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Communications Breakdown

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by Geoffrey Downey

On the surface, thinking about the skills a musician needs to be successful doesn't seem like the best way to discuss the disconnect between the IT department and the rest of the company.

But musicians must walk a fine line between artistic satisfaction and sales — in other words, product and value.

For former children's band guitarist turned IT consultant Jim Love, companies also have to balance the demands on their information technology departments between its product and value.

During his 30 years working in IT, Love, a managing partner at True North Consulting, has seen a chasm develop between IT and the organizational overall.

"I think it grew as systems got bigger and as people wanted more and more things done," he says. "And now everything has to be instantaneous. I never thought I'd hear somebody say I want it yesterday and mean it, but we're getting there."

This wasn't always the case. Love says in the past, various groups within a company used to mingle, but over time, the company structure changed, as did philosophies. About 10 years ago, he says, it was fairly common that IT people just wanted to acquire technology and weren't as concerned about how well it would be used. The reverse has happened to some extent. He says the business side says technology is the solution to most problems.

"Now it's the IT people saying, 'Wait a minute, think this through. How are you going to use it effectively?' It's an interesting flip," Love says.

There is a fundamental difference in how business and IT people look at technology. Love says the former see all the possibilities and potential the latest gadgets offer. Those in charge of administering it, however, see all the things that can go wrong.

The end result is the two groups communicate on one level: cost cutting. Love says this singular language has been disastrous.

"This cost-cutting message is poisonous to the IT people," says Love. "It says you are a commodity, we don't need you, you can be bought. Can you imagine coming into an office every day knowing that the only reason you're there is because you work cheap?"

Robert Offley, CEO of Fusepoint Managed Services, agrees and describes the disconnect as huge.

"There's a responsibility on both sides," he explains. "One is from the IT department, to take time to take time to explain what they're doing to generate business advantage, save costs, increase revenue streams, whatever.

"From the president's point of view, you need to take time to ask the question, 'OK, I understand what this does technically, but what does this do for me as a business?'"

Chuck Tatham, vice-president of marketing and business development for Changepoint, says after the dot-

com bubble burst, cost became the primary focus. So as everyone scrambled to slash costs, they discovered IT represented the most significant capital expenditure in many businesses — as much as 50 per cent in some cases.

Without a bottomless well of cash to draw from like in the late 1990s, IT managers and the CIO had to be able to explain how resources were being allocated.

"What are the decisions that have resulted in me having access to 7/24 support, or maybe only during business hours?" Tatham says. "Where is the dollar going and how does it relate to what the CEO said was strategic for this year? That alone is hugely powerful and few can do it with much accuracy."

"The IT department has to have a leader who can articulate the benefits of the infrastructure to the business leader," echoes Offley. "I think the companies that really have been successful have been the ones who bring in such a leader."

The danger in not having such a champion is losing or never gaining a place at the executive table. Cost per MIPS, Tatham explains, means nothing to anyone outside your department.


"If you can relate IT to impact on the business," Tatham says, "it won't be long before you have a seat at the table because it's critical to the business."

Love isn't recommending the IT department transform itself into thinking like the business. He says differing philosophies are essential to healthy business, but IT leaders must be able to discuss more than cost.

"We tend to eliminate diversity as our solution to everything and that's not right," Love says. "You want somebody managing risk and you want someone managing the forward thinking. Businesses are built on that."

"When we stop talking about cost and we start talking about value and return, then we'll be OK."

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