The Great Barrier Backlash

Thomas Frey

Editor’s Note: Significant and fast-paced change is occurring across society in general and our profession in particular. The clearer our sense for the future is, the more able we are to both understand and take advantage of trends working their way through virtually every aspect of our lives today. To help us see what these trends are and where they appear to be taking us, NEHA has made arrangements to publish the critical thinking of the highly regarded futurist, Thomas Frey.

The opinions expressed in this column are solely that of the author and do not in any way reflect the policies and positions of NEHA and the Journal of Environmental Health.

Thomas Frey is Google's top-rated futurist speaker and the executive director of the DaVinci Institute®. At the Institute, he has developed original research studies enabling him to speak on unusual topics, translating trends into unique opportunities. Frey is a powerful visionary who is revolutionizing our thinking about the future.

My wife Deb and I recently returned from a weeklong trip to South Korea where much of our travel inside the country involved riding on the high-speed KTX (Korean Transit eXpress) train from city to city.

The train is designed for speeds up to 350 km/h (217 mph), but currently tops out at 190 mph. Our final trip from Changwon City in the southern tip of Korea to Seoul in the far north took just three hours.

The entire country is 20% smaller than my home state of Colorado, but has a population of over 50 million people, greater than California, Arizona, and Colorado combined.

KTX trains are amazingly efficient with each stop lasting only three to five minutes and hundreds of people getting on and off at each stop. Compared to the nightmare that airports have become, where the minimum time between a plane landing and takeoff is well over an hour, and highways that slow to a crawl during most of the day, these trains are breaking down barriers of time and distance all across Korea.

KTX will soon connect Seoul's Incheon Airport with the rest of its network.

Their system works because it has broken down all the barriers: no security lines, no stoplights, no traffic cops, no passport checks or customs stations, just lightning fast trains.

Even government agencies have bought into this line of thinking, imposing penalties on everything from late tax filings, to wrong-
day watering fines, to late utility fees, to parking fines.
In the U.S., penalty traps have become a form of debtor prisons for those unable to comply with the demands of the system. With much of their income being taken from them, they have been reduced to a life of poverty.

The Great Awareness Shift
Today, many young entrepreneurs are looking at the excessive fee-charging practices of business and government with the same kind of righteous anger and opportunistic eyes that motivated Reed Hastings.
As our online communities continue to raise awareness all around the world, those operating within what is considered a legal but ethical gray zone will find themselves increasingly exposed to public angst.
Here are a few examples that come to mind:
• Cities that are overly aggressive in issuing speeding and parking tickets will find themselves cast into a social media “no-travel zone.” Both shoppers and travelers will go out of their way to avoid what they construe as a form of visitor harassment.
• Overall cost to the city in the form of lost revenue will be far greater than what is charged through its penalties.
• Businesses that employ the use of fee traps, legal shenanigans, or anything construed as customer abuse will have their tactics bared to the public with a hacker’s bullseye painted squarely on their executive officers.
• Communities that make it hard to do business will be publicly exposed. Excessive fees, filings, forms, and reporting will be publicly berated, castigated, and red flagged. Businesses will go elsewhere.
• Government agencies that still require forms be typed on a typewriter will not only be avoided but may even receive death threats for their stupidity.

It’s no longer possible to hide behind a cloak of secrecy when every person you interact with has the ability to write their own headlines on social media, text a friend, or capture the problem on video.

The New Age of Global Competitiveness
The people of South Korea are very aggressive. They are highly educated, tech savvy, and determined to make a name for themselves.
They have risen from a poverty-stricken, destitute nation to one of the most influential world-class countries in the world today.
In 1957 South Korea had a lower per capita GDP than Ghana, the poorest country in the world, but today theirs is over three times that of China, and over 18 times those living in the penniless squalors of North Korea.
Companies in Japan, China, Singapore, and South Korea are aggressively competing for the same money as businesses in North and South America and Europe.
Competitiveness is not just about being smarter or more aggressive, however; it’s also about having fewer barriers to contend with.
1. Executives who can squeeze in eight meetings a day rather than five because of fewer traffic problems will be more competitive.
2. Companies that are required to fill out five fewer government forms a year will be more competitive.
3. People who spend 100 hours less each year resolving accounting issues as a result of questionable fees and erroneous charges will also be far more competitive.
4. Travelers who are able to circumvent security and passport checks will have far more time to pay attention to other things.
5. Both people and businesses that spend 40% fewer hours a year doing their taxes will have far more resources to dedicate towards more important issues.

Final Thoughts
In our increasingly fluid society, people and businesses that don’t feel welcome will leave. And they may not just leave the local community, they may move to an entirely different country. Most countries are actively recruiting talented people.
Global power is constantly shifting. The 1800s were dominated by the British. America dominated the 1900s. The 2000s are showing major signs of shifting towards Asia.
One of the major factors in this power shift will be personal effectiveness, and our effectiveness gets far better when we are able to strip away at all the numerous barriers we all have to contend with.
On a recent trip to Amsterdam, I texted two photos to Deb, only to get tagged with a $24 charge. Normal texts only cost $.50 but texting photos, unbeknownst to me, costs far more.
Sneaky charges like this are very disruptive. They disrupt our normal thinking, divert attention, and create a painful wariness about using online services in an era where online services can be the critical difference between success and failure.
When it comes to fee traps, fines, and penalties, the monetary gains of the few create losses for the many. They represent unnecessary barriers to progress, and unnecessary challenges at a time where only the most resilient will survive.

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Did You Know?
The Integrated Foodborne Outbreak Response and Management (InFORM) meeting will be held in Phoenix, Arizona, November 17–20, 2015. This meeting brings together laboratory, epidemiology, and environmental health professionals involved with foodborne and enteric disease outbreak response. Mark your calendars and visit www.aphl.org/conferences/Pages/InFORM.aspx for more information.