

Media Room Article – IT Seven Deadly Sins

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IT sin No. 1: Lust for new technology

There are many kinds of lust in the IT universe—lust for power, for position, even (gulp) the physical kind. But believe it or not, the most damaging unbridled desire in the IT workplace might just be gadget lust.

The most common expression of lust in IT is the endless pursuit of new technology for the sole purpose of having new technology, notes James J. DeLuccia, author of *IT Compliance and Controls*.

"IT managers mistakenly seek out the latest processors and hardware to 'keep with the times' when, in most cases, the present technology is functioning just fine," he notes.

To illustrate, DeLuccia tells the tale of a consumer-goods manufacturer in the Northeast. Things were going well—operations were running smoothly, service-level agreements were being met, clients were happy. Nonetheless, the company's IT managers were infatuated with new technology and elected to perform a full upgrade to a new Oracle database and Xenon processors.

As with many IT endeavors undertaken in lust for the new, the first thing that happened was that the software the company used to connect to its database didn't support the new version of Oracle. Moreover, the software vendor itself was no longer in business. So, as a result of the upgrade, the company's primary service applications no longer worked.

Worse, the new hardware drew too much power, and the datacenter's electrical and UPS systems weren't up to the task. The result? Power outages. And when you're in the manufacturing business and your conveyor belts stop running, you're dead in the water.

Add to this bill all the long-term costs for hardware and maintenance, infrastructure upgrades, software licenses, energy costs, and training new Oracle DBAs.

"Now they're in a really long spending cycle for something that was completely unnecessary," adds DeLuccia. "If you're going after new technology, it has to be really practical and necessary to the business. Lusting after technology for the sake of desire is a costly sin."

IT sin No. 2: Information gluttony

Not as expensive as lust but more common is the sin of hoarding information. Too often, this unwillingness to share one's expertise is mistakenly believed to be the path to job security.

"I worked with one IT manager who really didn't like to hand out information about the network infrastructure," says Josh Stephens, head geek at SolarWinds, a network management software provider. "He was fine with letting other people handle servers and periphery switches, but he controlled the core of the network and didn't want anyone else to know how it worked. He liked being the go-to guy for this."

One weekend, when the manager was out of the country, the company had an outage. Nobody could bring the system back up because they didn't know how it was set up, says Stephens.

"They had to start from scratch and rebuild the core of the network. It took a day and a half when it probably should have taken an hour," Stephens says. "These people think they look smarter by knowing things nobody else knows. In my experience, you look smarter by sharing information and teaching the people around you."

Besides hoarding information, another common form of IT gluttony is the hoarding of projects, says Marcelo Schnettler, vice president of a small consulting firm in Jersey City, N.J. Some IT managers just can't say no—which can prove disastrous over the long haul.

"Senior management either takes on these projects because they want the attention and funding that comes with trying to get all of these projects done, or they're psychologically unable to turn it down," Schnettler says.

The result: IT departments end up running at emergency maximum levels for every project, then are unable to handle a real emergency because no one's available to attend to it.

"I personally left an IT department that ran on crisis mode for three years," Schnettler says. "Everyone worked 60- to 80-hour weeks, weekends, and God forbid if you tried to take a vacation. As far as I know, it is still running that way today."

IT sin No. 3: Avarice as an action item

When an IT project fails, more often than not, it is due to a lethal combination of arrogance and greed, says Michael Krigsman, CEO of Asuret, a consultancy that specializes in reducing IT project failures.

The problem, says Krigsman, is what he calls "the devil's triangle": naive or arrogant customers who craft hopelessly unrealistic RFPs (requests for proposals); system integrators and consultants who promise to deliver what they know is impossible; and technology providers caught in the middle.

"Even when the integrators go into a project with good faith, they face a conundrum," says Krigsman. "Do they tell the customer that the RFP is doomed to fail and lose the opportunity to win that business? Or do they do what the customer asks and run the risk of failing?"

Failing causes more hassles for integrators, notes Krigsman, but it almost always means more money in their pockets as they rack up hourly surcharges fixing fundamental flaws. "That's where the greed kicks in," he says. Meanwhile, tech providers, loath to alienate the integrators that provide them with cash-paying customers, take a hands-off approach.

According to Krigsman, to overcome inherent greed, you must build incentives for success into the agreement. Consider, for example, an early completion bonus, combined with stiff penalties for projects that run late or over budget.

A side effect of greed is an unwillingness to spend what is needed to get the job done, especially with smaller organizations, says Craig Vickers, a partner at IT Now, a managed IT services provider for small and medium-size businesses.

"One client needed to set up a call center for 50 or 60 people," Vickers says. "We recommended a bonded T1 line for the phones, but they balked at the cost. When we came back a few months later, we opened up the telecom closet and found six DSL modems mounted to the wall. They'd created six different networks, and now they couldn't figure out why their printers wouldn't print. We had to rip them out and throw them away."

This often ends up costing companies more in the long run, he adds.

"A lot of companies think they're saving money, but in the end, they waste more on stuff they throw away instead of buying the things they needed in the first place," he says. "It's all because of greed."

IT sin No. 4: Slothful approaches to IT

IT professionals work hard—that's a given. But all too often, they're unwilling to step outside their comfort zones or go the extra mile. Despite their hard work, IT managers often commit the sin of sloth by not doing the right things for the business.

"IT people have a fundamental belief that they're not doing anything wrong," says Tony Fisher, CEO of data-quality specialists DataFlux. "That's because they lack an understanding of the business at large. You end up with an environment where the IT manager sits in his office naive and happy, thinking he's doing all the right things, reading all the right journals, and executing everything according to specs that have everything to do with technology but little to do with the business."

For example, Fisher says this year's mortgage debt crisis might not have been so severe if the IT organizations in lending institutions had paid more attention to data quality and accuracy.

"A lot of the data collected from mortgage buyers was incorrect," says Fisher. "There are easy technical ways to validate this information and incorporate it into the system, but it was never done. They just took the information provided at face value. The mortgages were wrapped up in financial packages and sold to mutual funds and banks, but without any attempt to validate whether they were good financial

purchases. Whether this was the fault of the business or IT is hard to say. But it's a problem technology could have solved."

The ways sloth can hurt IT departments is almost endless—from lazy oversight of outsourcing arrangements to lackadaisical compliance auditing, inadequate data security, or bare-bones network monitoring.

"One very large broadband provider in the Northeast had implemented a very expensive network monitoring system they knew wasn't working right but did nothing about it," notes SolarWinds' Stephens. "Then one day, they had an outage affecting over a million people. They had no idea what was happening until their customers started calling them. If they'd implemented even a basic working NMS network monitoring system, they'd have treated their customers a lot better."

Given the current economic conditions, now is an especially good time to be proactive and busy, says Dave Taylor, co-founder of Sparxent, an IT management solutions vendor.

"During an economic downturn, it becomes more important than ever for IT people's plates to be very full," he says. "If you've been putting off a big project for a while because you were reluctant to spend the hours it takes to get it done, then now is the time to tackle it. Show the company there's no hint of sloth in your IT department and you're willing to put in the long hours just to save the company money in the long haul."

IT sin No. 5. In-house envy

Fiefdoms, kingdoms, and silos have a tendency to develop over time as a company matures, says author DeLuccia. In other words, people stop sharing information and instead spend most of their time protecting their own turf and envying the status or budgets of others. The result? Duplication, lack of transparency, and culture-destroying politics that can cripple an organization, he says.

DeLuccia himself was exposed to the classic example of IT envy when he worked with a global-industrial construction equipment maker. A manager who ran a substantial part of the company's IT operations continuously complained that other divisions had better metrics and superior funding.

"It was his mantra: 'I can't do this because they have a bigger budget, and this is why our operations are failing,'" DeLuccia says.

A third-party audit revealed that the manager's group was continually missing its service-level agreements and not operating as a proper business unit. As a result, the IT manager was let go, and his team was dismantled, DeLuccia says.

"Envy was his downfall," he says. "Instead of being more proactive and saying, 'Here's what we need to do to fix these problems,' he focused all of his attention on what other people had."

SolarWinds' Stevens says similar things happen in many IT organizations, both large and small.

"IT managers are always looking to take responsibility from other IT people in the organization," he says. "The infrastructure guy wants to manage servers; the server guy wants to also be the database administrator. They continually seek more and more responsibility to the point where they're no longer working for the organization; they're just working to take each others' jobs."

IT sin No. 6: Wrath management

Call it management by intimidation. But losing one's head at high volume is no way for an IT manager to motivate his or her troops.

"I think CIO wrath is probably the most damaging of the sins," says Marcelo Schnettler. "They demoralize and often foster the growth of a 'cover your ass' mentality within an IT department that leads to finger-pointing and a lack of collaboration."

Schnettler, who served under six CIOs in six years at various companies, says almost all of them blew up in public at one time or another. Once during a large systems outage, a CIO charged into the cubicle of the person he thought was responsible and chewed him out using language that would curl a sailor's ears, he says. "When he was done, he looked over the cubicles and said, 'Now who am I going to rip a new ***hole next?'"

Inexperienced or immature IT managers throw temper tantrums when they're forced to admit that computers are not magic and that they should have listened to steadier heads when they had the chance, notes Bill Horne, a computer and networking consultant who has worked for many years in the IT and engineering departments of one of the nation's largest telcos.

"I had a manager once demand that our coders accomplish a certain task within record-breaking time," says Horne. "He didn't understand that because a unionized workforce was involved in testing the application, it could be done only if the union workers were available to do it—during business hours, Monday through Friday.

"When we got up to leave on Friday evening, he went off like Vesuvius," Horne continues. "Threw a tantrum and screamed at us that we had to work through the entire weekend to make our deadline. The union workers literally laughed in his face and said, 'Take it up with the stop steward. See you on Monday.' He thought he could simply order us to solve the problem."

Bottom line: That deadline was missed—but the manager wasn't when he was transferred seven months later to a less demanding position.

IT sin No. 7: Pride creep

Pride manifests as sin when it blinds IT managers into thinking they know everything they need to know—even when they know very little about a given topic.

"Pride implies a state of completion and achievement," says DeLuccia. "It exposes an organization more to competitors and nastier threats than any other form of sin."



The arrogance and overconfidence that stem from pride can cost an organization millions, notes Asuret's Krigsman.

"There was this multibillion-dollar manufacturer with a huge distribution channel," he says. "Rather than license an off-the-shelf ERP system, they built their own. The problem was that the CIO didn't believe in QA. So they literally rolled it out to hundreds of retail locations without any testing. He wasn't doing it to intentionally hurt people. He did it simply because he had the power to do it."

After pouring millions of dollars down the drain, the project was ultimately canceled, and project team members were laid off, Krigsman adds.

One of the biggest problems is tech managers who think they're capable of doing something themselves when really they aren't, says IT Now's Vickers.

"We've gone into companies talking about the importance of managed backups. They say it's not a problem," Vickers says. "When we go look, we find no RAID systems and no backups for the past three months. Backup is just something people are doing on their own."

The solution: generous doses of humility and the manager's willingness to accept responsibility for their failings, says Sparxent's Taylor.

"IT people need to swallow their pride and be more open about mistakes they've made in the past," he says. "The intelligent IT director needs to get lined up on the side of the CEO and the CFO. The best way to do this is to be very open about IT successes—and failures. It does indeed take swallowing some pride, but admitting that projects in the past failed to return on the investment will help business owners realize the IT director cares about driving the overall success of the business."

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