

## Childhood's End?

Recently, Jeanne W. Ross and Peter Weill published an article with the attention-grabbing title "Six IT Decisions Your IT People Shouldn't Make."<sup>1</sup> In this *Harvard Business Review* piece, Ross and Weill argue that today's chief executives must personally exercise leadership in key areas related to the management and socialization of information technology. Their suggestion is similar to that in the recent television commercial that features a frustrated CEO who, confronted with a network outage, asks her team, "Whose problem is this?" The answer to the CEO is, of course, "It's your problem." This ad, and the article by Ross and Weill, suggest another possible passage in the life of technology in the academy: an end to the childhood in which technology is dominantly the purview of technologists.

Ross and Weill's article is important for many reasons. First, as senior scientists at MIT's Center for Information Systems Research, the authors bring the credibility of their work with over one thousand senior managers to bear on this topic. Second, the publication of the article comes at a time when the anticipated blurring of the boundaries between business and e-business and learning and e-learning has become widely apparent. And third, the appearance of this article in *Harvard Business Review* heralds (or creates) a possible inflection point in CEOs' thinking about the role of information technology and IT leaders in the business enterprise.

A review of the professional literature on information technology reveals an important strand. Since the time that the first general-purpose computer was pow-

Illustration by Steve McCracken, © 2003



ered up in 1948, computer professionals, visionaries, pundits, and science fiction writers have promoted the time when information technology would be friendly, pervasive, interconnected, and critical to every sphere of human activity. The realization of this dream meant, necessarily, that information technology would no longer be the exclusive—or even dominant—domain of the technologists. Computers were to become everyday objects. It is no accident that the first household

robots have been created in the form of the family dog.

In business, in government, and in academia, information technology has been an instrument of change, and technologists have become the *agents provocateurs* of their organizations, agencies, and institutions. As such, technologists have been lauded when institutional transformations occur (almost never) or vilified when they fail to occur (frequently). Like Imperial Romans, higher education's

business owners—the deans, department chairs, provosts, senate leaders, and presidents—have enjoyed ringside seats to watch as technologists battle in the epic struggle between change and constancy. Some technologists, bestowed with robust survival instincts, have found allies among other “expendables”: business officers, registrars, and others who are charged with making change (but who are relatively powerless to effect it). Others have become relentlessly tactical, defining success as implementing modest changes on time and on budget. Of course, still other technologists have taken refuge in the complex and the obscure, retreating to areas of technical arcana that allow them to substitute intellectual smugness for institutional relevance.

And now Ross and Weill tell us, “CEOs, COOs, CFOs . . . haven’t realized much business value from the high priced technology that they have installed.” Variations on this theme are sounded nearly daily among higher education’s presidents, business officers, and academic leadership. As budgets tighten, the theme will assume greater moment. This observation suggests a number of explanations: (1) IT executives (seduced by evil and mercenary IT vendors) collectively seduced their innocent leaders with unrealistic tales of IT-enabled change; (2) IT-enabled changes have occurred but are somehow not good enough or not big enough to please; or (3) institutional change is really a general management responsibility that has been largely abdicated by leaders in industry, government, and higher education alike.

Ross and Weill suggest that many notable IT “snafus” result from top management’s failure to realize “that adopting the systems posed a business—not just a technological—challenge.” Further, leaders “failed to take responsibility for the organizational and business process changes that the systems required.” The authors document numerous cases in which the existence or nonexistence of engaged non-IT leaders made the critical difference in the success or failure of an IT project.

Can we rejoice in these findings? Any IT executive in higher education has long understood the criticality of an active and

engaged leadership in the success of an enterprise-wide technology initiative. Thus, signaling the community of senior executives through *Harvard Business Review* is a breakthrough and may in fact suggest an end to IT’s childhood and a new maturity in IT’s management. On the other hand, Ross and Weill’s article leaves important issues unaddressed. For example, can “business owners” and IT executives craft new governance models that will work? Can higher education’s leaders be expected to stake their careers on risky IT-dependent change initiatives? Can IT leaders detail and communicate the real expected value of IT investments in terms that have meaning within the academy? In essence, can institutional “business owners” and IT leaders forge a genuine partnership that includes shared risk, shared goals, and shared accountability for successes and failures? Can this be done with the loosely coupled realities of shared governance?

Ross and Weill have done a great service by clearly revealing the “elephant in the room.” Now a new dialogue among higher education’s academic leaders, business leaders, and technologists can commence. The challenge is enormous, and no one is innocent. Indeed, institutional leaders and trustees must acknowledge that information technology has enabled huge positive changes. We simply do not live or learn the way we used to. And in the main, this is better. IT leaders, for their part, must acknowledge that not every new shiny thing that catches their attention can become part of the institutional legacy and that making the “business case” means doing more than simply uttering strings of acronyms or warning about competitors’ advances.

IT’s childhood is ending. With it must end a host of roles, behaviors, and expectations that work in childhood but that may not work so well in adolescence (no, we’re probably not yet ready for the jump to adulthood).

This could get interesting.

**Note**

1. Jeanne W. Ross and Peter Weill, “Six IT Decisions Your IT People Shouldn’t Make,” *Harvard Business Review*, November 2002, 85–91.

**Richard N. Katz is Vice President of EDUCAUSE.**

# EDUCAUSE

Why IT Matters to Higher Education

**PUBLISHER/EDITOR**

D. Teddy Diggs

**ADVERTISING**

Greg Farman, Advertising Director  
Geri Farman, Advertising Manager

**DESIGN AND PRODUCTION**

The Magazine Group  
Jeff Kibler, Art Director  
Soliteir Jaeger, Production Manager

**DEPARTMENT EDITORS**

**E-Content:**  
Deanna B. Marcum, Council on Library and Information Resources

**New Horizons:**

Peter M. Siegel, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

**policy@edu:**

Mark Luker, EDUCAUSE

**techwatch:**

Gregory Dobbin, EDUCAUSE

**Viewpoints:**

Gregory A. Jackson, University of Chicago

**EDUCAUSE DIRECTOR OF PUBLISHING**

Nancy Hays

*EDUCAUSE Review* is the general-interest, bimonthly magazine published by EDUCAUSE. With a publication base of 18,000, *EDUCAUSE Review* is sent to EDUCAUSE member representatives as well as to presidents/chancellors, senior academic and administrative leaders, non-IT staff, faculty in all disciplines, librarians, and corporations. It takes a broad look at current developments and trends in information technology, what these mean for higher education, and how they may affect the college/university as a whole.

EDUCAUSE and *EDUCAUSE Review* are registered trademarks. Copyright © 2003 by EDUCAUSE. Materials may be photocopied for noncommercial use without written permission provided appropriate credit is given to both *EDUCAUSE Review* and the author(s). Permission to republish must be sought in writing (contact editor@educause.edu). Statements of fact or opinion are made on the responsibility of the authors alone and do not imply an opinion on the part of the EDUCAUSE Board of Directors, staff, or members. For more information about copyright, see <<http://www.educause.edu/copyright.html>>.



4772 Walnut St, Ste 206  
Boulder, CO 80301-2538  
phone: 303-449-4430; fax: 303-440-0461  
info@educause.edu  
<http://www.educause.edu/>

For subscription information, contact EDUCAUSE: 303-449-4430 (phone) or 303-440-0461 (fax) or <er-subs@educause.edu>. For advertising information, phone 512-335-2286, or fax 512-233-2970, or send e-mail to <advertising@educause.edu>. Send editorial submissions or comments to <editor@educause.edu>.

*EDUCAUSE Review* is also available online at <<http://www.educause.edu/pub/er/>>.