

Herding Cats

Managing the entry of new technologies into the firm is much like herding cats.

The Personal Computer was originally brought into the workplace through the back door - without the support of IT. Business information was kept on a mainframe in the back room, and the only way workers could get the information they needed was to request a report from the geeks in IT (I mean the term *geek* affectionately).

Well, some enterprising workers thought they could get their work done more quickly if they had direct access to the information. They bought or requisitioned a personal computer on which they could store data and print spreadsheets from their desk - without going through channels and waiting for the results.

Eventually, the IT department incorporated PC's into the technology environment of the office - to everyone's benefit. It's clear that useful and innovative technology does not always get in through the front door.

In the past few years, you have probably seen lots of new programs and utilities being carried into the office or downloaded to the desktop - both good and bad. You may have found amusing (and allegedly amusing) screen savers and animations, derivatives of 'whack-a-mole' games, Napster (peer-to-peer file sharing) types of utilities and Instant Messaging on the office computers.

You have also seen PIM's (Palm Pilots and Windows CE devices) 'invade' the office, extending your office network to the pockets of the staff.

In addition to managing the official technology infrastructure, it's important to keep an eye on these rogue technologies for a couple of reasons. First, some will sap the resources of your network. Second, some will actually prove useful!

As an example, peer-to-peer file sharing utilities steal a great deal of network bandwidth, as can Instant Messaging. You may decide to take steps to eliminate use of peer-to-peer, but you also may judge that Instant Messaging has real business value and warrant's increasing your bandwidth capacity to accommodate it.

Here are some rogue technologies to keep an eye on:

Instant Messaging: We've explored IM before. Is it a technology that allows teams to work together more effectively, or a time-sapping chat-line? I think we will find more products like this which are focused on the business environment. Hopefully, it will be a front-end for a searchable knowledge-base. On a parallel track is the appearance of little devices like the Blackberry and two-way pagers with tiny keyboards - allowing the user to send and receive messages wirelessly in the middle of business meetings. You may have already seen a Handspring 'Visor' combination phone, PDA and IM platform.

Peer to Peer: Overlaying a manageable framework over the technology made popular through Napster could be a powerful teaming tool for geographically distributed teams - but does distributing the information this way make more sense than centralizing it on a web server? An early entry into this service is Groove at <http://www.groove.net/>

Web Services: A major part of Microsoft's .NET hubbub is in making the creation of 'Web Services' easy and universally consumable. The communication core of that technology is (drum-roll, please) XML! We've explored the promise of XML in this column many times, and it is in no way tied to any particular operating system - but it's implementation allows us to share information between different systems more reliably. We've been hoping that Project Extranet makers would jump on this bandwagon!

Web services can be used within a single intranet to maintain a certain business rule or calculation in one place - and then access that routine from any other application in the business regardless of the programming language involved. This increases maintainability - when your business rules change, you only have to change and debug one program.

There are a few service and information providers who publicly share their information with the world through Web Services - shipping companies have begun to make package tracking and shipment price calculations available through web services, for example. A directory of some of the information available through Web Services can be found at <http://www.xmethods.com/>

Wireless: With the popularity of wireless networking and bluetooth devices, it's probably time to place a wireless network node near the conference room to reduce the cable clutter necessary during presentations. Now if we could only find a wireless LCD projector!

Open Source for Business: One of the worst-kept secrets of the Linux world is that most of the web servers on the Internet are running Linux and Apache Web Server. If you have a business web server, you should consider it. Additionally, a great many workgroup file and email servers run on Linux. Storage Servers that let you add scads of storage to your network by plugging a device anywhere in your network also use the Linux operating system, as well as many manageable hubs and routers you probably have in your wiring closets. You may want to consider it for your supplemental file and web servers.

What other technologies are sneaking in through the back door in your office? - e-mail me at mhogan@id-8.com.

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