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Thoughts and ideas from The Systems Consulting Consortium

Teaching New Dogs Old Tricks

In late October, Ed dePaschalis (previously the CIO of Levi Strauss), Dave Mitchell (previously the GM for Infrastructure and Business Systems of Chevron), Bruce Rogow (the widely esteemed Gartner Group Fellow) and I met to discuss the state of the IT management profession.

It was an interesting, no-holds-barred conversation. Early on we agreed that the CIO's job and role in the company changed around 1992 as investments in technology increased dramatically. 1992 to mid-2000 was the time of large ERP implementations and the distributed computing/networking boom. IT budgets were increasing and there was no shortage of major IT projects that were requested and funded.

Even start-up companies were installing tier-1 ERP and CRM systems in-house and "gold-plated" IT infrastructures were put in place. The words "prioritization" and "rationalization" virtually vanished from the IT management dictionary until they reappeared with a vengeance with the collapse of the dot.com bubble.

The environment today, and for the past several years, is very different. IT budgets are tight and many company executives, burnt by the poor return on the technology investments made during the late 1990s, remain reluctant to approve spending on new technology.

SLAs, once at the Platinum level, are now at the Brass level, if not even lower. Some CIOs have learned to manage dramatically downward the expectations of their users – a new and not always endearing experience. Other CIOs remain at sea, in an environment they never before had to contend with.

What to do? – Our four-way discussion came up with the phrase "Teaching New Dogs Old Tricks" (authored by a British friend of Bruce's) meaning *Back to Basics*. CIOs must re-earn the respect of their customers or lose their seat at the senior management table. A few Old Tricks from the pre-boom days need to be dusted off:

#1 - Develop a comprehensive business application portfolio as a summary of a valuable set of corporate assets. Then manage those assets as you would anything else of similar value.

Of course, manage the related project portfolio but it is the application portfolio that deserves the real emphasis.

#2 - Take a careful look at everything your IT unit is doing and see if there aren't some high hanging fruit (low-glitz, challenging and possibly expensive projects that have been long avoided) that have high potential. Grit your teeth and do them!

#3 - In virtually every IT shop there are boring, low-glitz projects that no one wants to do but if done, the users' life will be made measurably easier. Do them and re-earn your management table seat.

Demand to be shown tangible benefits and the real cost. Don't forget retraining. It's never free.

Yes, these are Old Tricks -- but they are proven effective and they are certainly timely. The role of the CIO in the post dot.com economy remains viable and important. However, the days of easy success are gone. The days of solid, experience-based management have returned.

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