

IT's Surprises

Romi Mahajan

LONG BEFORE the age of IT, Aristotle said that the “secret of humour is surprise.” Anyone who enjoys humour knows this to be true just as anyone familiar with good IT would have to fundamentally change the formulation with regard to IT, as “the secret of IT is no surprises.” But would one really have to change it, or is IT actually like humour in that both gain their sustenance from the element of surprise? I’ll address that subject in a moment, after some observations from a recent discussion I had.

At the IT Connections 2008 conference, I was a panelist on the topic of “What Keeps CIOs Up at Night?” The entire hour was filled with thoughtful and brisk discussion, but most interesting was that the “usual subjects” (such as aligning IT with business or common scorecards) were dispensed with during the first 15 minutes. Instead, we began discussing basic IT pain points such as

security, privacy, and the possibilities of CIOs waking up in the morning to find the names of their companies all across the front pages, victims of breaches. The conclusion was that the CIO would love to avoid the public eye.

We also discussed the quotidian issues CIOs face – staff reductions, IT automating itself out of existence, dealing with bean-counting CFOs, providing support for users who expect that all will be taken care of for them etc. The underlying theme, however, was about the importance of connecting IT to the business. And while there were some people in the room who felt they did it well, most felt dejected. “People don’t understand our importance,” lamented one person in the audience. Another mentioned how executives in her company want her to automate all IT, indicating to her that they significantly underestimate the complexity of what her team does.

Someone from a 100-person company mentioned that in these difficult economic times, his company is laying off 10% of its workforce. The panelists sighed in empathy, but these sighs gave way to facial contortions when he added that his IT staff had to be pared by one-third. “From three to two,” he said.

“They don’t get what we do,” boomed a voice from the back.

We three panelists came to the same conclusion at once – all of the problems we were discussing (from proving business value to bridging the culture gap between IT folks and other employees) is in large part reducible to a home truth, namely that good IT is invisible. Good IT happens when users don’t even know IT exists.

We had begun this discussion extolling the virtues of avoiding the public eye, and here we were lamenting the fact that so few people actually see what we do. Maybe our certainty about good IT being invisible is, as are so many home truths, actually not true at all.

The importance of good IT is unmistakable; therefore, the need to sustain and nurture IT, too, is unmistakable. We have to overcome the invisibility of IT and surprise people who gain so much from IT, all the while not understanding it. In the box to the left are just a few examples of things you can do to make your presence known.

So discussing IT in the Aristotelian formulation this column started with might be a good idea. The secret of good IT is, indeed, surprise. ■

Strutting IT's stuff

I recommend an immediate guerilla marketing plan to make IT much more visible. Here are some tactics I suggest:

- Send out a monthly update to your workgroup (if you are in a large company) or your entire company (if your enterprise is 500 people or fewer) about the things your team does on a monthly basis. Offer real numbers. The IT manager in my company recently sent out a very powerful e-mail message itemising the number of distribution lists delivering vital targeted information to interested people, the number of messages per month that attempt to infiltrate unsuspecting inboxes under false pretenses, the number of MBs it takes to back up all files so that there’s no bloodshed when a server crashes, and so on.
- Instead of waiting for inbound calls to your help desk, have each help desk member make one outbound call to a user each day, just asking if all is well or if the person needs any help.
- Present what you do at monthly staff meetings.
- Create the IT Narrative: tell a story of what you do and have all IT personnel discuss their roles in terms of that narrative.

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