

# ***Information Technology***

## **“What We Have Here...”**

“...is a failure to communicate” (old movie). “We really don’t see the need for a network in our office.” I was reviewing a proposal with a prospective client when this came up. I was nonplussed; as a professional in the field, I take the concept and benefits of an office network so much for granted that it’s difficult to imagine doing business any other way.

Your business may sell products and services but it runs on information. Information is exchanged externally with customers, suppliers, regulatory and government agencies, and internally among employees. Any organization with more than one employee has a communication problem.

Starting with airline reservation systems in the early 1960s, speedy delivery of information to people who need it has been a major theme of the computer industry. My first job at IBM involved programs for transmitting orders to the trading floor of the NYSE. Before computerized message switching, young guys on roller skates tore paper tape off receivers, decided which trading post should get a particular message, skated over to the appropriate transmitter and put the tape in. When I got a video terminal in my office in the late ‘70s, I was thrilled. I could run reports, analyze data, and compose reports directly on the computer. I could even exchange messages with our laboratory in France using an early e-mail system!

In most small and mid-size organizations, PCs were introduced in the 1980s as stand-alone “islands of automation”. For all its slick features, a word processor is essentially a fancy typewriter, a tool for putting words on paper. An accounting program is a bookkeeper’s assistant. Each computer assisted a single user, or island. The true power of information technology appears when computers are linked together in a network and used to transform the way information is communicated.

Information flows along many pathways in an organization: face to face conversation, telephones and voice mail, fax, e-mail and snail mail, and that old standby, paper. Think of these pathways as your company’s nervous system. Then identify which pieces of information are the most time sensitive or encounter the most delays in traversing the nervous system. Are there delays in responding to customers or prospects? Do salespeople extend credit to accounts with overdue balances? Does it take too long to answer simple questions about customer service? Why? Do you have “a failure to communicate”? Network!

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