

FINDING UNICORNS

Do you know what a Unicorn is? Most people do, it is a horse type creature with a big horn growing out of it's forehead. It is supposed to be able to cure any disease with the horn while only virgins are able to ride them (bet you didn't know the last fact). Oh, and one last thing, this bit is very important,.. they do not exist. You may know what a unicorn is, but you will never see one, because they do not exist. Seriously though, this is important, ... they do not exist.

Do you know what a IT manager is? Most people do, it is a man type creature able to write project plans, manage staff, indulge management, do tenders, policies, agreements, SLA's. It is supposed to be able to guide a companies IT strategy towards a more effective future and be all things to all people. Oh, and one last thing (you know whats coming don't you?) ... they also do not exist. You may think you do, but they don't.

I have had this conversation with many people, and I have yet to be proven wrong due to one single inescapable fact - change. Let me use an example, how much has the basic concept of coding changed? Yes I know languages are different, but every single one I have coded in (5 at last count) had things like an if statement, a while loop, the idea of procedures, file accesses, etc. You could have been a programmer for the last time five years ago and you would not find it too hard to understand what people are doing now. Or databases, how different are the fundamentals of relational databases? Or how difficult is it to write SQL for different databases once you know what you are doing? How much has this changed in the last 5 years? Not much. And the same is true for much a business. Yes I know things are updated, new SQL statements, new tax laws, new advertising methods, but most of these are not fundamental changes. You could have done this stuff years ago and still be able to effectively manage people in your field simply because you would know and understand what they do, even if you are not constantly involved with it on a daily basis (because of paperwork and politics).

Now this is where IT is different. Let me use this as an example, if you had to install a firewall the best way that it could be done 3 years ago, and still claim that it was even partly effective today, most IT security people would ... struggle to believe that. If you are making choices on what Network operating System to use based on your experience of 2 years ago, let me tell you things have changed. If you are deploying IT security measures based upon what you knew 1 year ago, you are in trouble.

You see IT is all about change, all about pushing the envelope. Systems and concepts have changed physically, fundamentally and conceptually. We look at what we did 3 years ago and think about how slow, how clunky that was. Well in 3 years time, we will be doing the same thing. Now you take one of these IT-type people, pull him out of this daily learning curve, give him paperwork to do - policies and project plans to keep him busy. Tell him to deal with the "high level" stuff. Keep him occupied with politics - chasing around three committees to approve the plan to buy a server. Then you tell this person to direct your IT strategy, tell him to chart the best way forward, tell him to optimize the companies investment in IT - all without sacrificing any of the paperwork and politics of course. You know what is going to happen? A disaster. If you are lucky he will know enough about the hole he is in to ask the people who know whats going on and hope like hell they do not have their own axe to grind. If you are unlucky, your boy reckons he knows it all and sends your IT section to hell in a hand basket.

You see in IT you have to keep on top of the latest happenings or you will not know the best way forward, you will not know what has changed or whats looks like it is coming. Put bluntly, IT knowledge has an exceptionally short shelf life. Companies ignore that fact at their peril. But yet they do, [Dilbert](#) is full of stories inspired by such companies. And the cycle of change is only getting quicker.

So businesses, stop looking at IT like just another one of your departments. If you want IT to do well, treat it like IT. If you want to run IT like accounts, or sales, or a factory floor... then do not be surprised when IT does not do well. Someone once said that if you treat people like monkeys, thats what you get. The same principle holds true, each business section is different, recognize that and deal with it. And IT managers, stop thinking that you can keep up to date with 10 minutes a day reading the latest IT magazine or paper, be honest enough with yourself to realize that if you cannot step in and fill in any gap in your team that may occur when something happens (crisis, deadline, sickness, etc), then as far as I am concerned you should not be there, you are nothing but a waste of

money and space.

Thats why I say that it is the pace of change in the IT industry that makes the traditional business role of a manger useless in an IT environment, and that is also why I say, if you ever find such a person... please ask him where he stables his unicorn - I would love to get a picture.