TITLE: "ENTERING THE TWILIGHT ZONE"

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Since 1971: *"Software for the finest computer - the Mind"*

"If you are not pissing someone off,
you are probably not doing your job."
- Bryce's Law

INTRODUCTION

This essay represents my 100th in a series of weekly bulletins I have written over the last two years. During this time I have written on a variety of management related issues as well as technical topics pertaining to Information Technology, e.g., systems design, data base design, software engineering, etc. My intent was to show the vast scope of Information Resource Management (IRM) and try to get people to expand their horizons and think beyond their immediate scope of responsibilities. I have received a lot of feedback from these essays, some negative, but most have been very positive and supportive. I have always tried to be honest and forthright in my editorials, a "straight shooter" some say. Nonetheless. my comments are either welcomed with enthusiasm or disdain, there is little middle ground. Thank God I am not in the business of running a popularity contest. Regardless of what you think of my comments and observations, you know where I stand on an issue. Its not important whether you agree with me or not, but if I can get you to stop and think about something, then I have accomplished my goal.

I like to believe I have seen a lot over the last 30 years; customers trying to conquer massive system problems, luminaries who have impacted the I.T. industry by introducing new ideas, and charlatans selling the latest snake oil. But I have also found the discourse with the people in both the trenches and the boardroom to be the most stimulating. From their comments and experiences I have witnessed not only changes in technology but in management as well, some for better, some for worse. I have listened to both their frustrations as well as their accomplishments; their successes and their failures. The passing parade over the years has introduced a multitude of changes, from large to small. So much so, the corporate landscape is nothing like when I began in the mid-1970's. Interestingly, I am now at that awkward age where I am considered a radical by my elders and "out of touch" by my youngers (I like to call this the "Twilight Zone" period of my life).

SOME OBSERVATIONS

Between my consulting practice and the feedback resulting from these bulletins, I have observed some interesting changes in the corporate workplace. Below are some of the more pronounced observations, some will be rather obvious, some not so. Nonetheless, here they are, warts and all:

1. We now live in a Disposable Society.

Information Technology departments feel they are under incredible pressure to produce more with less. This is caused by executive managers who do not have a true appreciation of the mechanics of development. Executives falsely equate computer hardware with development and, as such, spend an inordinate amount of money on hardware and software, and little on the management infrastructure needed to create industrial strength systems (a kind of "penny-wise, pound-foolish" behavior). They may understand the value of computer hardware, but they do not have a clue as to the value of information as it applies to their companies. Nonetheless, because of the amount of money invested in tools, executives expect miracles from the I.T. staff. Since executives expect short turnarounds, the I.T. department is only able to produce a fraction of what is needed to adequately support the company. Programs are written with little, if any, thought of interfacing with other programs or to share and reuse data. Consequently, redundant data and software resources run rampant in most corporate shops. It has gotten so pervasive that I.T. shops have resigned themselves to writing disposable software whereby they openly recognize it will become obsolete in a short amount of time.

Let me give you an example, a couple of years ago I met the product manager of one of the more popular PC office suites. We got around to talking about his company's approach to development. He confided in me that they get requests for so many changes that they literally rewrite their product, from scratch, year after year. I was astonished by this admission as I had always had the utmost respect for this firm and thought they were smarter than this.

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This disposable mentality has become so pervasive that I.T. departments are no longer interested in doing what is right, but what is expeditious instead. This is why such things as "Agile" development is in vogue today. We no longer care about building things to last; instead, we do just enough to pacify the moment. In other words, the days of true enterprise-wide systems are a thing of the past. I.T. departments simply do not have the time or inclination to build such systems. Even if they had the desire to do so, I no longer believe they have the knowledge or wherewithal to build major systems anymore.

2. Our sense of professionalism has changed.

With the passing of each decade I have noticed changes in our sense of professionalism, some subtle, some not so subtle. How the "Greatest Generation" perceived professionalism is different than the "Baby Boomers" and Generations X, Y, and Z. Remarkably, all consider themselves to be talented professionals, probably more so than the other generations. I am not here to pass judgment, only to observe the changes:

Scope - the scope of project assignments addressed by each generation has changed over the years, from larger to smaller. Whereas companies in the 1960's and 1970's tackled major systems, today they tend to shy away from such undertakings because they have failed more than they have been succeeded and because of our "disposable" mentality just mentioned. This has led to a "bottom-up" approach to systems development today.

Discipline - there has been a gradual erosion in discipline over the years. To conquer the major systems projects of the past, people realized it was necessary to cooperate and work in a concerted manner. This meant people had to perform in a more uniform and predictable manner in order to attain the desired results. But as the scope of development projects diminished, individual initiative was rewarded over teamwork. Today, discipline has been sacrificed for results. In other words, because of the "disposable" mentality, there is less emphasis today on uniformity, integration and reusability. Interestingly, developers in all of the generations possess a pride in workmanship, but it is a difference in scale. Whereas, developers of yesteryear sweated over the details of an entire system, today's developers sweat over the details of a single program or perhaps just a module within it.

Organization - Again, because of the scope of projects years ago, there was a greater appreciation for the need for organization in order to conquer problems on a team basis. But with the trend towards smaller projects and cheaper computers, developers were given more tools, and fewer rules, to get the job done. This led to the deterioration of teamwork and gave rise to rugged individualism. Now, instead of conforming to organization, developers are permitted to operate as they see fit. To me, the unbridled cockiness of today's developers is both good and bad; good in that they are not afraid of a challenge, but bad in that they are marching to their own drummer.

Accountability - Whereas years ago people had no problem being held accountable for their actions, today they tend to avoid responsibility and prefer to be told what to do. I find this to be a strange paradox, particularly in lieu of my earlier comments regarding the unbridled cockiness of today's workers. Regardless of their enthusiasm, they are reluctant to seek and accept responsibility. Instead, they prefer to take orders thereby deflecting responsibility to someone else (who takes the blame in the event of a problem). I find it remarkable that the younger workers today prefer to be told what to do.

Management Style - since the 1960's we have seen a transition from a Theory Y form of management (bottom-up worker empowerment), to some Theory Z (consensus), to Theory X (top-down dictatorial). Today, "micromanagement" is the norm as opposed to the exception.

Its interesting, we all claim to want to do the right thing, yet we have different interpretations as to what exactly is right. I attribute this to the different perspectives and values of the different generations; they are most definitely not the same and can be attributed to changing socioeconomic conditions. Not surprising, what is perceived as "professional" by the "Greatest Generation" is not the same as what is perceived by Generation Z. As I have discussed in the past, there is a serious generation gap. Which generation possesses the correct interpretation of "professionalism"? That depends on who you talk to. As I said, I am not here to pass judgment but, rather, to observe the phenomenon. Ultimately, our sense of professionalism is based on our sense of quality, resourcefulness, our determination to see a job through to completion, our ethics, and how we deport ourselves in executing a job.

3. There is no sense of history.

One thing that distinguishes the younger generations from its predecessors is its sense of history, or the lack thereof. Very few have an appreciation for developments in the

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I.T. industry. Consequently, there is a tendency to reinvent the wheel every few years in terms of systems and software theory. Many of today's younger I.T. developers genuinely believe the problems they are experiencing today are unique. For example, they believe:

- There is no consistent approach for specifying requirements.
- Users do not know what they want.
- Systems lack integration and proper documentation.
- Data redundancy is a problem between systems.
- Systems are difficult to maintain and modify.
- Projects never come in on time or within budget.

In reality, these problems are as old as systems development. To illustrate, not long ago I got into an argument with some younger developers over how we program today versus how I learned it back in the 1970's. They contended it had changed radically. I contended, the tools and techniques may have changed, but the underlying philosophy of programming has not.

Today, "programming" is considered passé since it is being outsourced overseas. Instead, developers want to call themselves "Solution Providers," "Business Analysts" or "Enterprise Architects," anything to differentiate themselves from programmers. Regardless, unless they are truly doing something different, they're still thinking and acting like programmers.

Bottom-line: there is nothing new in development; and our problems are still the same.

4. Workers are becoming socially dysfunctional.

While the use of technology in our personal and professional lives proliferate, people's interpersonal relations/communications skills are deteriorating at a rapid rate. Simple things like writing a business letter, conducting a meeting, or greeting and networking with others is becoming difficult. I am finding more and more people who prefer to tune into technology and tune out mankind. Consequently, common courtesy, etiquette, and effective communications is being sacrificed, all of which is having an adverse effect on the corporate culture and how we conduct business. This concerns me greatly.

5. Rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

This has been a favorite expression of mine for a number of years and is indicative of the problems people have in establishing priorities. Technology, not management, is leading the country today. To me, this is the tail wagging the dog. Technology will always have a place in business, but we should not be driven by it. Because of our faith in technology there is now a tendency to leap into costly projects before we look. As such, I believe we need more people who truly understand the business and its market as opposed to more technologists. Always remember, an elegant solution to the wrong problem solves nothing.

CONCLUSION

I am often asked by younger people as to the direction of the I.T. industry and what they should be thinking about. I tell them three things; first, this is an illogical industry devoid of commonsense. What was logical in my day will not be the same in theirs. Second, I tell them if they are going to stay in the I.T. industry, they should find a solid niche and immerse themselves in it. And third, be prepared to change and evolve.

My father-in-law always had an interesting expression that I believe is still true; he said, *"We have 30 years to learn, 30 years to earn, and 30 years to burn (the money)."* The most interesting and creative years in our professional lives are in our 20's when we are still learning and have great enthusiasm. In our 30's we establish our niche and concentrate on it. In our 40's we bustle with confidence and establish our stride. Then in our 50's, as I mentioned early on, we begin to go through that awkward stage where we are being questioned by our elders and pushed out by our youngers. After this Twilight Zone period, I'll let you know how the 60's go.

This will be the last of my essays for awhile as I begin working on other opportunities. I'll still be producing my weekly *"Management Visions"* broadcast, but I have to ease up on my writing assignments to focus my energies elsewhere. Not to worry, I will be back from time to time to comment on other management and I.T. related developments. Until then...

Keep the faith.

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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