

TITLE: "TODAY'S CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICERS: THE UNTOUCHABLES"

by Tim Bryce
Managing Director
M. Bryce & Associates (MBA)
P.O. Box 1637
Palm Harbor, FL 34682-1637
United States
Tel: 727/786-4567
E-Mail: timb001@attglobal.net
WWW: <http://www.phmainstreet.com/mba/>
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"If we lived in a perfect world, there would not be a need for managers; projects would be executed on time and within cost. However, the reality is, we live in an imperfect world."

- Bryce's Law

INTRODUCTION

It has been often said there should be two Presidents for the United States; one to deal with politics, and another to tend to the true affairs of government. The same can be said for today's Chief Information Officers (CIO). Although they should be tending to matters of state, they are all too often preoccupied with politics and gamesmanship.

Ideally, the CIO is the information keystone for a company. As chief architect and information broker, the CIO represents the catalyst between understanding business information needs, and the development organization who must satisfy them. Although the position often comes with much pomp and circumstance, it is all for naught if the CIO cannot effectively tend to this pivotal role.

As the focal point for a company's information resources, the CIO must deal with a wide spectrum of people: end-users concerned with the status of their development projects, as well as reporting problems to existing systems; technicians who argue over tactics of implementation; vendors marketing the latest technical panacea; and CPA's who scrutinize every penny spent by the CIO. Sound hectic? It is. Feeling harassed, the CIO tries to insulate himself, and herein lies the problem.

THE ELECTRONIC COCOON

The CIO begins his tenure as an "ambassador" between his department and the rest of the organization. But as demands close in, he builds a buffer around himself, an electronic cocoon of voice mail and E-mail. Though voice

mail is designed to record messages while a person is away from the office, it is primarily used to screen out unwanted callers (both internal and external). Consequently, calls are not returned. E-mail is touted as a convenient way to enhance organizational communications, but the CIO finds himself besieged by a ton of memos and notes (most of which go unanswered). By coordinating these two technologies, it is possible to avoid human contact altogether. However, this would negate the need for the organizational cocoon.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL COCOON

After the electronic cocoon is in place, the CIO develops an infrastructure featuring several layers of management. This allows the managers to concentrate on the day-to-day operations of the department, while the CIO concentrates on hobnobbing with the corporate brass. As problems rise through the organization (as they invariably will), the CIO simply adds another layer of management to deal with the problem. In departmental issues, the CIO is more concerned with who gets to deal with the problem than what the true solution might be.

The CIO's final and crucial sentry is his secretary. Used properly, secretaries play vital roles as expeditors for their managers. For the CIO, the secretary has more of a "pit bull" role, with explicit orders to redirect phone calls and mail, and to tell anyone foolhardy enough to try for a face-to-face encounter that the boss is "in a meeting" and cannot be disturbed.

POLITICALLY CORRECT

The CIO often speaks in a forked-tongue. On the one hand he is conversant in the latest catch phrase (i.e., *"re-engineering," "enterprise architecture," "business rules," "extreme/agile programming,"* etc.), but on the other he must be politically correct when talking with his peers. Although he balks at technical discussions with his own staff, he loves to overwhelm executive management with his technical verbosity. Conversely, he dazzles the technical staff with management jargon, discussing the *"global impact"* and *"bottom line strategies."* As a consequence, the CIO fails miserably as translator between management and the technicians. He plays a different part for each group, making sure neither group can understand (or attack) his grandiose ideas.

LOSING TOUCH

Surrounded by the false security of e-mail and voice mail,

(continued on page 2)

(continued from page 1)

protected by platoons of managers and his diligent secretary, the CIO can finally relax. However, due to poor communications with the CIO, executives and users do not know how their business information requirements are being satisfied. And since you cannot communicate with someone who is not there, they become frustrated with the elusive executive. Technicians, awaiting their marching orders, are following a leader who has lost touch with the real world. Impossible to communicate with, he cannot properly manage his department.

Without proper management, chaos reigns, and the CIO's tenure will be brief. Perhaps this is why the average life expectancy for a CIO position is between 6 and 24 months. How can an IS department plan for the future if there is a revolving door at the top? CIO's must shed their insular layers and become accessible to their own people and executives. Only then will information systems be synchronized with the goals of the business.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

The CIO is the pivotal player for satisfying the information requirements of an enterprise. The CIO, therefore, must recognize interpersonal communications as an inherent part of the job. Instead of avoiding it, he must master it. Some suggestions:

1. RESTRICT THE USE OF ELECTRONIC MAIL - there are some merits to passing documents electronically throughout the company. However, legislate the distribution of junk mail (spam) as a felonious crime.

2. DUMP THE VOICE MAIL - its dehumanizing effect is perhaps the biggest irritant around. Instead...

3. HIRE AN EFFECTIVE SECRETARY - not just a clerk to chase people away on the phone. A real secretary can expedite problems when the boss is busy or away. The CIO's secretary can be one of the most powerful people in the IS organization.

4. FLATTEN THE ORGANIZATION - building an empire with layer upon layer of management only causes confusion in terms of responsibilities and slows the decision making process. Even worse, important decisions tend to fall through the cracks.

5. TALK IN PLAIN BUSINESS TERMS - using the latest catch phrases (technical or otherwise) may be trendy but they may also be misleading. Find out what you're talking about, and express it in simple terms. If your executives or technicians cannot follow what you are

saying, you are not communicating. If they truly understand what you and your department are doing, you will have real backing and support, instead of a sign-off for the latest superficial offering.

6. Last but not least, **ANSWER THE DAMN PHONE!** People like to know there is a real person out there, not someone who is obscure and runs around the world answering messages by e-mail or voice mail.

END

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