

The Myth about Techies

“IT Is for the Techies.”

Most senior executives hope to avoid conversations about IT, fearing they’ll have to listen to a litany of inexplicable terms like *PKI, BLADE, Shibboleth, VoIP, SQL server, DRAM, EDGE*, and more. Who could possibly understand what all these terms mean, much less make a disaster recovery or business continuity decision that involves choosing between Web-based backup, serverless backup, continuous backup, and consolidated storage? As a result, it may seem that the best thing to do is leave IT to the techies.

But who is *not* involved with IT? Do administrators and staff have computers on their desks? Do they use e-mail, Blackberries, or cell phones? Do they access financial reports, enrollment data, or donor-giving reports? Do faculty use a course management system for classes or data processing for research projects? Do food service staff monitor the hottest-selling food products based on receipts from the food court? Do police scan motor-vehicle records or look for previous offenses in a database? Do students register online? Virtually no aspect of campus life is untouched by IT. And most IT users are not techies.

Yet just because they aren’t techies doesn’t mean that IT is not an essential skill for them. Knowing how to use a search engine to find and order parts online is important for the mechanics shop. Managing a complex database is an es-

sentential part of running the development office. Using analytics and predictive modeling may make all the difference to the office of enrollment management in ensuring a strong freshman class. None of these units can afford to leave IT to the techies.

Choosing when and how to use IT is not just a technical decision. Investing (or not) in IT is often a business decision. For example, if the campus wants to attract industry to a research park focused

on genetic engineering, does the institution need to invest in massive storage arrays, visualization tools, and supercomputing? Investing in IT (or not) is often a financial decision. Although it might be nice for all faculty, students, and staff to have tablet PCs, it may not be economically or academically viable. Investing in IT (or not) is often a conservation decision. The need to conserve energy may make remote monitoring and control sys-

tems a no-brainer. Sometimes decisions are predicated on risk. Deciding whether or not to allow Facebook on campus may hinge less on the students’ desire for Facebook and more on the risk that stalking incidents could increase. Sometimes decisions are based on image. Although registering for courses in the gymnasium by picking up a card for each course still works, what kind of image does that send to students and parents?

From a technical standpoint, more technology may seem better. Investing in IT provides new tools and new

opportunities to explore. But from an institutional standpoint, those investments must be weighed in terms of cost, benefit, risk, and impact on the culture.

In thinking about leaving IT to the techies, the CIO and other members of the executive team should ask themselves the following strategic questions:

1. *Do we avoid IT discussions because they are technical? Or do we go beyond the technology to the strategy?* Discussions about specific technologies or the pros and cons of a particular product may not merit the attention of the executive team. However, some seemingly technical discussions may mask important strategic decisions. For example, which e-mail system a campus should use seems like a technical detail best left to the CIO’s office. However, the executive team may want to debate the merits of whether or not the campus even needs its own e-mail system. Why not use Gmail? Why should scarce campus resources be used for a commodity product that is freely available? Or, in another example, should the campus purchase a commercial course management system? The decision may involve more than product specs and contract terms and conditions. Does the campus believe that cooperative software development through open source is the best long-term strategy for higher education institutions? Not all technology discussions are removed from fundamental strategic choices.
2. *Do we ensure that faculty, staff, students, and administrators have the IT tools, skills,*

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and confidence they need to optimize their contribution to the institution? Are institutional leaders confident that all users have the skills to capitalize on the infrastructure and application investments that have been made? Since virtually every campus operation uses IT, it would be easy to assume that all users have the skills they need. However, lack of training and support can undercut even the wisest investments.

3. Do we recognize—and manage—the IT that is centralized as well as that which is distributed? There are many servers, laptops, and network connections that are not managed by the staff in the CIO's office (the staff usually

4. Do we help the techies better communicate with the non-techies? With IT everywhere on campus, avoiding conversations about IT is not possible. Perhaps the reason some have avoided them has to do with communication style rather than importance. Is the institution helping the techies understand the issues of importance to college and university executives? If they don't understand what the executives are doing or the executives' areas of concern, perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise that communication is awkward. Do the techies have professional development opportunities to ensure that they understand others' perspectives and are effective communicators?



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thought of as “the techies”). Are the graduate students who run the Web site or maintain the database for their research team educated about security? Is the training that is available to the central IT shop available to those in distributed campus units? Is there an overall technical architecture to ensure that technologies align with each other rather than creating more expensive one-off systems?

IT may be for the techies, but IT is for the rest of us too. Just as we accept that the government isn't only for the politicians and that the environment isn't only for the environmentalists, maybe it is time to accept that IT isn't only for the techies. IT is for everyone.

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