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By Brian L. Hawkins

HABITS OF SUCCESSFUL IT PROFESSIONALS

In all positions, professionals must continue to develop their skills. The higher ed IT profession is no exception. However, many of these skills should be developed progressively. If IT professionals can start learning these skills early in their career, they will have a good chance of turning the skills into habits—and of becoming successful and effective IT professionals. Below I have identified twelve such habits, involving objectives or skills that I feel are key to the success of IT professionals.¹

*Brian L. Hawkins is President of EDUCAUSE. A version of this article will be published as a chapter in the upcoming book *Cultivating Careers: Professional Development for Campus IT* (Cynthia Golden, ed.) to be published by EDUCAUSE in Spring 2006.*

1. They Are Multilingual

Many years ago, I was interviewing for a CIO position at Brown University. Howard Swearer, the president of Brown at that time, asked me: “What is the greatest strength that you would bring to the position?” I contemplated for a moment and answered: “I am multilingual.” He stared at me for a moment, as if I had lost my mind entirely. I proceeded to explain that I was capable of effectively communicating with faculty, with students, with vendors, with trustees, and with other administrators. I was not trying to be flip-pant: the CIO needs to be able to interact effectively and be respected by a variety of quite disparate audiences.

Effectiveness of interaction, especially on campus, is based on whether or not an individual can understand the concerns and problems being faced by a particular user, as well as that user’s professional dilemmas. This is true on the academic side of the house, where one needs to understand the technology requirements and problems of a particle physicist, a



classicist, or an economist. There are different needs for data files, transmission speeds, and many other IT issues that directly affect the scholarship of these varying disciplines. The ability to understand some of these scholarly requirements is essential to being perceived as a partner in the academic enterprise rather than just as some bureaucrat who has responsibility for the IT environment on campus.

The same is true on the administrative side of the house. If the IT professional has some working knowledge of the challenges facing financial aid, the auditor, or the admissions office, the sense of “being in this together” increases substantially. The problem is that gaining this working knowledge takes time—time spent listening to users and reading and following key issues in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or other news sources—in order to become and then stay informed on current challenges. Trying to become an expert in all of these areas is completely unrealistic, but showing an interest in coming up to some basic speed on key issues and concerns provides an entrée that can set the stage for the IT professional—and the technology organization that he or she represents—to be perceived as a partner in the larger enterprise.

2. They Avoid the Unconscious Conspiracy

In the absolutely terrific book *Why Leaders Can't Lead: The Unconscious Conspiracy Continues*, Warren Bennis explains that leaders are impaired—if not prevented—in leading because they become consumed by the routine. He suggests that individuals with the full capability to lead their organizations often fail because

they drown in the tidal waves of minutia, mundane details, and dailiness associated with their jobs, which take all of their time and energy. There is not adequate time left to think about the bigger issues, to do the necessary visioning for their organizations, and to look over the horizon. All of us have certainly felt that our jobs are a bit overwhelming, but if we succumb to these pressures and daily issues, and fail to do this thinking about the longer term and the strategic issues, we will fail as leaders and as IT professionals. So, how do we find the time and prioritize in a fashion that allows us to keep the “unconscious conspiracy” at bay?

Bennis provides a number of strategies for doing this, including designating the time to do this broader thinking. That means blocking time on the calendar and not just grabbing time when it presents itself. For me, this time is early in the morning, when nobody is around to drop in the office, when nobody calls on the phone, and when I am fresh and rested. Others will find their own times and rhythms for such thinking, but one thing is clear: it needs to be blocked time; if it's not, other tasks will soak up all the available time.

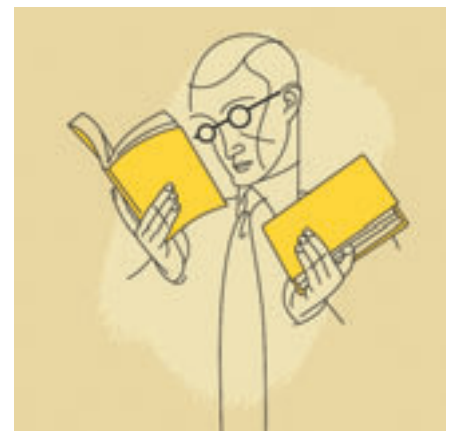
Bennis also suggests interacting with people other than your closest professional colleagues, or what he refers to as the “palace guard”: those who may often think like you do, who may want to please you, and who may have a vested interest in things staying the way they are. This too necessitates time—time to have coffee or lunch or just to visit with members of various campus committees, with staff in administrative offices, and with faculty critics. But these discussions can yield



different and potentially new perspectives, as well as increasing your knowledge of other areas.

3. They Read Broadly

Perhaps the most important strategy that Bennis suggests for leaders is to change their reading habits. What leaders read in many ways shapes their views on issues, and although reading also takes time, it is essential to understanding what is routine and what is strategic and to developing a broader view of the environmental factors that are affecting the technology, the campus, and higher education as a whole.



In many ways, the things people read define their worldview and the reality they use to define their professional strategies and directions. A person who aspires to a higher position or to a more responsible position needs to have a broader understanding of higher education, technology, and best practices in a variety of information resource arenas. Some suggestions are to find out what other higher education leaders are reading, review the new books in the *Chronicle* listing, and see what is new and relevant in periodicals such as *Harvard Business Review*, *Change*, *Business Officer*, and of course *EDUCAUSE Review*.

Keeping up-to-date with happenings in higher education means reading most if not all of the major sections of the *Chronicle*, not just the section or the articles in a specific professional area. To achieve the breadth needed for a successful IT career, one should have at least an awareness, if not a working understanding, of all areas in the college or university—including

financial aid, athletics, and international concerns. Only by having this awareness can an IT professional more fully appreciate the myriad pressures that the senior administration is trying to balance, as well as those areas in which new technologies or approaches may assist the campus more broadly. A variety of electronic digests also cover key breaking stories and challenges and can be an easy way to keep in touch with the complexities of campus life and scholarship. In addition, reading the letters to the editor or participating (or simply lurking) on listservs or blogs about higher education issues can greatly assist in understanding higher ed issues.

Finally, a word about career planning is in order. Even if you are not currently looking for a new position, it is worthwhile to explore the relevant job postings in the *Chronicle* or on the EDUCAUSE Web site. Understanding the job requirements (and also the changing nature of these requirements) provides a better idea of what search committees are looking for in given positions. By reading these, employees are not being disloyal to their institution but are trying to get a better understanding of areas in which to grow and develop. Similarly, reading the "Gazette" section of the *Chronicle* reveals patterns of where people are moving from and to, leading to a better understanding of the boundaries that are capable of being crossed and of how career mobility is working in today's environment.

4. They Educate Others about Information-Based Organizations

IT professionals need to actively help others understand the ways that the new technologies and new information flows are affecting the very essence of the college or university. This applies especially to the process of educating senior institutional officers. Today's institutional leaders need to know that they are responsible for more than the financial and human resources. They also are responsible for the information resources under their control. This is a relatively new phenomenon, and it is one that needs to be embraced by all senior officers. The enterprise systems that so many campuses have implemented are beginning to redefine information assets, in that particular



information is no longer considered (or at least should not be considered) "the registrar's information" or the "admission director's information." Instead, such information should be looked on as the institution's information.

Thinking of information as an institutional asset is critical to effectively managing today's complex institutions of higher education. However, all too often, the senior institutional officers would like to keep the issues of technology and information off of their desks and to relegate these issues to the CIO or to other specialized professionals. To quote from an earlier article: "On most campuses, a significant amount of continuing education needs to be provided so that the entire senior team can assume these new responsibilities. The CIO must be integrally involved in shaping this education, but ultimately the campus strategy and the commitment of the executive team to work collaboratively will be critical. Although higher education has historically been organized in vertical administrative structures, technology is a cross-cutting function, creating horizontal interdependencies that require administrators to manage these campus-wide functions. This interdependent and nonhierarchical characteristic of information technology implies that campus leadership teams need to develop competencies within their own functional areas and need to work jointly in defining the strategic value of IT investments—in short, defining information technology in terms of its instrumentality rather than as a cost center."²

Institutional leaders must understand that our colleges and universities are

information-based organizations, that technology facilitates highly interdependent relationships between organizational units, and that the traditional stovepiped or vertical structures are inadequate to manage the information-based institution. This educational responsibility is an obligation that all IT professionals need to actively assume.

5. They Understand the Limits of Their Advocacy

Effective IT professionals need to make clear their understanding that the college or university has other priorities with which it must deal. Others at the decision-making table need to know that the IT professional has an appreciation for and understanding of some of their problems and issues. In trying to advance particular goals, the IT professional should consider reducing their importance if other campus needs take precedence. In the management concept known as *suboptimization*, a given unit of an organization advances as premier in an organization that is not fully achieving its overall goals. For example, an automobile manufacturer that has the best research and development unit in the world but that has marginal sales and marketing and is therefore failing economically is experiencing suboptimization. Maximizing a subunit at the expense of the institution is improper and foolhardy. In advancing a given IT effort or other initiative, the IT professional must do so fully in support of the primary goals and objectives of the institution and not just to advance the IT unit for its own sake.

Many in the campus community already perceive IT as a black hole that will



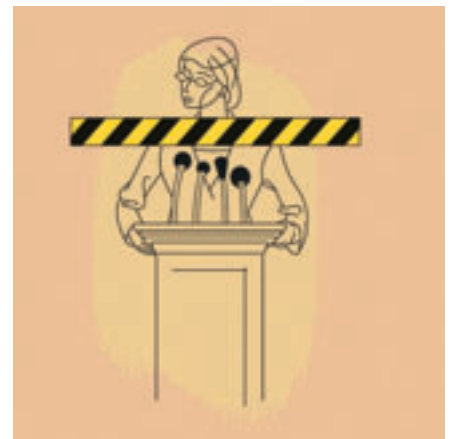
potentially absorb all of the resources of the college or university. Careful thought must be given to each initiative and to how each can advance the mission of the institution. Then, and only then, will such efforts gain the institutional support that is essential. To appear to be (or, worse yet, to actually be) selfish in looking for resources from the institution is perhaps the quickest way to lose campus credibility. Certainly, one needs to be thorough and up-front about the resources that are necessary to advance a given project, but all proposals must be cast within the parameters of institutional goals. Discussing and building support for this goal of alignment is a critical part of being an effective IT leader.

6. They Are Cautious When Speaking Publicly

With the increasing dependency of colleges and universities on information technology and on accessing information electronically, there is often public interest in what campuses are doing with this technology and information. There also

is a downside to this public interest. When campuses experience security failures or when confidential information has been exposed, IT professionals are called on to speak to reporters and other officials. These are often ticklish situations. Although most IT professionals have not been trained in this arena, it is often thrust upon them, and they need to be cautious that using part of their “fifteen minutes of fame” does not result in infamy.

If possible, the IT professional should tell immediate superiors and possibly other senior officers that he or she is being asked to speak to the press on a given issue, since the senior leaders may prefer to have someone else handle such matters. Sometimes this advance notice is impossible, of course. If caught in the position of making public statements, the IT professional should make sure these other campus officers know immediately. If sensitive information is involved and the reporter does not honor a request to go off the record, the IT professional needs to know which information can go



public and should be careful not to volunteer too much information, especially if the issue involves a sensitive or potentially embarrassing circumstance for the institution.

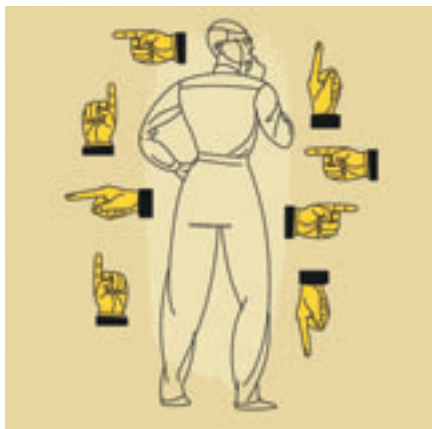
Certainly, not all encounters with the press are highly volatile situations, but reporters are often looking to make a story rather than to educate the community. IT professionals need to proceed cautiously and should remember not to use too much jargon. The reporters probably do

not know even the basics about technology, nor will they have done all that much homework on a topic. The IT professional needs to identify key highlights and principles and not make too many clarifications or get too detailed, even if the simplistic version isn't 100 percent accurate technically. Reporters can be referred to particular policies or other documents that may be available electronically. On the other hand, they are not likely to fully digest large amounts of information and may select the wrong points unless the IT professional has carefully highlighted the most important issues.

It is also wise not to avoid reporters, since this will likely only motivate them to pursue the topic more vigorously. This is probably most true of student reporters on campus. They are part of the campus constituency, and it is wise to treat them with respect and courtesy. Remember that old adage by Mark Twain: "You should never pick a fight with a person who buys ink by the barrel." Talking with the media is a skill that needs to be developed, ideally in an *a priori* manner, before a crisis arises. During nonpressured times, the institutional public relations professionals can explain the desired behavior for these situations. Also, in an informative *EQ* article, Kandice Salomone and Paul Gandel provide a host of useful bits of advice in this arena.³

7. They Cultivate Their Advisory Committees

Advisory committees can be extraordinarily helpful to and an enormous ally of IT professionals, but they can also be a nightmare if not managed effectively. As

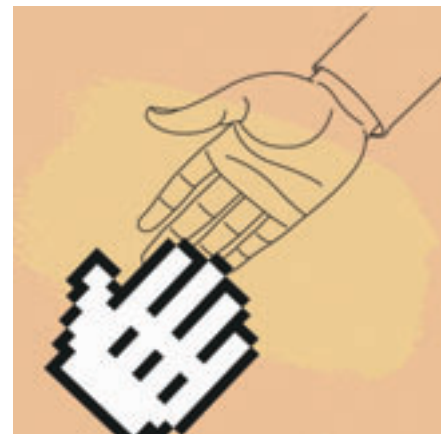


with the other skills noted above, there is no defined curriculum for learning to work with advisory committees. First of all, though called *advisory* committees, in reality these groups are more about governance than advice. Committee members are the designated voice of key constituencies, and they need to be heeded. When posing key issues and questions to such groups, the IT professional needs to be prepared to do something with the information they provide or, at least, to explain why their advice has not been followed. Otherwise, they will eventually cease to participate meaningfully and will drop out; or, worse yet, they may become active adversaries. The IT professional should consider consulting with the chair and perhaps also a number of key members offline, not just when an official meeting is scheduled. This may seem Machiavellian, but it is important to take advantage of the power of these governance structures. This means cultivating the relationships and making sure the committee members are well-informed emissaries for the committee's function.

Generally, the advisory committee is not a working group. Its purpose is to help define direction and policy—not to do the work of the IT service unit or to act as the *de facto* manager of this unit. The committee members need to know what they are to do and need to have a clear mandate or charge, which probably cannot be repeated too many times. They need to know that governance is not management and that their responsibilities are directional, not operational. For the IT professional, this means setting some clear boundaries, without in any way intimating that the committee members need to mind their own business. Ideally such committees will reflect the breadth of the campus. All too often such groups are populated by zealots who may have in-depth knowledge but who are also likely to have particular axes to grind. Representation of the general campus and of the needs of various academic or administrative sectors is a much preferred approach. For more on this topic, William H. Pritchard has written an excellent *EQ* article that summarizes some very good advice regarding campus advisory committees.⁴

8. They Are Enablers

The goals of any organizational leader in a service role, whether in IT or not, should be to enable others to accomplish their goals. All IT professionals are ultimately in the "service" business—assisting students, faculty, and staff to achieve their goals, since IT is ultimately a means to an end and not an end in and of itself. The job of the IT professional is to help others on campus figure out how the information or the technology can allow them to better serve the missions of their units and, ultimately, the campus. This can be accomplished more effectively if the IT professional is perceived as assisting and acting in partnership with the end user. Many of the suggestions in this



article are intended to assist the IT professional in better understanding and better appreciating the problems faced by these end users. On the other hand, the IT professional needs to be careful not to create the impression that he or she understands the problem as well as or better than the end users, who have spent their careers in a particular area of expertise. The IT professional needs to be a partner and to avoid stepping on the toes of those who are ultimately responsible for a given area.

9. They Don't Whine

At one time or another, everyone has felt beaten down and frustrated by the demands, changing directions, and perceived injustices of the organizational existence. This is natural, not at all uncommon, and simply part of living and participating in the social organizational structure of the college or university. We



may not agree with some new directions being taken. We may think a boss is stupid. We may feel that some things are not fair and should not have occurred. The challenge that all of us face is how we go about combatting or reacting to these situations.

An all-too-common method for dealing with such things is to whine. Whining diminishes the whiner and seldom accomplishes anything constructive. Whiners—who talk incessantly about how bad things are, why things aren't fair, how terrible everything is, and how much better things are someplace else—do themselves and the whole organization a disservice. If things are bad and need changing, it is up to the IT professional to identify alternative courses of action, new directions, or different ways of doing more with less. If other options have been tried and these attempts rejected, and if the IT professional feels there is a greener pasture elsewhere, then he or she should go find it. Unfortunately, many whiners don't want to create new options. Others cannot move on. But if they stay and continue to whine, they need to realize that they are hurting the credibility of their unit, and potentially the whole organization, since other people in the organization will come to discount the whiners (and their units) even if they had a legitimate point. Such behavior gives the impression—or, perhaps, reinforces the reality—that this person and his or her unit is not a team player and is not trying to help the organization do its very best in difficult circumstances.

10. They Are Generalists

One of the challenges that IT professionals must face is that they enter their careers as specialists, with much of their

professional identity and self-concept based on the fact that they are highly skilled and knowledgeable about a given, albeit limited, area of expertise. As they mature in the IT profession, they must give up some of the security that this specialized identity has provided and become more rounded, more of a generalist, in order to tackle problems that cut across specialized and professional boundaries and silos. As the IT professional moves up the organizational ladder, he or she must develop the mindset, the worldview, and the skills of a generalist in order to be successful. This isn't always comfortable, but it is essential. Being—and being perceived as—a member of the broader academic community, not just a niche player, gives a person standing and credibility in the decision-making process within any college or university.

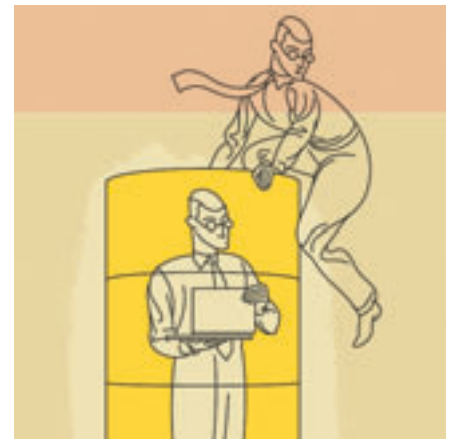
In becoming generalists, IT professionals essentially blur the edges, making



them less identifiable as a given “type” sitting at the table. If someone is perceived as a “techie” or a librarian and reinforces those stereotypes, that person is likely to be anticipated and potentially dismissed, since the other decision-makers may think that he or she is bringing a single mindset and perspective to the table. IT professionals need to break out of these stereotypes, drawing on some of the suggestions previously identified in this article, in order to enhance both their personal credibility and the credibility of their units.

11. They Redefine Themselves

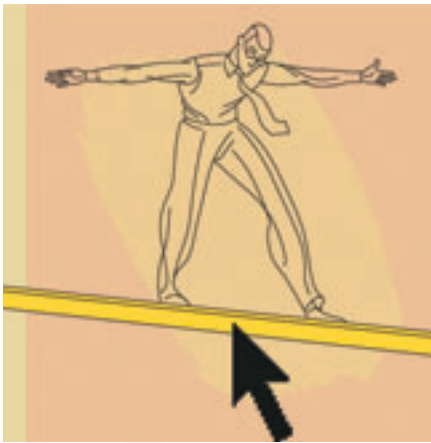
When IT professionals begin their careers, they likely define themselves as a



systems programmer, or a security specialist, or an environmental biologist, or a reference librarian. Over time, this may evolve into a somewhat more generic term, such as “I’m an IT professional” or “I’m a librarian.” But if we define ourselves in the silo of our technical or professional training, we are pushing an agenda in advancing that point of view or that particular solution or set of resources. Instead, we should all strive to be “people in support of the academic enterprise.” This self-definition suggests that IT professionals consider themselves to be partners in the overall mission of the college or university. It means that they work hard not as an advocate of a particular solution, but as a partner supporting those with whom they work in achieving learning and discovery goals. This will be reflected in the extent to which others see them as a partner, a collaborator, and a co-conspirator. And finally, if IT professionals have accomplished all of this without being (or appearing to be) selfish and greedy, working as members of the broader institutional team, then they will be perceived as *responsible members of the academic enterprise*—the ultimate objective!

12. They Maintain Balance

I am often asked my thoughts on whether one can be a successful professional in the complex and demanding field of IT and also still have a personal life. I firmly believe this is possible, but as with so many of the other habits or skills discussed above, doing so requires planning and prioritization. It is unrealistic to expect that one can be a successful IT professional, pursue all of one's avocational activities and sports, have a full family



life, *and* have time to watch all of the current television shows. It just doesn't work that way. The CIO position can easily consume fifty-five to eighty hours per week, especially if one tries to keep up with professional reading, block out time for thinking and planning, etc. As in everything else in life, there are tradeoffs.

I can say from personal experience, however, that you *can* pursue a successful IT career and have a solid family life as well. I never missed my kids' soccer

games or felt they were getting short shrift, and I have been happily married to the same lady for closing in on four decades. On the other hand, I have had little time myself for sports or leisure. I am not advocating this choice; I'm simply saying what worked for me. Each person has to make tough decisions, because it isn't possible to have it all. I also have found out that it is easy to start to slip and give work too much importance and time, rather than keeping this equation nicely balanced. Constant monitoring and adjustment is necessary.

Conclusion

The twelve habits presented in this article involve objectives and skills that seem apt for all IT professionals. Some of the skills are simple, but some take time and maturity to fully comprehend. Many of us who are current IT leaders wish we had picked up all of these habits earlier in our careers. We all need to work hard at growing constantly, no matter what age we are or what career stage we are in. Leadership occurs at numerous levels in a college or

university, and everyone needs to develop personal-growth and professional-development plans to continue to improve as managers and as individuals. In addition, those of us who have been blessed with the job of supervising others in the IT field have the significant responsibility of helping those who work for and around us to acquire these skills, to turn these skills into habits—and thus to become successful IT professionals. *e*

Notes

1. This article was developed from a presentation given to the Frye Leadership Institute, and later to the EDUCAUSE Leadership Institute, about the skills needed by a CIO to "play effectively" while sitting on the president's cabinet or the provost's council.
2. David Ward and Brian L. Hawkins, "Presidential Leadership for Information Technology," *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 38, no. 3 (May/June 2003): 36-47, <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0332.pdf>>.
3. Kandice L. Salomone and Paul B. Gandel, "Talking with the Press," *EQ (EDUCAUSE Quarterly)*, no. 2 (2004): 61-65, <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eqm0427.pdf>>.
4. William H. Pritchard, "Advice for IT Advisory Committees," *EQ (EDUCAUSE Quarterly)*, no. 1 (2005): 52-53, <<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eqm0516.pdf>>.