# THE IT FALLACY

In recent years, three forces – downsizing, globalization and the need for speed – have combined to change the work environment. What used to be a comfortably busy routine has become a non-stop workshop in which most people feel they can never stop to take a breather.

The result of downsizing is a mad dash to cram more work into fewer people. If six people are doing the work that ten used to do, and at the same time are expected to meet or exceed previous budget and productivity targets, something has to give. To this pressure-cooker environment, in which everyone is supposed to 'do more with less', we can add the globalization trend that has swept through corporate boardrooms. To the extent that global competitors have a lower cost structure – which many do because their labour costs are so much lower – US and European firms have yet another reason to keep budgets and headcounts lower. The final ingredient in this mix is fierce competition, which has resulted in the pressure to do everything faster.

One way corporate leaders justify the quest for efficiency and speed is to point to the multibillion-dollar investments that have been made in IT equipment and services. The new PCs and corporate networks are supposed to boost productivity and profits, and will, in fact, allow their companies to 'do more with less'.

This is true. But another truth has become buried under the technology sales pitches. Achieving those gains will happen only after a significant initial investment in training and 'system integration' to make sure that all the pieces connect well with each other. Pouring thousands of PCs and miles of cables into a corporation is a great way to waste money unless the systems and processes that technology is meant to automate are overhauled. Unfortunately, this has all become somewhat irrelevant. The expectation is that more technology means more speed and more output per employee – and when those results don't always magically occur, the only way to produce them is to require people to work longer hours.

Oddly, the same thing happens even when the technology delivers as promised. Consider the case of presentation software such as Microsoft® PowerPoint, which has become a standard office tool. Before PowerPoint, a graphics presentation would have to be created by a graphic artist. With PowerPoint and its software cousins, just about anyone can sit down at a PC and, without much training or practice, produce an on-screen presentation or a slick set of slides, handouts or transparencies that look fully professional.

On the one hand, this software is actually a productivity tool – it takes only hours to do what might have taken days previously, and the result is just as good, if not better. But it doesn't stop there. Now everyone sees how easy it is to use these programs, they are used more and more. Thus, a senior manager who wouldn't have considered asking an analyst to spend a couple of days working up a slide presentation using Stone Age technology, doesn't hesitate to direct the same analyst to prepare that presentation using the desktop PC and PowerPoint. The goal is for this analyst to save time by using the software; the likely outcome is that he or she spends more time on presentations and has less time available for other aspects of the job.

If you're starting to think that, instead of working on a plan to cope with pressure, tight deadlines and non-stop work, it's time to polish up your résumé and look elsewhere, I'm afraid I have some bad news. The grass really isn't much greener anywhere else – or at least, not a whole lot greener.