

# FINDING CURES IN THE JUNGLE

## UNDERSTANDING IT MANAGERS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO VALIUM



IT departments can drive senior casino executives crazy. It often seems to me that it seems to them that IT people are an exotic jungle species. Executives frequently don't understand much of what IT does. IT departments are expensive, and when systems don't work, there can be large consequences. Even the small problems cause heartache. I've seen executives completely distracted when they couldn't synch their PDA. If this is where the examination ends, some form of medication will be required. Hopefully, however, you will find some relief here. The understanding gained from a short time in an IT manager's shoes should reduce the required dose. Furthermore, I believe that because of their experiences, IT management may be an enterprise's rainforest – full of cures for corporate ailments. (According to the Rainforest Foundation, <http://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org>, 25% of the world's prescription medicines sold come from rainforests.)

### The Left Shoe

Stepping into the left shoe, we encounter the analytical requirements for being an IT manager. They operate scores of systems, utilized by hundreds of people throughout the organization. These systems (typically around 100) involve dozens of different types of computers and operating software (e.g. iSeries, PCs running various versions of Windows, Macs, POS terminals, PBXs, slot floor hardware); they have scores of different types of equipment attached to them (e.g. various printer models, scanners, PDAs, touch screens, coin scales); the operator frequently misuses much of the equipment and software; the data contained in them must be secure; and frequently, when a system fails, the impact to the operation is high in terms of costs, risk and inconvenience. These systems range from hotel room technology (e.g. in-room Internet access, movies, telephone, fax,

television check-out); to financial systems (e.g. accounting, cage, credit, purchasing, inventory, payroll, POS, spreadsheet, forecasting); to casino systems (e.g. slot management, player tracking); to communications (e.g. enterprise telecommunications, email, word processing, network management, showroom); interfaces between these disparate systems; the list goes on and on. Each system is an onion of various sizes; a problem with a single entry on a single screen in a single layer, is capable of bringing the whole thing down.

To be effective, the IT manager must have the technical know how to understand at least the system basics in all of these areas: technical

theory, the business methods, security considerations. He or she must also understand the strengths and weaknesses of the vendors that have supplied the systems. The manager also must have a familiarity with the competing systems. To get this knowledge, he or she attends system sales presentations and trade shows; reads multiple trade magazines, system documents, training guides, BLOGS, newsgroups and newsletters. When they think they know the systems they have, they are asked (because we all know that when you can't manage it you automate it) to modify them; create interfaces so they can share data; and invent new ones.



The job requirements have moved well beyond bits and bytes. They must also understand their systems in terms of government requirements for business (e.g. Sarbanes-Oxley, OSHA, privacy), gaming regulations, internal company policies (e.g. document retention, confidentiality, customer service); industry standards (e.g. GAAP, ASCII, UL, ISO, COBIT). Now, with hundreds of patents covering gaming industry technology and methods, they must also give consideration to a swim-in-the-swamp of intellectual property law.

In my experience, IT managers know the most about the operation of more areas of the organization than any other departmental manager; know more about how to develop and implement business processes; and, along with the accounting department, are held to the highest regulatory standards. (I recently spoke with the CIO of a prominent casino company and he told me his organization has five full-time employees dedicated to Sarbanes-Oxley compliance – I wonder how many full time employees the accounting department for the firm has for this purpose?)

### The Right Shoe

Putting the right shoe on, we look at the subjective side. Obviously, the IT manager can't possibly know everything. Therefore, in his or her department, it is quite possible that each subordinate knows better what they should be doing at any given time than the manager. In most casino departments, a supervisor is likely (if not expected) to know at least as much about their subordinates' jobs as they do. In IT, this is not possible because of the many details required to operate a system. They can manage only by exception – when and if a problem surfaces. The essentials for a policy and procedures manual for a food server, for instance, can be well done in a few pages. Microsoft has whole courses and certification programs for network managers – which could cover only how to implement policies and procedures.

Gaming executives are in the entertainment business and by nature extroverts. Techies, however, are often happiest in a cubicle with a 17" screen. In fact, when I leave my computer, my IQ drops 50 points. We, by nature, are introverts.

When IT professionals make the jump to management, their world vision changes. What made them good as technicians (and what they practiced for the preceding years)

hurts them when they move to management. Managers must concentrate on processes and the big picture – IT technicians focus on minutiae. For the IT manager, although their technical knowledge is essential to do the job, they no longer have a technical job. Very little in their background prepares them for the new role. In the beginning of a technical career, there is little time (or, frankly, interest) to learn how to read a financial statement, prepare budgets, manage subordinates, delegate and all of the other business essentials the up-and-coming managers in other departments learn as a matter of course. Probably the most difficult skill, however, is how to be comfortable in a cocktail party where you don't know anyone. When a casino GM holds a staff meeting and looks around the table at the Directors, it is likely that all but one has been trying to get there for their whole career. The IT Director is there because he or she just wanted a raise and frequently thinks back to the good old days when there were no performance reviews, fighting for operating budgets, Sarbanes-Oxley, etc.



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All he or she had to do back then was work all night to fix systems others developed poorly and still others operate poorly.

### Wearing Both Shoes

While answering more than 100 emails per day, taking 25 phone calls per day, attending three or more hours of meetings per day (many of which were called by those outside the department), the IT manager has had to become a great time manager; learn razor sharp project management; learn to create systems for business problems and translate it into geek-speak so technical people can build the solution; manage people who know how to do the job better; manage groups that don't work for him or her; manage those higher in the organization; recruit technical people already in high demand and/or outsource; exist in an organization where technology is not well understood; spend lots of money for what many times are mediocre products that are not well understood; and keep mission critical systems (like slot systems) running 24/7 under strict regulatory and policy requirements.

I find that in the organizations I have worked with, sometimes the best business process development, project management and supervisory talent are hidden away behind the security-locked door in the IT department.

Okay, I've done it. I've led you a little way into the jungle. Think of the medicine the IT manager takes and then look at the medicine he or she can provide to the rest of the organization – even though the bedside manner can use some work.

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