

Be Advised...

If you find yourself spending far too much time trying to make sense of mounds of conflicting information about computer systems, yet still find your systems ineffective, expensive and unreliable – you are far from alone. The North West Development Agency (NWDA) recently completed the most comprehensive study of ICT the region has ever seen, and among the main conclusions was this:

"Businesses are not clear on where to go for robust advice on ICT exploitation".

Many business owners find themselves with two stark choices when it comes to ICT advice: their suppliers – even the best of whom can rarely make detailed recommendations outside their particular offerings, and the suggestions of techies known to them and their colleagues – who are likely to enthuse more about what's cool than what is appropriate.

The result is often that businesses fail to exploit ICT as well as they could. Bosses find themselves diverted from their jobs, spending countless frustrating hours wading through supplier proposals and industry magazines just so that they are not completely at the mercy of their suppliers' recommendations.

In an ideal world, companies would analyse what they do and how they do it, then implement the systems best suited to supporting - and improving - those processes. In the real world, many businesses implement the systems that they are made aware of at the time, based on a limited knowledge of the market and which rarely address more than one part of the company's need. Systems evolve sporadically over time without clear direction. 'Band-aid' fixes are implemented instead of long-term solutions - and suppliers still get blamed when they break. ICT strategies are rare, and computer systems loved by their users are rarer still.

In my opinion, this is largely because there are two mutually exclusive aptitudes necessary for successful ICT exploitation: business minds and technical minds. The 'True Techies' are essential when it comes to the detail, but what is needed before then is someone with a business mind, and a wide-ranging technical knowledge. A 'business-side tech', if you like. This is the person who can talk business to the businessmen and tech-speak to the techies. He or she can analyse the company – its strategies, objectives and processes – and work out how best to support it with technology.

The problem with this is simple: how many people like that do you know? The vast majority of those who choose a career in the ICT industry do so because they are fascinated by the 'how' and not the 'why' – the method and not the need.

The situation is similar to when computer graphics first took their place in the design industry: it was no good trying to get computer experts to be artistic – it was down to artists to learn how to use computers. What companies need now are business minds who have learned the principles of applying ICT in the commercial world.

The good news is that these people are out there – often entering the industry via other occupations such as management, business analysis, business services etc. - but they are notoriously hard to find. I count myself among them, and I have spent my whole career painfully aware that I do not fit neatly into an industry where people are classified by the initials of their technical specialisations.

Last year I was discussing this problem with some people from Business Link. When they mentioned a new initiative called 'Technology Means Business' I have to admit that the cringe-worthy name alone limited my hopes somewhat. But my cynicism proved misplaced, and TMB is one initiative that I wholeheartedly applaud.

The basis of TMB is a business-orientated qualification for ICT Advisers. What makes it effective is that a TMB Adviser is not expected to know which buttons to press, but to be able to work out - through proper business analysis - which set of buttons is appropriate. In other words, to get the TMB qualification you have to be able to think business first, technology second - and produce clear, sensible and effective advice at the end of it. Don't expect to find any young, zitty programmers with it on their cv's.

I attended Durham University Business School to get my accreditation - and was pleasantly surprised when the course, methodologies and examinations showed so much more than the basic grasp of reality I had dared hope for. Where I expected to find the outdated, the technical, the corporate and the academic, I was impressed to find (mostly) the current, the practical, the independent and the realistic. Better still, behind it is an organisation that provides the tools - if, alas, not the publicity as yet - to pass on the full benefits to the UK's businesses. Logging on to www.tmb.org.uk (or talking to Business Link, or - plug, plug - calling my company, Teagus) will let anyone easily find a local accredited ICT Adviser who should be able to give them the sensible, independent and understandable advice they need. The scheme is not perfect - but it's an excellent start and one that I hope gains recognition and success.

The North West is far from being alone in having its ICT industry driven by supply instead of need, and TMB was created to help in solving this problem for the whole of the UK. What we can do as a region is to use such initiatives to greater effect - and more quickly - than the rest of the country, to get our businesses using the right computer systems in the right way. It is only one component of the economic picture, but it is a vital component if we are to get Cumbrian businesses competing effectively with the rest of the country and beyond.

Putting the word out about TMB will only be part of the battle - providing some help in paying for the advice and ongoing help is just as important. I know that these issues are being addressed in the various groups and quangos around the region, so for those who really cannot afford to take on an adviser unassisted there may be some publicly funded light at the end of the tunnel. But for most businesses to wait would be a false economy. A good ICT review can cost well under £1,000 for a smallish business - not much for a properly approached ICT strategy to earn back in just a few months.

So once you have your recommendations - what next? If you've found someone who understands your business - and whose advice makes sense - don't let them go! A knowledgeable ICT person in your corner can spot problems before they arise, keep your systems in line with your business as it evolves, keep your suppliers on their toes, help with implementations and upgrades, and - most importantly - keep you and your managers managing your businesses.

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