THE NEXT BIG THING
Is your technology ensemble cutting-edge?

by Michael Schubach

As an IT professional, I am frequently asked what revolutionary advancement, process or gizmo looms on the horizon that will take the industry by storm. Oddly, I never field this question during strategic planning sessions or budget preparation meetings; instead it's advanced only at cocktail parties or similar social gatherings. The question is never asked by other IT professionals, but instead by people who, when told that I am (to quote Dilbert) a *knowledge worker*, struggle with an appropriate response. Reactions to my career choice can run the gamut from mild disinterest to active aversion, but the facial expression is identical as "the question" formulates itself. Their frozen smiles seem to telepath, "Another techie. Quick, what do I say? Oh, I know…" and out it tumbles.

The question is so cliché that it's practically a geek pick-up line. But for those geeks who wouldn't mind being picked up (or at the very least, wouldn't mind appearing to be capable of adult conversation) I recommend that you have some sort of stock answer ready simply because it's expected of you. I usually throw out some vague prediction that PDAs will become the size of pocket lint and then change the subject as quickly as possible. Maybe it's just too many years of taking requests for assistance as each new gizmo-du-jour finds its way into eager little user fingers, but I am as excited about "the next big thing" as I would be about a timeshare in Fallujah.

Why this marked lack of enthusiasm? From my perspective the contemplation of life as George Jetson is a fantasy for amateurs. The working reality for most IT professionals is not the next big thing, but getting the last several next big things we purchased to function as planned. What sort of issues might we have with existing technologies? Funny I should ask. According to a poll conducted by *Hotel and Motel Management Magazine*, the top technology issue facing our industry is the seamless integration of different systems. Not a very futuristic problem, is it? Haven't we been complaining about this issue since the Carter administration?

Yes, in fact, we have. The hospitality industry has long been seeking best-of-breed technology solutions, largely because the depth and complexity of our service offerings required specialized solutions. We sought out the hottest products available (the newest gizmos, as it were) in property management, food and beverage and every other operational area that complained of computer deprivation. Not a completely brainless way to shop, but certainly not the smartest way, either; we shouldn't have been surprised by the chaos that ensued. It was as though we went out and bought a left shoe from Reebok, a right shoe from Florsheim, tuxedo pants from Brooks Brothers, a sport jacket from Armani and a Versace vest, only to be amazed that our very expensive, top-of-the-line outfit didn't come together very well.

Undaunted, we sought to harmonize the discordant elements of our fashion disaster by interfacing. We insisted that Brooks Brothers and Armani agree on the jacket lapels, and pass that result on to Versace. (In the meantime we added a Ralph Lauren plaid shirt and Nicole Miller theme tie and tried to get them to agree on the salient portions of the lapel standard as well.)

Realizing that we would never attain the desired result, we changed strategies: we began data warehousing. This is when we sent material samples from all the products we have to a tailor in Hong Kong and requested that we be provided with one comprehensive fabric that could be used for on-demand, custom-made patchwork muu-muus. It was precisely upon receipt of the material that the marketing department requested formal evening attire that could, if required, double as swimwear. And so the integration demand cycle continues.

There are three strategies for obtaining the Holy Grail of integration we seek. Strategy one; find multiple hospitality system vendors (usually competitors at some level) who are willing to design products that integrate seamlessly with those provided by the other vendor partners. (It would be easier to find either the Holy Grail itself or another line of work – your choice.) Strategy two, and see if this sounds familiar: leave the task to the IT department to solve. (Bear in mind that the definition of *insanity* is expecting the same actions and behaviors to produce different results.) If neither of these two options seems practical, then you are left with strategy three; find one vendor that provides a mainframe suite of as many of the products you seek to integrate and accept that architecture in lieu of the disparate systems you now own. You may have to combine strategies two and three to get you where you need to be, but it's an alternative that beats beating your head against the wall.

If our biggest issue with technology is making the stuff we already have work coherently, then what would be the next big thing we really need? Instead of investing in a new tele/fax/e-palm, how about dumping a few dollars into the people who

operate those systems that you already own? Now that would *really* be big. Each time I hear management cry that "we're not using a fraction of what we already have," I wonder just exactly what kind of investment we're making in our knowledge workers. Do we put the users themselves through regular refresher training to make certain they fully understand the applications that they are only fractionally using?

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The concept of under-utilization implies that the system has capacity or functionality that goes untapped. Assuming that the use of those functions and capacities would enhance the operation (or the lives of those who access them), what would be the motivation for bypassing them? There are, in my mind, only three possibilities: 1) Lack of motivation (a management issue), 2) lack of awareness (a management issue) or 3) lack of the requisite skills (a management issue).

See if you can guess to whom I would assign blame for the issue of under-utilization.

The weakest link in information technology should be something mundane, something mechanical, something easy to correct like too little air conditioning, not enough plugs or a server that needs upgrading. It shouldn't be the people who use or benefit from your investment, like your employees or your guests. If you feel that your technology problem is rooted in your people, then physician, heal thyself. If you feel that your problem is rooted in the Byzantine technical conglomeration that has sprung up around you, then be willing to step up to new approaches to long-standing problems rather hoping that another year of elbow grease might make things right. Finally, and most importantly, if you think that all that technology you bought almost 18 months ago just isn't sitting on the cutting edge, then by all means get yourself a new gizmo. If nothing else, being so progressive should make you feel much better.

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These management problems are easily repaired.

If Your Problem Is:	The Fix Is:
Motivation	Encouragement; continued pay checks
Awareness	Studying your systems; sharing the results
Requisite Skills	Training; follow-up training; refresher training