Building profits or reducing costs?

Is your Information Technology manager focused on business building exercises, or simply on cutting costs?

The cult cooking show from Japan, the Iron Chef, begins with the quote:

Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.
(Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, The Physiology of Taste, 1825)

I'm not sure I buy that, but I can surely say:

Tell me who your IT manager reports to, and I'll tell you what they do!
(Michael Hogan, Structural Engineer Magazine, October 2002)

If your I. T. Department head reports to the CFO, then undoubtedly the focus is upon reducing costs (a.k.a. increasing efficiency).

If she reports to the CEO or another business-creating executive, then she is focusing on using technology to "grow the business". She is a business enabler.

I'm in favor of I. T. being a part of business strategy. Your I. T. manager should be capable and eager to work closely with marketing, and should attend client meetings regularly. They must know what technology-supported services clients are asking for today, what they are expecting to want in 90 days and what do they envision needing in the next 18 months. They must be able to see what supplemental services can align with the firm's business plan and suggest them to management when the opportunity arises. They must also be able to see what's down the road in your business to assure the proper technology infrastructure is in place when the time comes.

The most valuable role that IT can play is to identify situations where technology can leverage business development and expand client services: to enhance profits and improve customer service.

The second most valuable role is to lead the planning of construction projects at the very beginning. As the person who 'touches' almost every project in the office (through systems and CAD administration duties), and as the person most experienced in applying technological solutions to business practice they see many different strategies applied to many different kinds of projects.

In my experience, the CAD person who starts drawing within 15 minutes of being assigned to a project creates a disorganized and inefficient project that will ultimately require more work and more re-organization than necessary. The proper way to approach a new project is to answer some general questions about the nature of the project. Such questions might include:

DOCUMENT ORGANIZATION: How detailed should the cartoon set be? How will the drawings be organized? What aspects of the design are most likely to change, and how can we organize the information to minimize the impact of that change? What parts of the project will be re-used in other areas, and how can we organize the information to allow for easy replication both initially and when the re-used parts change? How can I make sure the changes made to those parts are replicated to the other instances within this project? Will the different instances REALLY be identical, or just similar? Do they need to be broken into smaller components for efficiency?

APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY: What aspects of the project are better done in Word Processing, Spreadsheets or a database rather than CAD? Should that information be imported into CAD, linked or should it stand as a separate document? If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail, so make sure your team does not exclude technologies like Word Processing and Spreadsheets. Additionally, if you can buy or create a new tool that will save hours on a project it may be worth it to invest in that tool – even if it's thrown away at the end of the project. Tools to consider may include CAD plug-ins, scanning or vectorization tools or services, custom or ad-hoc database tools, etc.

COMMUNICATION AND WORKFLOW: How will the documents be shared with other team members during the design process - both in-house and out-of-house? How many people will be working on the drawings at any one time? How will the work be divided between them, and how should the drawings be organized to accommodate the team size? How often will files be exchanged, and how will you identify and track the changes from version to version? How long will it take to prepare and distribute the exchanged files? What formats will be used for the exchange, and what will be the medium: CD, Email, FTP, Project Extranet? When sharing information between departments or offices, each department needs to be completely responsible for particular layers or files and cannot touch work that is the responsibility of others. You information exchange methodology must support and enforce that segregation of responsibility, as should the structure of your files through the use of reference files and other types of linked documents.

The IT manager or CAD manager should meet with the production team at the very beginning of each project to plant the questions and help the team begin to answer them, suggest alternate strategies, test ideas and assign responsibilities. The manager must touch base with the team from time to time to adjust the strategy to new situations as they arise, and to keep the team on track.

The truism: "When you fail to plan, you plan to fail" applies to project organization as much as it does to building construction.

Make sure your IT manager is not someone who sits in the server room or a back office - they need to be on the front lines: out on the road with marketing, and at the front end of new projects! Make sure they know your most important clients. IT should not be a back-of-house operation!

Who does your IT manager report to? E-mail me at mhogan@id-8.com to let me know.

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