reflects the great psychological reformation of the second half of the twentieth century" (p.324).

The book offers up examples and scenarios but falls short of painting a picture of this new economy and the path that will lead us there. That's okay. The authors are describing a road un-travelled. *The Support Economy* is intended as a wake-up call, alerting us to treasures still hidden in uncharted territory.