Successful IT

Successful management of Information Technology in an AEC firm requires many talents. It takes a real internal entrepreneur (an *Intra*preneur) to do it all:

Businessperson: IT efforts and investment must be in line with the firm's business goals. Your IT projects must solve real business needs and must have measurable benefits.

Salesperson: Like a good salesperson, you must perceive the needs (both stated and subliminal) of both internal and external 'clients' and create realistic expectations. Communication skills are key.

Production: You must provide visible results quickly, with measurable benefits. Have frequent progress reports on ongoing projects - and make sure you have a schedule and milestones for completion. Failing to plan means planning to fail.

Educator: People learn in different ways. Provide them with the learning resources they need as a part of the rollout process. You'll need reference books, manuals and magazines for some users. Others will do best in a classroom environment. Some require over-the-shoulder mentoring. Some people will flourish in a user group community while others will quietly experiment on the keyboard. In all cases, measure results. Let trainees know your expectations for initial training and continuing education. Have a minimum required education standard for each application.

Remember that education is a continuing process - not a one-shot deal. You will have to train new employees promptly, so communicate with those responsible for new hires. Also, some users will require more than one class. Train people using examples pertinent to their job description, and keep publishing 'hot productivity tips'. Include these tips in your training documentation, and keep that documentation current, on-line, and in printed form (many people use their commuting time to read manuals).

It's not enough for users to 'know' CAD or Word Processing - it's vital that they know the proper way to use them in your firm! Provide enough standards so that others in the firm can pick up a document created by another user and work on it without stumbling over nonstandard techniques.

Monitor: Measure results - and monitor use. Is anyone using that snazzy routine, macro, procedure or program you put together last year? If not, should it be fixed, supplemented or dropped? Don't be afraid to remove unused technology that's not being used - even if you spent a lot of time putting it together. Drop ineffective efforts.

How about the software on your computers? How many people are really using spreadsheets and presentation software at their desktops? Do they really need the whole productivity suite, or just CAD and e-mail?

Marketer: Publish measurable results on a wall chart or firm newsletter. Let people know why ineffective processes were dropped, and what improvement to expect from new efforts.

Fortune Teller: What technologies might benefit the firm in the future - or for a particular client or project? Keep informed about those technologies, and be ready to propose the solution when the opportunity arises. Don't bother with exact pricing and don't even bother selecting the right product or vendor until the need arises - things just change too quickly to get that specific before you're ready to propose it.

Martial Artist: Respond quickly to changing situations (using the information you gather as a fortune teller). Be ready with solutions and alternatives.

Critic: In the old days, you could never be fired for buying IBM computers. Now, it seems S.O.P. is to buy AutoCAD and Microsoft Office, regardless of the needs of your firm. When assessing new solutions (and reassessing old ones) be sure to use measurable criteria. Everyone has their favorite CAD package and Word Processor - but your firm has specific needs. Try to score the possible solutions based on their real benefits, rather than strictly on their market share. Recruit some of your end users to score the solutions while building consensus within this 'implementation team'.

Team Builder: Every IT initiative that impacts the work process needs a champion from management, funding, a schedule, and the involvement of a group of end users. Involving the users in the design of the solution will likely create a better solution, as well as a ready made group of mentors.

When assembling this team of future mentors, aggressively schedule progress meetings. Restate your goals at each meeting to keep the team focused on results, and dissolve the team soon after the project's completion. Consider them a skunkworks team that swoops in to assesses the problem, provide a solution and implement it - then move on.

Even with conventional productivity applications, you're likely to have some particularly inquisitive users. Recruit them to train, educate new users, and lead a users group meeting from time to time. Ask them to be the conduit for enhancement requests for that product.

What other skills do you use to manage IT? - e-mail me at mhogan@id-8.com.

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