

EXCLUSIVE: Facilitating increased business knowledge in IT workers

By Robert Johnson

Companies are increasingly using information technology to sell more products, grow their business and improve their competitive footing. Online banking gives customers greater access to their accounts and lowers costs for retail banks; as a result, it's turned retail banking into a 24x7x365 business. Retailers use technology to track store inventory, monitor daily sales and manage their workforce, all of which has increased sales per square foot. However, when retail store personnel can't access these systems, sales can come to a halt. This increased dependence on technology has upped the ante for the IT department.

IT must be user centric and keep all systems running smoothly around the clock. I believe that users are now the IT department's top priority. In order to effectively support users, IT personnel need to increase their business knowledge. I have this conviction because:

- Technology is fused with business processes; for example, a retail clerk uses a store inventory system for an item a customer wants to buy
- The IT department must empower people so that they can perform their work with high productivity
- IT workers must champion technologies that help open new markets, increase "wallet share" with existing customers, and improve customer service

When these three points are upheld, everyone wins—customers, suppliers, shareholders, and employees. IT workers typically are the few individuals in an organization that can make technology "sing and dance." Unfortunately, few IT workers have sufficient business knowledge to help users get the most out of technology and achieve outstanding business results.

What's holding back IT workers from boosting their business



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knowledge? I believe it is perspective. IT professionals have pursued and been rewarded for increasing technical knowledge. While this is certainly necessary, it's not enough. IT is the steward of technology; therefore, it is up to IT workers to convey how their companies can get the most out of it. Moreover, many IT practitioners are technology elitists who expect their business colleagues to "understand IT". But technology is now fused with business so it's time for all IT professionals to "understand business".

Most changes occur from the top down in an organization, which means that you, as CIOs, must lead the perspective shift in IT professionals. To get started, I suggest you create a vision for the future where IT professionals are champions of applying technology to your business. This vision serves as a vivid picture of a positive future where the IT department and all IT professionals enjoy a very strong reputation for helping the organization use technology to serve its customers significantly better than the competition. This isn't just your vision but the vision of all IT professionals. This shared vision will create common purpose and an emotional connection of each IT professional in your department.

Early on, incorporate incentives (recognition and rewards) for expanding business knowledge. Get help from your training department since they can contribute techniques for accelerating learning and knowledge transfer.

If the reputation of your IT isn't strong, convince an influential business colleague to partner with you and enhance IT's value through increased business knowledge. The success of this partnership will encourage other business leaders to work more closely with IT for mutual benefit.

I recommend you hold a meeting to unveil your vision for the future and brainstorm ideas to

bring it about with the entire IT department AND your influential business colleague. You and your business colleague must be prepared to answer questions about this vision and your joint commitment to make it happen.

You'll want all employees to contribute ideas during the brainstorming session, so have a good facilitator lined up who will get everyone contributing to the discussion. Remember to consider all ideas and get the employees to decide which are best to move ahead. Produce a "roadmap" of activities and intentional actions to increase business knowledge in an aggressive but achievable timeframe. This will reinforce your commitment AND show everyone the path forward.

One CIO who I know created an "academy" to change the mindset of his department and increase the value to his \$2 billion business services company. He partnered with his training department to develop a four month program for all IT personnel and used training, mentoring, role-playing and roundtable discussion to foster learning and skill development.

There are myriad ways to enhance business knowledge. The key is to stimulate the desire in each IT practitioner to do so AND implement a predictable plan that employees can trust to occur. Remember, you need a climate of trust within the IT department to get started and beyond IT to achieve success.

To quote Peter Drucker from his book *Management Challenges for the 21st Century* (HarperCollins, 1999):
"Organizations are no longer built on force but on trust. The existence of trust between people does not necessarily mean that they like one another. It means that they understand one another." Work with your IT professionals to strengthen their understanding of their business colleagues and increase IT's value to your company.