



Draining the Information Swamp

Introduction

We're not hydrologists, but it seems clear that the first thing to do when draining a swamp is to stop random inputs of more water. With an information swamp, information needs to be managed better as it is captured and created, but also as it's passed around inside the organization. In IT we've gotten great at building huge information pipes using internet connections, distributed ERP systems, and even the crusty old back office systems running on mainframes. These pipes deliver an ever-rising flood tide of information to the desktop, and that's not counting the undesirable contributors like spam and office joke lists.

We have been much less effective at channeling all that information to effective and productive uses. Recent studies by Northwestern University and the Brookings Institution¹, attribute much of the last 10 years productivity gains to information technology. However, in the day-to-day operation of your business, it may not feel that way with unread emails piling up in your in-box, the message light on your desk phone flashing insistently, and the stack of papers drifting off the edge of your desk. To paraphrase Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, we know a swamp when we see one.

Stemming the Tide

So what's an IT shop to do, abandon our stock-in-trade of building information pipes? While that might help for a short while, it's probably not sustainable. The problem isn't that we have too many pipes, or even that the pipes are just too poorly organized and coordinated, as some vendors are suggesting with ERP systems, consolidated message centers, or even spam filters. Fixing all that may be necessary, but it's far from sufficient. The root of the problem, to return to Justice Stewart, is that while we can recognize good information when we see it, we have a very difficult time defining it in a way that supports automated selection and filtering.

Very few people drain swamps for the purpose of creating arid deserts. With the rising knowledge economy, information is a critical resource for any business. But it is possible to get too much of a good thing. IT has a leadership responsibility as we build our information pipes to also work in our organizations to build better information consumption practices. This responsibility goes beyond keeping anti-virus software on our servers and pleading, begging, and even ranting at users to not click on attachments they can't identify.

Starting from the familiar, we can use some of our data analysis and data flow skills to understand what's actually happening with all that information. As called for in other columns we can begin to work with other information professionals like researchers and librarians to understand how they manage information. We can roll up our sleeves and do a turn on the front lines or in the back offices of our organizations to better understand the daily impact of those pipes we're building. We can become part of the communities of practice in our organizations and take a stand that more information and more technology isn't always better.

Buckman Laboratories is good case study for the effective use of technology in support of organizational change. In 1978, this specialty-chemical manufacturer was struggling against growing global competition. CEO Bob Buckman shifted the company from a command and control

structure a flexible, customer-driven organization. To put it plainly, he wanted fewer managers and more sales engineers in the field. That required better communication across the disparate sales force and with customers. Buckman Labs achieved its turn around goal through an artful blend of organization and technology. Avoiding fancy 'solutions', they implemented an infrastructure with proven technologies like email, phones, and laptops. However, their use of that infrastructure was very innovative. Today, employees are expected to share information and assist one another through email-based forums, but the organization is also focused on listening. All questions are taken seriously. If no one can answer a question, a manager steps in. Librarians assist with research and collect the best answers. Over time the Buckman K'Netix system has evolved, and today the company cites it as a source of a 50% rise in the sales of new products.²

As we shift from the pipes to the content, from the bits and bytes to the bigger picture, we'll also be moving from areas we control more completely to areas that require cooperation and effective sharing of power. It's not a shift we can demand (that whole control thing). It is a shift we will have to earn by becoming informed citizens of our organizations and by delivering pragmatic benefits to the daily experience of doing business. Then we can begin replacing the hip waders with knee boots and dream of walking through the information garden in regular shoes.

¹ Hal Varian. "Information Technology May Have Cured Low Service-Sector Productivity." *New York Times*, February 12, 2004.

² Melissie Rumizen and Sheldon Ellis. "The Evolution of KM at Buckman Laboratories." 2002.
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