

---

# Five factors for success in a challenging world

Tim Marshall  
Chief Executive Officer  
JANET(UK),  
Lumen House,  
Library Avenue,  
Harwell Oxford, Didcot,  
Oxfordshire,  
OX11 0SG  
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/blog/author/timmarshall/>

---

First Browne, then the Comprehensive Spending Review, and with more reviews and uncertainty to come in 2011 it is easy to feel like the distraught lover in L'Âme Immortelle's song 'Life will never be the same again'. While this is *de facto* true it is certainly not the end!

Higher education and research have been well funded over the past decade but are now moving into a new phase which will require a renewed spirit of innovation and collaboration if the UK's world leading position is to be retained and we are to continue to punch well above our weight.

As the budget restraints kick in we will undoubtedly all be faced with seemingly impossible tasks. However, such situations often appear impossible only because our natural instinct is to assume that the way in which we have acted, and indeed enjoyed success, is the right approach for the future. If we ensure that our focus is on the benefits that our communities, or even 'customers', require and not the features we think they like, the future may not be so impossible after all. An outcome-based approach combined with free and adventurous thinking surely underpins successful performance in a challenging world. Such success is essential if we are to compete effectively with the emerging 'new' economies, a key priority for the recovery of the UK economy. The answer is likely to be found not so much in the latest management tome – a growth business it would seem in an economic downturn – but rather within our own experience. If our experience combined with creativity and analysis is harnessed in an innova-

tive way then this could offer the key – organised common sense based on evidence still has great value and this is the approach enshrined in the five factors.

## 1 Know your business

This sounds obvious, but how many of us, when asked what we do, tell them exactly that... what we do! What the enquirer really wants to know is not what we actually do but more what we contribute – in management speak, our value proposition. At JANET, for example, our occupation is not so much the 1s, 0s, routers, applications or any other technical solution, but rather may be described as the way we enable the UK's world-class research and education community to collaborate and share. I recall once doing an exercise where the task was to come up with a fifteen-second sound-bite that could be extracted from a one-minute answer. It was quite challenging to construct a few words which encapsulated a complex business: however, it did help focus on what was important and what was not. I commend this exercise to you in a quiet moment.

## 2 Know your numbers

Many people in our organisations instinctively prefer to leave the numbers to the accountants, particularly in a system which has been substantially grant-funded and based on annual cash-flow profiles. When the going gets tough it is crucial to know the precise nature of the finances and the real costs of the business activity. The 'know your numbers' factor really seems to resonate with colleagues throughout the research and educational community. When the budgets come under pressure it is essential to know your total cost of ownership. Without this understanding it is highly unlikely that you will be able to adapt and flex effectively without risking the quality of provision to those who use the services. Understanding the real costs may be a little frightening at first but once the shock is over it will focus thinking on what is really important and enable effective and deliverable service provision options to be pursued.

## 3 Strive to be trusted

Any sales person worth their salt has the ambition not to rip their customers off but to become a 'trusted adviser'. In the new, lean, mean world we shall increasingly be required both to collaborate and to compete – a sensitive relationship, but one which certainly has no chance of success if there is no trust. Our prime pursuit must be to establish trust based on honesty and integrity, even when we disagree; this is an effective and pragmatic

route to success but one which can be emotionally challenging. Achieving this is, however, well worth the hassle and enables significant value to be delivered.

#### ***4 Enable and empower the team***

No one person can do it all, however able or driven they may be. Successful leadership is about drawing out the best from all the team but this does not happen by magic. Just as in sport, a good team last year may not necessarily be a good one this year. The game may have changed, circumstances altered or players moved on. As we seek to deliver service in a changing world team members' roles will be constantly changing and they will be asked to do challenging things. In such circumstances it is important that the team are equipped to complete the task, both as a team and as individuals. Failure to train and empower the team proactively leads to organisational dysfunction and thus to failure to achieve targets and serve customers.

#### ***5 See over the horizon***

If this could be done 100% accurately we would have few problems; in fact, we could well be living in luxury from the wealth such an ability would bring! Just because this is challenging, however, this does not mean giving up. In a fast changing political, economic, societal and technical environment it is essential to explore the likely scenarios that are just over the horizon, form a strategy and then go on bravely to execute it. The legendary ice hockey player Wayne Gretzky said, 'A good hockey player plays where the puck is. A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be.' We must all seek to be where the action is going to be tomorrow and not just where it is today.