TITLE: "ARE I.T. WORKERS BLUE COLLAR?"

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"How we look and act speaks volumes."
- Bryce's Law

INTRODUCTION

"Are I.T. Workers Blue Collar?" Interesting question. I was recently asked this by some executives who were concerned with improving the productivity of their I.T. departments. I asked them to explain why they thought this way. They contended their I.T. people (e.g., analysts and programmers) exhibit a lot of blue collar characteristics, e.g., repetition in types of work performed, they do not dress or act like professionals, and regularly punch in and out of work with little interest in going above and beyond the call of duty.

I countered there were two other aspects to consider: first, blue collar workers tend to perform manual labor, and; second, they are nonexempt workers who are paid an hourly wage. Also, they tended to be less educated than white collar workers.

They told me I was being naive; that blue collar workers can perform technical tasks as well as manual tasks, such as those found in manufacturing and assembly; and although they are classified as exempt workers paid a salary, they tend to behave like hourly workers instead. Further, there are plenty of blue collar workers who were just as educated, if not more so, than a lot of the programmers and analysts on their staffs. One executive even went so far as to tell me about a couple of craftsman machinists he had with MBA degrees.

Frankly, I had a hard time refuting their arguments. This is actually an old concept, one which I haven't heard in quite some time, back to the 1980's when there was talk of unionizing programmers. Nonetheless, it should cause us to pause and think how I.T. people are regarded in the board room. To me, it suggests a credibility gap between management and I.T. and helps explain why a lot of jobs are being outsourced.

In recent years I have met a lot of people who have abandoned corporate I.T. shops and have opted to become consultants instead. Its not that they didn't like their companies, they simply became disenchanted with how I.T. departments were being run, read the writing on the wall, and figured it was time to bail out before they were outsourced. So who is at fault here, management or I.T.? If management truly perceives I.T. workers as blue collar, than there will be a great temptation to give the work to shops overseas at greatly reduced costs.

There are those in the I.T. field who believe unionization is the route to take. As far as I'm concerned, this would be the kiss of death to corporate I.T. shops as executives would rather outsource than be held hostage to a union.

Instead, I believe I.T. workers should do some soul searching and ask themselves how they can differentiate themselves from their foreign counterparts. Technical knowledge alone will not do it any longer. Outsourcers have already demonstrated their technical skills are on a par with ours.   No, the answer is they must demonstrate how the I.T. department adds more value to the company than an outsider can. This means they have to become more serious about their work and produce better I.T. solutions more quickly, correctly, and less expensively. Anyone can apply quick and dirty Band-Aid solutions. What is needed is a higher caliber of professionalism and improved skills in management. The I.T. workers have to work both harder and smarter. In other words, job assignments have to be performed in a more professional and craftsman-like manner (methodically with a quality consciousness). This requires a more disciplined, organized, and professional attitude which is the exception as opposed to the rule in a lot of I.T. shops today.

If I.T. can demonstrate they behave more like white collar professionals, executives will become dependent on them and will be less likely to outsource their jobs. Ideally, you want to hear executives say, *"I can't live without these guys (the I.T. department)."* But if executives perceive you, the I.T. worker, as nothing more than a blue collar worker, than your story is told.

Think I'm kidding? Consider this, I know of a large manufacturing company in the U.S. Midwest who had a pressing I.T. project not long ago. Knowing he was short on staff, the CIO appealed to the executive board for additional funding for more personnel. Basically, the board gave the CIO carte blanche to hire as many people he wanted at generous wages, with whatever job title the workers wanted. But the CIO was explicitly told, *"When*

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the project is over, fire them." Do you think these executives had a high regard for I.T. people?

So, are I.T. workers "Blue Collar"? Look in the mirror and you tell me.

END

About the Author

Tim Bryce is the Managing Director of M. Bryce & Associates (MBA) of Palm Harbor, Florida and has 30 years of experience in the field of Information Resource Management (IRM). He is available for lecturing, training and consulting on an international basis.

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