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WHAT YOU SHOULD READ IN ORDER TO AVOID THE ERP TRAPS

by

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Overview

Christophe Deshayes illustrates the intervention methods of his company Documental (an irreverent watch-dog in the information technology sector) using the various comments about ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) systems as an example. Documental's intervention consists of a very lively oral presentation in the form of a condensed version of "all you need to know" about topical subjects in this sector. There is so much information about mysterious subjects ie. not understood by many, such as information technology, that those involved in this sector are no longer able to become correctly informed. More important than just supplying information, these meetings enable people to pool their intelligence, to enhance their curiosity (even if it is merely by providing the missing vocabulary), to promote in-house experts and to share knowledge. This is the true value of these meetings. These meetings are also Documental's way of charging clients.

TALK : Christophe DESHAYES

My talk is divided into two sections : firstly, I shall present Documental's intervention methods ; and secondly, I shall use the example of the debate about ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) to illustrate these methods.

Documental

Documental was created in 1996 from a very simple premise : since information was becoming the principal resource of companies in the information society, the key employee in the company had to be the information officer. This role is dominated by women, a fact which undoubtedly says a great deal about why it is of such interest. Obviously, we have not yet reached the stage where the information officer can aspire to be the assistant to the CEO : there is undoubtedly a missing link between the *thinkers* and the document *filers*. We thought that we could take on this role by limiting ourselves to the sector of information technology and its uses, a field in which we had acquired a certain expertise.

We were immediately faced by a paradox : everyone agrees that being able to control information becomes the battleground, but no-one has time for this activity. We always have more important things to do than dealing with information.

We suspected that there were more serious reasons behind this than just lack of time.

Four shortcomings

The first question is : do we still know how to read ? It is perhaps the one activity during the day which is not planned. Even if the time allotted to it were to be programmed, this would not be very useful since a time for reflection, after reading, would not have been anticipated. And even if it were, it would be outside of our work time, either in the evening or at week-ends, and this would only be of interest to a few select individuals, and the benefit to the company would therefore be minimal.

The second question is : do we still know how to think ? Most of the time, during the first contact we have with companies, their initial reaction is *« Oh ! You will be able to help us to make a decision »,* and we suggest that before deciding, we should have a discussion, if possible in a group, since two heads are better than one. From this point of view, we are not in the same business as those people whose aim is to help people make decisions.

The third question is : do we know how to make an enquiry ? Our speciality is general culture, obviously in the IT sector but also in the management sector. This concept of general culture, however, seems almost like a dirty word in companies : *« What on earth is the point ? »* we hear them say. For people who are extremely specialised, work to deadlines and are constantly under severe pressure, the creative processes of associating ideas and using unusual methods does not appear to be appropriate.

And finally : do we still know how to share ? Many companies carry out important studies to help people make decisions, but once the decision has been taken, they find themselves unable to convince the rest of the company to adopt that decision. Therefore, they resort to outside services, which are very time- consuming and expensive, to manage the change. Perhaps it would be wiser to prepare for the change in the very early stages of the process by asking all the employees to think about it first.

From the written to the oral

We developped our client offer as a result of this diagnosis. Our information officers who are specialised in information technology have the job of reading on behalf of those people who do not have the time to do so themselves, and they choose articles which are really important.

But this is not sufficient since, on the one hand, reading an article chosen from tens of others is still apparently too much to ask of executives who are overloaded with work. On the other hand, it is difficult to get paid for a service which consists of giving nothing, or delivering very little.

This is why we thought up another method, *Événemental*, which allows the transition from the work of reading to the job of storytelling, in other words, fom the written to the oral stage. In general, executives rush around all day from one meeting to another ; taking an hour out to read seems unthinkable to them, but adding another meeting to their diary is possible. The transition from written to oral also eliminates the barriers. This proves that the alleged lack of time, which is constantly used as an excuse, is not necessarily the real reason…

Details of the offer

In practical terms, our offer consists of the organisation of a two-hour meeting every three months during which we deal with six subjects which are both topical and are in the information technology sector.

We use modern presentation methods which are made possible by IT : our press-cutting presentations are supplemented with musical extracts, sound effects and graphics, particularly using post-its which appear on the screen.

Each time, we try to have at least one "micro-level" subject (such as IP telephony, intelligent labels…) and one "macro-level" subject (such as productivity and IT, governance and IT …). Our aim is to reflect the prevailing debate about questions which we raise, without really taking a stance. Nevertheless, each time we treat or rather 'mistreat' one of the subjects, we do so in our own particular way. For example, we did this when we discussed the intensive use of Powerpoint as a method of presentation, and ultimately as a method of thinking.

Our clients are primarily medium-sized and large companies and some administrations. Our normal business contact within the organisation is the CIO (Chief Information Officer) : we would like to intervene more in other sectors of the company, especially the general management committees. We bring our own materials and equipment ; all the company representative has to do is summon his staff. We are non-elitist and we hope that the programme reaches the greatest number of people possible, without being judgemental. The idea is to go beyond the usual, small elite audience. In general, at the end of a few months, the initial group has increased in size and our client notices that this works even better.

The first reaction of those concerned is surprise and suspicion. When one sees a court jester, paid by management to come to give a presentation, one suspects that he is there to sell something. At the end of a few sessions, people realise that we do not sell anything, and that our subjects are very varied and sometimes raise questions. They find this a bit unusual. Later, when we come to explain to the management which launched an ERP in the company why the ERP does not work, this makes talking easier, which is not often the case.

Our first contribution consists of supplying people with the vocabulary which will allow them to become interested in subjects other than those in which they specialise. One often talks about IT as if all IT workers have the same job. However, computing covers a great number of very different jobs, and often an IT worker does not understand a word of what his fellow IT worker is doing. During our presentations, the person who specialises in a given subject does not learn anything new about his subject. What he does learn, is a great deal about the

five other subjects discussed, or at least the relevant vocabulary. Once he knows the vocabulary, for example, he knows that ERP does not stand for *Establishment Receiving the Public,* he becomes more interested in reading articles which previously he had left to one side.

Our system is also a formidable method of recognising the value of experts within the company. Our slightly unusual use of post-its encourage people to speak. For example, when someone, such as the person in charge of technological watch to whom no-one ever listens because no-one ever understands a word he says, stands up at the end of a talk and in the space of two minutes, without any props, puts forward his well-informed point of view about the question, he shows that there is a real added value, and his credibility soars. Often, in the beginning, the person in charge of technological watch is very wary of us because he thinks that we are there to eliminate his job. After a certain length of time, he swears by us because he has realised that we enable him to make himself more visible and to allow his role to be better understood.

An example : poor signs regarding the ERPs

[The speaker makes a presentation following which he makes these comments]

This presentation has shown a series of sequences which summed up the question of ERPs at different times during the past years to illustrate the way in which we work.

The first series was made during 1999. Since then, some worrying features came to light. To tell the truth, at this point, it was just a case of poor signs. Most of the press was ecstatic and particularly highlighted the fact that everyone was adopting ERP software. Of course, our work is all about emphasising poor signs.

The uncertain future of ERP editors

There was anxiety with respect to the market for ERP systems. In a market whose turnover was growing by 45 % per annum, what would all these editors do once everyone was equipped ? It was feared that there might be a headlong rush to find another solution at any costs, and this is exactly what started to happen : having claimed that their ERP systems dealt with all the essential functions of the company, the editors began selling new 'indispensable' modules. However, when this falls within one's line of work, one understands that the installation of new modules, especially after the company which bought the ERP system was bought out by a rival company, entails costs and considerable difficulties, without any guarantee of a result.

Planning or reactivity ?

Another, more fundamental criticism was expressed by the researcher Pierre-Jean Benghozi : « *In a world which has become as uncertain as ours, was the desire to plan everything relevant ? Would it not have been better to improve the capacity of companies to react appropriately ?* »

A complete solution… which is incomplete

A year later, we took stock again of the situation with two additional criticisms. Whereas ERP software claimed to manage everything in the company, it was noticed that they only had a marginal role and that substantial budgets were devoted to other management systems operating at the same time and in parallel, such as the changeover to the new millenium, the switch to the Euro, e-business, and so on. It became more and more obvious that the ERP software was not *the* complete solution for the whole company, at least not unless the company had installed all the supplementary modules, as and when they were released.

A desire for outmoded integration

Another criticism is that the ERPs translate a desire to integrate the world as it exists which may appear to be based on a rather outdated vision of the world. Since it is a question of processes, perhaps one should look into the the way in which these processes are born, develop and die. Yet this is rare within companies, and happens more frequently outside the company, for example with clients, suppliers and partners. A more interesting approach, but perhaps more ambitious, would be, rather than to integrate the world as it exists, to try to integrate oneself with others.

A new concept emerged at the same time in the context of the net-economy. This was the concept of *market places,* in other words web platforms devoted to business-to-business (B2B), where everyone could come together to make business deals. Luckily for the ERPs, the market places phemenon was short-lived : the ambitions of its promotors were roughly the same as for the ERPs, but the model was even more complicated and its promoters did not have the same financial capacity.

Too long, too expensive, too complicated

As far as the ERPs are concerned, the ecstatic views expressed at the onset gave way thereafter to criticisms which were increasingly harsh. The installation of ERPs was much longer, more costly and more complicated than expected initially. This is true of all computer projects. However, in this case, the ERP promoters had promised that *this time, it would be different*. People became increasingly worried because the market for ERP systems began to run out of steam. Were those people who unfortunately had chosen an editor who was in a precarious position or even whose business was going bankrupt going to be able to adapt themselves to a new system ? Finally, whereas investment in ERPs appeared to be a bottomless pit, it became increasingly obvious that their implementation would not generate a single Euro in turnover. These are the sorts of questions which companies must ask themselves sooner or later.

An assessment of ERP, ten years later

The third sequence is an account of the situation at the present time, ten years after the installation of the first ERPs, using numerous university-led research studies which are starting to be published.

How did we arrive where we are now ?

First of all, these studies allow us to assess the reasons why companies adopted ERPs. IT for business and enterprise administration, such as existed before the ERPs, was largely inadequate. It consisted of consecutive software layers and did not lend itself very well to communication between different services and was characterised by lack of availability, incoherence, ambiguity and high production costs.

Faced with this break down in information, the ERPs suggested modules which were capable of handling all the functions in the company, and which were integrated in a unique data base. As a direct contrast to, and in order to put an end to the swarms of IT workers constantly busy programming the slightest organisational or semantic change, the ERPs proposed a system which was ready to use and which was adjustable by the parameter tables and could be directly handled by professionals who were not IT workers. The ERPs were the answer to the dream of *business process re-engineering* which alone should have made way for real optimisations. They enabled horizontal management across different sectors of activity. Despite their size, underlying *workflow* engines were able to distribute relevant data almost everywhere in the information systems, and as much as was necessary at any particular time.

"All in one" and "Once for all"

The two most tempting arguments for heads of companies were, on the one hand, the « all in one » and, on the other hand, the « once for all ». ERP salesmen told them : « *Listen, you have really had enough of IT, the budget extensions, programmes which you have to alter constantly, misleading promises from your CIO. If you sign a cheque tonight, tomorrow you will have the CD-Rom and that'll be the end of it !* » In the build-up to the year 2000, it was a fact that CIOs became particularly annoying (« *Changing the programmes is going to be a very expensive process and I can guarantee you nothing* ») and it was very tempting to resolve all these problems at once. Moreover, with the approach of the new millenium, it was no longer even a question of discussing what was working and what was not. One had to modernise and turn over a new leaf with regards to a system judged to be globally obsolete.

Accessibility of information

A third argument concerning the accessibility of information, certainly did not fool heads of companies completely, but it was very useful for them in order to deprive their colleagues of alibis for not working. When one hears « *I cannot make a decision : I don't have the necessary elements ; it's the IT system's fault* » all day long, one is delighted to have a tool which will allow one to put a stop to this moaning, even if really one does not hold out much hope about the capacity of this system to change things.

Administrative and financial directors of companies quoted on the Stock Exchange probably appreciated the fact that they would finally have information which they had been asked for. Up till then, when an auditor asked them questions which were awkward, they contented themselves with the reply that they would have the information at their next meeting. The auditor, however, was insistent, saying « *Are you still only at that stage ? If you had an ERP system you would be able to answer me immediately. If you are interested, we have a subsidiary which handles this very well* », and several months later : « *Listen, I still have to make a report, since without an ERP system, I cannot be sure of the validity of your answers.* » The administrative and financial director took these criticisms (concerning the quality of his computer system) personally and became a staunch supporter of ERPs.

Change but continuity

Possible reservations linked to the fear of making a leap into the unknown were also anticipated : « *Thanks to this tool, you will be able to reorganise your processes operationally without losing your old structure.* » Even if services do not communicate, the miraculous *workflow* engines would allow information to be dispersed throughout the whole company !

Finally, imitating one's competitors played a huge role. « *I am not completely sure that it works, but since my competitors have adopted it, so will I. If we both have made a mistake, it will not be serious since we will all have made the same mistake.* »

Disappointing results

Today, the result is, at best, disappointing.

Less ERPs than once anticipated

From the beginning, the "all in one" proved to be largely illusory. The modules kept coming, but when one asks companies, it becomes clear that their implementation is so extensive that they have integrated only between one to three of them. In general, two sectors of the company were particularly affected by the ERPs : the IT department, of course, and the accounts department. When a solitary module is installed in a company, in 78 % of cases, it will be an accounting module. But why should one make use of an accounting system sold in the context of an ERP when there were other excellent accounting software packages

avalasse ? Can one say that companies which only have one accounting module have really installed an ERP ?

Always more IT

Some important groups launched several ERPs with different brands or all of the same brand at the same time. A study shows that, on average, the big groups had 2.7 ERPs each. Some had many more than this. One important group, which had as many as twenty-two different ERPs, has just started a project aimed at removing eighteen of them…

The idea that companies were going to get rid of their IT workers in the near future was also misleading. There have never been as many of them as there are now ! And this is unlikely to change since what was not stated is that the use of CD-Roms required the implementation of a great deal of specific programmes which accompanied them. The injunction at the beginning of *« stop getting involved with IT and get on with your job »* has paradoxically resulted in the whole company burying itself in IT, and very infrequently resulting in bankruptcy.

The illusion of the unique database

The fantasy of a unique database did not take into account one essential element which was the volume of information in a company of a certain size. One day, I was in the CIO's office of a very large company when a consultant came in and very proudly announced that *« it was finished »*. What was finished, was the reloading of the integrated database, a process which had taken twenty-three days !

The principle of the unique database allows one to enter the maximum amount of information as quickly as possible. This task is often undertaken by the sales department, and usually by secretaries in this department. Since the probablity that most of the staff there have been correctly trained to use these tools is low, one can imagine the results : *« Tell me, Jacqueline, do you know which code you have to enter for this ? – No, try 38 : it is not the right code but it works. »*

Insufficient benefit

Analysis of the way in which the contribution and benefits of ERPs to the company are shared show that the computer configuration generally relied for the most part on subcontracting and also on an important participation from a few key users. Having put in a great number of additional unpaid hours, these key users will exchange their new know-how elsewhere for money. The encoding work (data entry) is primarily left to the department which is not very close to management and which has not necesssarily been sufficiently briefed about the subject. On the other hand, the benefits are principally due to a certain number of central personnel such as management controllers. The result is a feeling of blatant injustice.

As far as helping people make decisions is concerned, it is easy to understand that the fact of having information is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for decisions to be taken, especially when information is defined within the conditions mentioned above. The result is very stressful for users who can no longer blame the lack of information, and at the same time, have no guarantee that the information in question is reliable and that the decision they will take is the right one.

Furthermore, administrative and financial directors, who dreamed of general performance indicators which would really help them make decisions, discovered that they would have to equip themselves with numerous tools with barbaric names such as the CRM (Community Relationship Management), the SCM (Software Configuration Management), the PLM (Product Lifecycle Management), the CPM (Corporate Performance Management) and so on, in addition to the ERP system.

Human "damage"

Trade unions were very concerned about the risk of job cuts and even organised demonstrations in front of La Défense, Paris' Business District. In reality, there were no real job cuts and the opposite was true. It was more a case of job mobility, for example when a multinational's accountancy processsing centres were regrouped in Germany. That is not to say that there were no layoffs : a large number of people who, up to this point, had worked correctly, did not manage to adjust to these new tasks which required a very advanced level of abstraction. These people were progressively marginalised and often ended up leaving the company.

Even when there were no layoffs, people felt deprived of their work, both by lack of time, since they were caught up in the operational side of things, and also by lack of skills, since they were not included in these major processes of change in the early stages which, for the most part, were outsourced. They were then told that they only had to carry out the processes which were supposedly perfectly designed. Up to this moment, they had been responsible for their work, they had developed skills, had drawn up a rule book, and knew how to change a product if it was not suitable. Suddenly, the ownership of their work was removed from their hands and in exchange, they were asked to devote themselves to abstractions.

Paradoxical results

Despite it all, when ERPs have had positive results, they are often paradoxical.

Some companies – usually the larger ones – say that ERPs have improved their performance in terms of control and integration. Others – particularly the smaller companies – say they have advanced in terms of reactivity and transversality. In other words, the ERPs have allowed companies to grow in areas where they were already efficient. Unfortunately, when one develops one's strong points, one can only progress a few more points. In order for the margin to be greater, the weaker points have to be improved.

To be fair, I ought to cite the case of a SME (small and medium-sized enterprise) which is really very enthusiastic about ERPs. In the space of two years, all its employees sat around a table and frequently argued the pros and cons with each other. At the end of their time for thinking, they unanimously concluded that the ERP was not what they needed… However, all those who took part were delighted with this experience since it allowed them to understand better how their system worked and how they could improve it.

DISCUSSION

How Événemental works

Question : *Can you describe the Événemental team ?*

Christophe Deshayes : There are seven of us : three professional information officers with extensive experience specialising in information technology ; three people who write the scripts and host the Événemental sessions ; and one colleague who handles the administrative details.

Q. : *How do you prepare the Événemental sessions ?*

C. D. : We meet together and continue until we reach a consensus. The aim is to define what we are going to discuss and how we are going to discuss it. One of us presents the dossier and the others criticise it. This demands a great deal of mutual trust since the person in charge of the dossier is convinced that it works, while the others do not necessarily agree.

Information brokers ?

Q. : *In view of the enormous amount of existing information, one could imagine the emergence of a new profession, the "information broker". However, this presupposes that one could go further and answer precise questions about particular problems. Do you envisage this type of activity ?*

C. D. : No, as this would present us with almost metaphysical problems. It is very difficult to determine the value of information. Our market is enormous and even infinite but not necessarily solvent. The means that we have found to make it financially viable consist of selling not only information, but also analysis or even the fact of being together, to stand back from one's everyday activities for a while, or even to reassure oneself a little. It is important that other services are added to this, since the value of information itself is measured in a negative way. A large part of my added value in terms of information, is not to give the client all that one could say about a given subject. It is very difficult to find clients who will pay for this service…

   Previously, I developed an idea which consisted of analysing and discussing with groups of people involved in a project in order to help them to understand their own decisions better, and to make them aware of many things they already knew but which they had forgotten. Obviously we cannot charge a great deal of money for presenting things which people know already. And yet, the exercise is unquestionably useful.

Answers without questions, elusive data

Q. : *I am a researcher and I am among those who gave out poor signs – apparently really poor signs – regarding the development of information technology in organisations[1]. One of the lessons which I learned from my investigations is that the principle of the ERP originates from within the ideology of computerisation. Epistemology teaches us that there is no information without the existence of a question which allows information to make sense. It is therefore unrealistic to believe that inserting a large amount of information into numerous channels will allow one to make a decision.*

Q. : *The concept of data is deceptively simple. We make managers believe that we are going to standardise the system because we input data just once, but even for simple data, such as lists, this is not very straightforward. The same would not be true for a shopkeeper or an industrialist. Which one will we choose ? What I find hard to understand is how managers who, in general, are not that stupid, have fallen for it.*

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[1] Francis Pavé, *L'illusion informaticienne* (L'Harmattan, 1989).

Why is there collective blindness ?

C. D. : Of course, we can attribute the phenomenon to a technocratic deterioration : we leave it to the experts, and – since no-one is ever a prophet in his own country – preferably to outside experts, in other words, consultants. As a result, this becomes a very profitable industry particularly as it grows without any opposition. Generally speaking, journalists will interview an ERP editor and then a consultant to try to establish some contradiction between them, and then possibly a client. Yet a consultant will not say anything bad about the job which allows him to earn money, and a client will say that he is satisfied or dissatisfied depending on the way in which he is asked the question. As for researchers, we cannot hold anything against them, since it is sometimes difficult to find a field of research. However, they take a long time to publish their studies.

Collective blindness can also be explained by reasons which are much more prosaic. At one time, it was enough to announce the launch of an ERP in order to see one's share price rise several points, almost as surely as if you were to announce a wave of layoffs…

Q. : *One can push this reasoning too far : even if you get it completely wrong using the SAP system, no-one will hold it against you since you will have opted for the solution which everyone else has !*

ERP : a smokescreen without scruples ?

Q. : *I think that for certain managers, a very simple move is to export dissatisfaction. If you talk about revitalising a company and orientating it towards clients, you will have the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail : French Trade Union) on your back. If you introduce SAP or PeopleSoft, some of the dissatisfaction will be directed towards the consultants. Finally, perhaps the ERP in the end is a means like any other to make companies react, a pretext for encouraging or accompanying change.*

Q. : *One may doubt its efficiency if one believes the session presented by Francis Pavé in this seminar, entitled «* New Technologies of Information and Communication : engine or substitute for change ? *» The association between the organisation and the IT department is not necessarily in name alone and may become even stronger to the point where it is impossible to separate them.*

C. D. : I like the well-known alchemists' phrase '*solve coagulas',* in other words, we make it liquid, then we make it solid, then liquid again, etc., until the day when perhaps the transmutation will take place. All companies follow these oscillatory movements : we centralise, then decentralise ; we merge and then resell. Sometimes these different movements are only intended to create movement or reaction, which is not necessarily absurd.

Having said that, when one decides to install an ERP only for bad reasons, one is taking a risk. I knew CIOs who said « *Since the head of the company doesn't know a thing about IT and, despite my request, refuses to spend time in the field, and still wants to cut my budget, and to top it all, wants an ERP, then I say'OK'. They will spend the budget, they will spend their time but it's not me who will have asked them to do so, - it is the ERP.* » If the choice to take the ERP as an instrument to encourage change is made perfectly clear then this is fine, but it the choice is made with the sole purpose of avoiding discussion, we should not be at all surprised if it all ends in catastrophe.

And yet sometimes it works…

Q. : *I suggest the following interpretation of the fact that, in certain cases, the ERPs allow companies to improve their performances in their own field of excellence, whether it is a question of control or reactivity. These companies were so efficient in these areas that they have progressed* despite *the ERPs… But it is likely that they would have progressed even more had they not lost time in installing them.*

Q. : *In my experience of accompanying many ERPs in companies, I realised that all the projects which were successful had a common element : the presence of a small team of people who possessed extraordinary human qualities, common sense and courage. It is true that sometimes we need court jesters. Sometimes we need or we should need a fifty-year-old housewife full of common sense to ask the right questions andwho dares ask « Listen, I don't understand anything that is happening any more : where are we going ? » I see some companies involved in projects which are literally crazy because no-one is brave enough to stop the process.*

The paradox of thinking

Q. : *Often, people buy technology so that they do not have to think, since thinking, paradoxically, is sometimes considered to be a handicap. As long as one is thinking, one is not taking a decision. Often, as a result, the decisions which are taken most quickly – almost too quickly – are those to buy technology. Americans tend to make decisions more quickly and, as if by chance, they have developed an industry of information systems. In France, we spend a great deal of time hesitating and having doubts, which does not prevent us from being followers and from making many mistakes. We cannot even console ourselves with the IT industry which is non-existent in France.*

C. D. : It is true that in France there are many software and computing services companies and we thought for a long time that these were also technological companies. In fact, we have missed the boat and it is unlikely that we will have another chance. Since every advantage has its disadvantages and vice versa, we could try to take advantage of this handicap. The extraordinary development of the IT industry in the United States has a downside, namely that lobbies exist which are sometimes dictatorial. In France, we could explore a field which is still largely *terrae incognitae,* namely everything which in IT for business and enterprise administration relates to organisation in the strict sense of the word, or to its uses.

Unfortunately, this is considered to be 'soft science' : if you present an innovative project to the ANVAR (Agence nationale de valorisation de la recherche : equivalent of the National council for the promotion of research in industry) concerning the uses of computing, it is very unlikely that you will receive any financial support. And yet, such an industry would create jobs and is very close to European values…

Presentation of the speaker :

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