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Cutting Edge IT

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A Matter of Escalation

by Bruce D. Hicks, CPCU, CLU

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There have been a number of times where I've either heard or read the phrase "the turn of the century." The funny thing is that it continues to be used to talk about the transition from the late 1890s to the early 1900s. What I find more puzzling is that I've yet to notice it being used to talk about the transition from the 20th to the 21st century.

Usually the phrase is part of a story or article about something that is antiquated. Or it may be spoken as someone begins discussing a slower, less sophisticated time. However, the previous turn of the century could be accurately described as a fast-paced and reckless era. It was an exciting time where new discoveries and applications could be found affecting nearly every area of home and work.

Individual entrepreneurship flourished with many people striking out and trying their ideas to advance themselves, society, or both. That time was truly a revolutionary period and those persons who had the best chance of succeeding were risk-takers, the same group of people who faced the largest chance of suffering spectacular failure.

Still In Risky Times

This new century finds that a certain idea is still true . . . rewards come from taking risk. Many members of the CPCU Society Information Technology Section are involved in work that has the image of being at the front edge of the future. But is that image accurate? Are many of the tasks and projects that we perform representative of advancing something bold and new . . . or are they extremely conventional and safe? Some experts advocate that workers should change the way they treat risk-taking. In the opinion of some, actively seeking risk should be considered a routine part of performing our jobs. It is so important that failure to adopt such an attitude is a bar to being an effective worker.

Charette's Escalator

In Tom DeMarco and Timothy Lister's *Waltzing with Bears*, the authors share an insightful illustration of the importance of integrating risk-taking to a company's regular operations. The writers explain the risk escalator concept developed by risk consultant Bob Charette.

Imagine that your company and each of your competitors are placed on separate downstairs escalators. Each escalator represents the effort it takes to operate your business, and all the escalators are moving at the same speed. At a minimum, you and your competitors must move fast enough to maintain your same position. If you are too slow, you risk falling out of competition (business failure). However, two things are accomplished if you can move faster than your competition. If you can climb to the top of the escalator, you can use a lever that can increase the speed of all the escalators. Therefore, you will be able to shift the work environment to a more comfortable speed for yourself while making things harder for your slower competitors.

The concept is, in my opinion, a great example of how accepting a status quo can be both ineffective and dangerous. It suggests that we need to either move aggressively or fall back toward failure. Therefore our attitude should be to seek every opportunity to find different, more effective ways to achieve our objectives.

What kind of project environment do you work in? Are risks sought out? Are successes rewarded? Are failures fairly evaluated and accepted as the price of acting with courage and vision? If you answered each query "no," then please be careful and watch your step . . . escalator going down. ■

An "Agile" Solution to the Technology Paradox

by W. Thomas Mellor, CPCU, CLU, ChFC

W. Thomas Mellor, CPCU, CLU, ChFC, is an IT project manager in the Systems Department at State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company in Bloomington, IL. He is a Certified Scrum Master and leads software development projects at State Farm using agile practices. He is a national governor for the CPCU Society and has served in various local chapter and national capacities since obtaining his designation in 1991. Prior to moving to State Farm's Systems Department in 2001, he managed Special Investigations Units in Oregon and Washington. He is also a member of the Agile Alliance.

I was traveling to Phoenix for the CPCU Society's Board of Governor meeting. I had to endure a several-hour flight delay, waiting for mechanics to fix a "minor problem" (an indicator light wouldn't verify that the cabin door was closed). Ultimately my flight was cancelled and I arrived in Phoenix late at night for meetings that began early the next morning. The travel plans of myself and 47 other people were unexpectedly and significantly disrupted by a "minor" technological malfunction. Sadly, glitches happen every day and I'm sure many of you can relate to the misery they cause.

I'm intimately familiar with both good and bad experiences of technology end users because I'm an IT project manager. I'm one of the people who "executes and controls" the development and deployment of software ostensibly designed to make workers' lives better, more efficient, easier, and perhaps even safer. Many people view software as nebulous and mysterious. They may find it fraught with complexities and features that cause aggravation and disappointment. They may also feel that certain software adds to their burdens. So, the very product designed to help them can also impede them. This is the technology paradox.

Theoretically, end-user needs, desires, and expectations (we call them requirements in IT projects) should be rooted in the software's design and construction. After reading Phil Coley's article in the April *Cutting Edge*, "Why Projects Fail," I reflected a bit on the conundrum of meeting business requirements in software and the historically abysmal record of IT project success. Coley identified all the typical reasons given as to why software projects fail, but the growing consensus in the software industry is that projects primary fail because people fail. At first, this sounds harsh and abstract, but documented industry analysis (and my own observations) indicate that software projects primarily fail not because of technology or business problems, but because of "people problems" (e.g. lack of skills, lack of time, miscommunication, or lack of communication, misunderstanding, etc.). The most prominent cause of project failure, in my opinion, is the failure to actively and persistently engage the customer in software design and development. At the heart, it is the failure of the product to satisfactorily meet customers' requirements.

If one accepts this root cause of IT project failure, then why haven't we been able to simply connect the two sides? The problem has been on the minds of industry leaders for many years. IT professionals typically take great pride in product development. But, time after time, they are blamed by customers for failing to deliver what they wanted. This continued division of perspective between the technical side and the consumer side regarding product quality is where the problem lies. Getting the two sides to understand, appreciate, and listen to one another is the essence of the solution. But, in the traditional software development environment, collaboration rarely takes place. The two sides rarely interact after the project requirements are gathered. They shake hands when requirements are "locked down" and the technical people go off to build the product. Twelve to 18 months later, they deliver the product and often, the customer says "Well, this is nice, but it isn't what I wanted." So the finger pointing begins and everyone is left with a bad taste.

There is a solution to this problem—agile development techniques.

Agile Practices as an Alternative to Traditional Software Development

Agile is a general term applied to a collection of software development practices. The most prominent methods include Scrum, Extreme Programming (XP), Adaptive Development Methodology (ADM),

Crystal Development, Dynamic Systems Development Methodology (DSDM), and Feature Driven Development (FDD). XP and Scrum are arguably the most popular and recognized. All of them emerged during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s when a host of software engineering leaders recognized that the traditional way of managing and developing software was simply not working well.

To better understand the ascent of agile processes, let's briefly review the history of software engineering and management. Software development has historical roots in general engineering and project management practices that grew out of major construction projects. Structural engineering and construction incorporate a complete inventory of requirements and up-front design before any actual building begins. Often, small-scale models are built to show the customer what the structure will look like, and the assembly is detailed in very articulate specification documents. Once the requirements and design are approved, construction begins. In this world, a plan and schedule can be developed and followed since the contractors typically have experience in building similar structures.

But, software doesn't fundamentally fit this construction paradigm. If you build a bridge with a lane of travel in each direction, adding additional lanes after the bridge is half erected would be impractical and prohibitively expensive. That's why specifications (requirements) are "locked down" at the beginning of such projects. For years (and even to this day), software development was managed under the same premise: gather all the requirements, lock them down, design the entire product, and then proceed with construction. After the coding is complete, perform extensive testing to validate that the requirements were met and then deliver the product. This is a "waterfall development process."

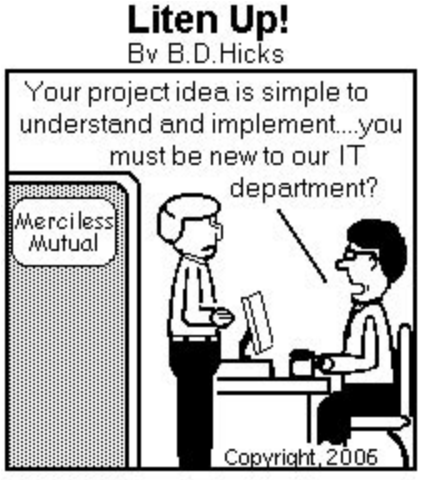
Waterfall development has several fundamental flaws. First, it assumes that the customer knows exactly what he or she wants. The problem with software is that it is virtually impossible to create accurate models. Alternatively, developers tried prototypes. However, a prototype is not a fully functional product, so the customer can't get a meaningful demonstration of what the final product would look like. Second, downstream requirements and design changes were viewed as likely resulting in extensive rework at great expense. Therefore, customers were influenced to accept requirement inaccuracies because they thought corrections would be too expensive to pursue. Third, because of uncertainty regarding product performance, and to battle against additional customer requests ("scope creep"), there is a propensity to incorporate as many features as possible—even if these are ostensibly of little value to the customer.

So, how do agile techniques deal with these issues? First, agile requires that the customer be engaged throughout the development of the product. Ideally, the customer should be part of the development team. As working software is incrementally and iteratively developed, the customer has regular opportunities to review and experience it. Then, desired changes can be made. Product reviews should occur at the end of every work cycle—typically two to four weeks. Persistent collaboration between developers and customers results in better understanding. Desired requirements end up in the completed product since the review of working software (not prototypes) allows the customer to prioritize precisely what he or she wants.

Second, change is welcomed (and expected) in agile practices. While costs are still associated with changes, they are usually smaller in scope. Large rework effort is typically avoided. Where uncertainty around requirements and design is greatest, agile practices advocate delaying decisions (especially those that are irreversible or highly impactive) until as late as possible. It is conceivable that the customer will not need some functionality as the product is developed. The most useful and valuable functionality is prioritized by the customer so that the product can be assessed early in the development.

Finally, some critics of agile practices argue that it is impossible to control scope creep because the list of desired functionality is seemingly endless. However, all projects are typically constrained by factors of time and budget (as well as resource availability.) Decisions about the viability of a product can be made early and the cost/benefit analysis can be tested by incrementally building the product. Many of us can identify with software projects that were eventually killed because of cost overruns.

There is much more to agile than can be explained in a relatively short article, but the gist is to produce functional software quickly. Agile has moved beyond the novelty stage and is now popular in all kinds of businesses—both those who build software for distribution and those who build software for internal use. In the future, I'll explore more agile development techniques, including the shifts required in culture, work structure, and philosophies from traditional waterfall approaches. ■



A Modest Proposal: Leave the Data at Work

by Bob Sullivan

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint of the May 31, 2006, edition of the "Red Tape Chronicles," a blog by MSNBC.com columnist Bob Sullivan. It appears here with permission from MSNBC.com.

A worker takes home a laptop computer loaded with personal information. The computer is stolen during a burglary, and with it, a hoard of Social Security numbers are taken, creating tremendous risk for widespread identity theft.

Think you've heard that story? You probably haven't. It happened sometime in May, to customers of Baltimore's Mercantile Bankshares Corp. In that incident, 50,000 consumers had their personal information compromised—including their Social Security numbers and their account numbers. In this case, the laptop was stolen from a car.

Perhaps you've heard this story? Fidelity Investments had to admit earlier this year that a laptop containing 200,000 identities was stolen from a public location.

You are no doubt familiar with last week's news from the Veterans Administration (VA), which revealed that a computer containing the identities of every living veteran—and some family members—was stolen from a house. Now that we've had a week to beat up on the employee who took home all that information, it's time to look beyond this one incident, and that one poor soul who now regrets ever taking work home with him.

He's hardly alone. Millions of Americans take work home every day—20 million, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, or about one in seven U.S. workers. Each one is a ticking time bomb. Just ask Fidelity or Mercantile Bancshares.

In light of last week's dramatic news from the VA, here's a not-so-modest proposal: Leave the work at work.

During the past 10 years, corporate America has slowly but surely extended the workday way beyond 9 to 5. It has extended the office, too, into home bedrooms and dens across America. The number of people who go home, feed the kids, and then log in has skyrocketed from close to zero 10 years ago to two-thirds of "professional" workers, according to the U.S. government.

Perhaps it's not worth it. In the cost-benefit analysis of this creeping work force, computer security has not been taken into account. Recovering from a high-profile data loss is expensive and embarrassing. This is no doubt hyperbole, but instructive hyperbole—at a congressional hearing last week; the VA discussed the possibility that the ultimate price tag for its lost hard drive would be $100 million. Whatever that employee was doing at home couldn't have been worth that much.

Now is a time to reconsider this extended workday. Given the true costs, would it be better to just let your workers leave the data behind when they leave the office?

Are You Better Off, Soccer Moms?

Working at home can give employees additional flexibility. I know there are soccer moms who are allowed to leave work early, drive the kids to the game, and then make up for lost time late at night after the kids are asleep. Perhaps that's an employee benefit.

But companies are getting a lot of free labor out of their employees. The Bureau of Labor Statistics says in 2004 (the most recent year for which statistics are available), 10 million people worked extra at home with no arrangements to be paid for the work, and they averaged seven hours a week. That's almost a full day of free labor.

It's hard to tell a corporation that work isn't worth it—unless you take into account the unexpected cost of a data disaster.

Of course, preserving this free labor force is a critical priority for corporate America. An entire industry of software has developed to secure after-hours homework. That's why we've all learned terms like VPN (virtual private network) and tunneling. Avivah Litan, a security analyst at research firm Gartner who testified before Congress last week about the VA theft, insists there are safe ways to work at home.

It Can Be Safe, But It's Not

Working at home is no more dangerous than giving employees computers with floppy disk drives or USB ports, which can also be used to download data, and simple policies can cut down dramatically on the risk, she said. For example: Personal data should never be removed from company computers unless it's encrypted.

The truth, however, is very few organizations enforce such policies. Why? They don't have to.

"In many situations, there are just no rules out there," she said. In fact, in the VA situation, "No laws appear to have been broken."

Yes, working at home can be safe. But right now, that's utopia; it's not safe for millions of workers, and millions of identity theft victims. The data isn't secured. It's left in taxicabs, hotel rooms, and on park benches. It's stolen from homes and parked cars.

So since we're already living in a utopia, I would like to propose a different utopia: Keep the data safe by leaving it at work. With all apologies to Jonathan Swift, I can't help but wonder if this modest proposal—work only at work—doesn't sound as crazy as telling the Irish to eat their young.

I know some workers (such as journalists) really do need to be connected 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But many—and I would guess most—simply log in out of peer pressure.

I was in Ireland not long ago talking to Microsoft employees who often teased their American counterparts over this point. The Americans were frustrated that at 5 p.m. Dublin time (9 a.m. in Seattle) the Irish workers could no longer be found at their cubicles or contacted by e-mail, but instead were lifting a pint at a local pub. In response to accusations of a lack of industriousness, the Irish told me that Americans may spend more hours working on e-mail—in fact, they seem to be doing that all the time—but weren't actually getting very much done. In Ireland, they told me, the focus is work until 5 p.m., and after that, the focus goes elsewhere.

We could learn a thing or two from the Irish work ethic. A company rule saying work stays at work would be a boon to American families. And if you need a business case, it would be a boon for the safety of our data, too. ■

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Human Networks

by Marsha D. Egan, CPCU, API, CPIW, ACC

Marsha D. Egan, CPCU, API, CPIW, ACC, is a CPCU Society past president, and CEO of The Egan Group, Inc., an executive coaching firm based in Reading, Pennsylvania. You can reach her at marsha@marshaegan.com or (610) 777-3795. Visit her web site at www.marshaegan.com for more career-building articles.

Networking may have a different meaning for IT insurance professionals than for other business folks. You think network—you think technology. Just as computers are networked internally and externally throughout the business world, so should you be networked. That is—if you are concerned about your career mobility.

In any business, there are relationships that should be built to enable progress. We call these relationships a network. Careers rarely progress solely through individual work; there are usually several people involved in an individual's successful career.

Some of my coaching clients cringe at the suggestion of "networking." But everyone should consider becoming comfortable with the concept, so let's set the record straight about it. Networking is not about building insincere relationships, compromising one's principles, collecting business cards, pretending to like someone, or about catering insincerely to a boss. Networking is about building reciprocal, synergistic relationships with people throughout your organization and your life. It involves caring about the progress of others more than you care about your own. It requires you to establish trustful, supportive bonds with people who share your business or personal goals.

When we look at networking as a sincere effort to build mutually beneficial relationships, it can actually be fun! When you take the focus off of yourself, and place it on others, your whole picture about building relationships can change. You become other-directed, rather than selfish. You become caring rather than self-absorbed. You become interesting rather than boring. Doesn't this sound better?

"Other focused" is a key word in this equation. Many people make the error of trying to get the person to know about their business. People see through this immediately. Your objective should be to show a true interest in the other person, and avoid trying to talk about yourself in the first several minutes of the conversation. This could result in building a mutually beneficial relationship.

When we look at networking as a sincere effort to build mutually beneficial relationships, it can actually be fun!

Here is an example: You are an insurance IT professional, and you meet someone for the first time. Instead of jumping right in with your elevator speech about you and your business, you might ask this person questions about his or her business. A great question can be, "What are the three biggest challenges you are experiencing currently with your business?" By sincerely listening, you will probably have a very interesting conversation with this person.

When this person indicates that his CFO has just left the company and he is totally focused on finding a replacement, you have an opportunity to build your relationship further. You might know of some candidates, an employment agency, or some other reference that can help that person solve his current problem. It may be that the last thing he wants to know about are your IT concerns or solutions in them. But, if you provide helpful information by e-mail the following day, you will be remembered as caring, helpful, and unselfish.

Reciprocal relationships don't necessarily mean immediate benefits. You've got to be patient. A network is built over years. One person at a time. And the more sincere, and helpful you are, the more mutually beneficial (and more fun) your network will be. ■

"As-Is" Analyses and Critical Thinking

by Mike Tarrani

Mike Tarrani has 25 years of experience in software engineering process improvement, IT operational management, and auditing and compliance. He is currently employed by Software Resources, Inc. of Longwood, Florida, and is working on operational process improvement projects for a Central Florida county government.

One mistake I see in one project after another is the quest to document an existing system before defining its replacement. Here are some rules of thumb that I use to determine whether an "as-is" analysis should be performed.

The New System (or Business Process) Represents a Revolutionary Approach

When a project involves tossing out the old system for something radically different, an "as-is" analysis is wasted effort. Reason: If conditions and requirements have so changed that a revolutionary approach makes sense, the last thing you want to do is replicate old methods and processes in the new system. A better approach is to elicit and prioritize requirements for the new system. These requirements should reflect business functions and imperatives that drive the need for a revolutionary approach. In other words, approach the requirements phase within the context of business rules and features/functions that are actually needed. If you approach it this way you'll be getting a fresh perspective and making a clean break from the past. Of course, there are technical aspects that need to be analyzed, such as system interdependencies, data structures, operational requirements, and the such because rarely will an old system be tossed out and a new one magically take its place. Therefore, the "as-is" analysis will support requirements for data conversion, batch job synchronization, and comparing resource requirements between the old and new system (impact on network, service levels and up- and down-stream systems that will remain).

A Brand New System or Business Process

When a project involves a new process or system, it's a fallacy to document the status quo. In such instances, "as-is" analyses are a waste of your time. It only provides revenue for consultants. The time and money would be better spent on tracing requirements to business imperatives and going forward from there.

Other Documentation Sources Exist

One other fallacy is to spend time developing documentation for systems when commercial documentation is available. During one engagement, I was tasked with writing database administration policies and procedures. At my billing rate the final product ran into the tens of thousands of dollars. Aside from the fact that the document shortly became shelfware, the client could have purchased any of a number of excellent books in the $40 to $60 price range, and decreed that the procedures contained within were to be followed as a matter of policy. Selecting and recommending the best book from the many that were in a local bookstore would have saved a significant amount of money. Even better would have been to ask the database administrators to agree on the best commercially available book and use it. The sorry fact is that, as I write this, there are consultants who are developing UNIX, Oracle, and (pick your favorite application, database, or operating system) documentation when excellent books may already be available.

The New System (or Business Process) Is Evolutionary

When a project involves process improvement or an upgrade, then the "as-is" analysis does need to be performed to determine how to best improve processes and the way upgrades will require changes in processes or infrastructure.

Learning to Think

The point to the above is that thinking is required. Not problem solving—thinking in a critical manner. Question the status quo and don't be misled by misdirected, fallacious arguments that have logical flaws or that are emotional appeals. Perform a

Continued on page 8

"As-Is" Analyses and Critical Thinking

Continued from page 7

mental sanity check on approaches that are normal practices. They may actually waste resources and shareholder value.

A few months ago I read a book by Jonathan G. Koomey titled *Turning Numbers Into Knowledge: Mastering the Art of Problem Solving*. I expected something about quantitative methods and advanced problem-solving techniques. However, the book didn't even discuss numbers until page 111, and it was light on problem solving. Although it was not what I expected, it turned out to be one of those rare books that deeply influences and provides fresh perspectives. The book led me on a journey that broke the process of critical thinking into manageable steps. Among the things I learned were:

- Examine key factors, such as information, attention, and action. Do so within the context of a cycle that begins with goals and moves through execution. Continue by considering how external events influence the meeting of those goals, and then evaluate and refine the goals. Then the process starts anew.
- The structured methods for getting organized. The techniques given are simple, yet powerful. How to collect and critically analyze data and information, common fallacies, and how to spot them. Two of my favorite parts that reinforce these concepts are the single-page chart titled "What Scientists Say, and What They Mean," and Chapter 20 (Uncertainty Principle and the Mass Media).
- The straightforward process of numerical analysis, using relatively simple math techniques to turn numbers into knowledge, is priceless. What makes this part of the book valuable is the author's integration of the preceding chapters. His writing leads you to a critical thinking mindset with common sense and techniques that are within the grasp of high school students. It looks easy, but is testimony to the author's exceptional ability to communicate and inspire.

Overall this book is one of my personal favorites and one that I recommend to colleagues. ■

IT Events Calendar

FYI, you may want to mark your calendars for the following information technology-related events:

September 2006

26–30, ASCNet's Annual Technology, Education and Networking Conference
Gaylord Texan Hotel, Dallas TX
For more information visit http://www.ascnetquarterly.org/TENCon/

October 2006

25–26, e-Financial WorldExpo—Global Technology Event for the Financial Industry
Direct Energy Centre, Toronto, Canada
For more information visit http://e-financial.wowgao.com/

October 31–November 2, KM World 2006 Conference and Exhibition
San Jose McEnery Convention Center, San Jose, CA
For more information visit http://www.kmworld.com/kmw06

November 2006

5–11, TDWI (The Data Warehousing Institute) World Conference
Royal Pacific Resort, Orlando, FL
For more information visit: http://www.tdwi.org/education/conferences/

The Better Way

by Nancy Doucette

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the June 2006 issue of *Rough Notes* Magazine. It is reprinted here with its permission.

Author's Note: Gulfshore Insurance received the Automation Excellence Award at the 2006 AMS Users' Group National Conference. The award celebrates innovative ideas that enhance agency efficiency, profitability, and streamlined operations. In presenting the award, AMSUG's then-president, Jerry Fox, noted: "By taking advantage of the technology and tools we have available, Gulfshore has gone from good to great. Their continued commitment to automation has paid off for them in a big way—particularly this year."

■ **Nancy Doucette** is senior editor for *Rough Notes* Magazine and specializes in the area of technology as it impacts the insurance industry.

"Good-to-great companies think differently about the role of technology," observes Jim Collins, author of the much-read, oft-quoted book on management strategy, *Good to Great*. He notes that great companies don't adopt technology for their own sake. Instead, they use technology as a tool to accelerate momentum.

The management team at Gulfshore Insurance, Inc., (GSI) based in Naples, Florida, knows a lot about using technology to accelerate momentum. According to Jack Powers, vice president of sales and marketing for GSI, agency revenues grew by 16 percent last year. "That's typical for us," he says. "We do over $100 million in sales a year. We're a sales centric organization and devoted to growth. We couldn't be what we are without technology."

But with sales, comes service and with some 10,000 clients—8,000 of which are personal lines clients—the agency is reliant on its agency management system. "This area of southwest Florida is growing rapidly," Powers continues. "There are a lot of high-value homes in this area and we have a lot of clients to keep track of. So we have to be as efficient as possible. Our Sagitta system helps us achieve that."

In terms of revenue, though, 65 percent comes from commercial lines. Since the agency opened its doors in 1970, it has grown along with its neighbors. "We've been fortunate to get involved in larger, more sophisticated business accounts," Powers explains. "Those accounts need strong risk management services and financial planning assistance. We continually evolve to meet the needs of our expanding client base." As a result, GSI's commercial clients are loyal. This is evidenced by a 96 percent retention rate.

As part of that evolution, Gulfshore Risk Solutions was established as part of the commercial lines division to assist businesses seeking alternative risk solutions and loss control. Powers says that Sagitta helps Dennis Slabaugh, the head of that division, review account histories and determine the best sources for insurance for individual clients. Additionally, Slabaugh uses Sagitta's capabilities for claims reviews, especially for workers comp.

In some cases, evolution requires GSI to adopt an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" philosophy, Powers says. "Florida probably leads the nation in professional employer organizations (PEOs). We did battle with them for a number of years—we saw them as the competition. But eventually we decided to start a Human Capital Solutions division. We now represent seven or eight PEO organizations for large businesses that like that model, or smaller ones with three or four people."

In other instances, a more traditional approach to employee benefits suits the client's needs. Among the services available through Gulfshore's Financial Services department are group life/health insurance products for businesses as well as long-term care, term life, and annuities. Executive vice president and chief operations officer Michelle Gleeson explains that both the Human Capital Solutions division and the Financial Services department depend on the AMS Benefits management system to store prospect, client, carrier, and staff data. She notes that there is a separate support staff for the Financial Services department. However, the information that's in the AMS Benefits database synchronizes with Sagitta so a complete client picture is available should it be necessary to find out who the proper service person is to send a client inquiry to.

"Since we began using the AMS Benefits solution just over a year ago, we're able to manage the information more effectively and, therefore, serve our financial services clients much better," Gleeson says.

Continued on page 10

The Better Way

Continued from page 9

"Our sales folks are more confident about going after larger accounts since we implemented the AMS Benefits solution," says Powers. "There's a huge amount of service involved on a benefits package for a company with a lot of employees. There's often more turnover so making census changes is easier with this solution in place. It's a better way of tracking activities so we can be on top of customer service issues."

GSI is indeed committed to finding that "better way" of conducting business, Gleeson notes, and frequently that better way is dependent upon using technology. The agency has been scanning since 1996, she reports. In 2005, the agency added a bar code system that works in conjunction with the scanning program. Now, all service staff create their own bar code pages, and scanned documents are automatically directed into the folders in which they belong. "All service staff members have all-in-one units (printer, fax, and scanner) on their desks," she explains. "The desktop units are used for single-sheet scan needs. For the high-volume scanning jobs of bar-coded material, GSI has three high-speed, all-in-one units in the building.

"We are paperless within the day," Gleeson continues. "We keep the paper documents for 90 days and then shred them."

About 4 percent of GSI's budget is earmarked for technology. Powers explains that hardware upgrades are "strategically initiated based on agency growth. Upgrades are based on a needs analysis, which is reviewed at regular operational management meetings."

Gleeson adds: "The management team realizes that getting the right tools for employees is one of the best things we can do. And if the staff feels that we're making investments that are going to make their jobs a bit easier every day, that's a good message that we're sending."

Let's get back to *Good to Great* for a moment. Author Collins amends the adage "People are your most important asset." From his perspective, the *right* people are an organization's most important asset.

Gleeson concurs. Naples received the brunt of Hurricane Wilma—a record-setting Category 3 storm that hit in October 2005. But GSI didn't miss a beat. "Not only was our technology up and running 24 hours after Wilma hit, but 85 percent of our people were here and ready to work. Some staff arrived as early as 7 a.m. It's not only having the right tools but having the right staff," she says.

One of the technology solutions that was working behind the scenes was CSR24. GSI has been using CSR24 for about five years. At the close of business each day an automated process that is part of CSR24 takes a copy of all GSI's client and policy data, which it then stores, at its hosted site. Among the services available, CSR24 provides 24/7 web-based policy access and after-hours call support. "Prior to leaving the building once a hurricane warning has been issued, we have our telephone service provider forward our phones to CSR24," Gleeson explains. Following Wilma, the telephone service provider was unable to restore the telephone function right away so calls continued to go to CSR24 while the staff was in the lobby of GSI's building taking claims. A permanent electronic record of each contact was e-mailed immediately to the agency.

As part of the agency's disaster recovery plan, GSI has a contract with a firm that guarantees them a generator. "It's large enough that it needs to be pulled on a trailer," Powers explains. GSI had the first floor of its building wired a couple of years ago to accommodate the generator. Gleeson says that once the hurricane warning is issued, they call the electrical contractor with whom GSI has a relationship to arrange to have the generator hooked up once the storm has passed. After Wilma, GSI was running on the generator for about five days. And, should the water supply be shut off, GSI also has a contract with a Port-O-John company. Fortunately, GSI didn't lose its water supply after Wilma.

Gleeson recalls that in 2004, Hurricane Charley went north of the Naples area. That gave GSI a chance to do a test run of its disaster plan, she says. In 2005, GSI had prepared for several other hurricanes but Wilma "really put us to the test. And while we were satisfied with how the disaster plan worked, we have configured the electricity so the second story of our building can be on the generator as well. After Wilma, we could use only the first floor of our building. By having our entire office space wired to be on the generator, we'll be even better equipped to serve our clients." ■

New Hope for Blackberry Addicts

by Bruce D. Hicks, CPCU, CLU

In our July 2006 issue of *Cutting Edge*, author Jon Gice shared a personal and humorous secret . . . he had been lured into an addiction to his Blackberry device. Well, it appears that Gice is not alone in his predicament. In a June 7, 2006, story from the Reuters News Service, it was reported that the Sheraton Chicago has recognized the large number of persons with a similar and deeply set addiction. It has also created a way to help.

The innovative hotel offers its guests an additional service when they reserve a room . . . a chance for Blackberry Rehab. Specifically the Sheraton allows its guests to voluntarily surrender their device for the length of their stay. The idea for the Blackberry blackout time was the idea of Rick Ueno, general manager of the Sheraton Chicago. As is the case with many new efforts to deal with addictive behavior, this opportunity grew out of Ueno's own, previous obsession with the seductive and flexible wireless communicator.

Sheraton guests who would like to take advantage of the e-rehab need only to surrender their Blackberries to Ueno who keeps them locked and secure in his office until such guests checkout. The story did not include any information on how many guests have accepted the opportunity or whether any have broken down and demanded their return, unable to complete their voluntary ordeal.

The story also lacked any mention of whether Ueno has developed any plans on dealing with relapses or if there will be any ongoing monitoring after guests leave the Sheraton Chicago. While it may be too early to predict whether this effort will "save" any Blackberry addicts, it should still serve as an indication that more avenues of rehab may be developed. We can only hope that more brave souls, such as the IT Section's own Gice, will recognize their need for help. One step at a time. . . . ■

Use the IT Section's "Identity Theft" PowerPoint Presentation

by Peter Laube, CPCU

Identity theft remains a hot topic in the media, and the methods used to scam victims are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Constantly there is news involving sensitive company information being erroneously published on the web, hackers illegally accessing company servers, and data on stolen laptops that is not properly encrypted. It is obvious that the valuable data on employees and customers is constantly at risk.

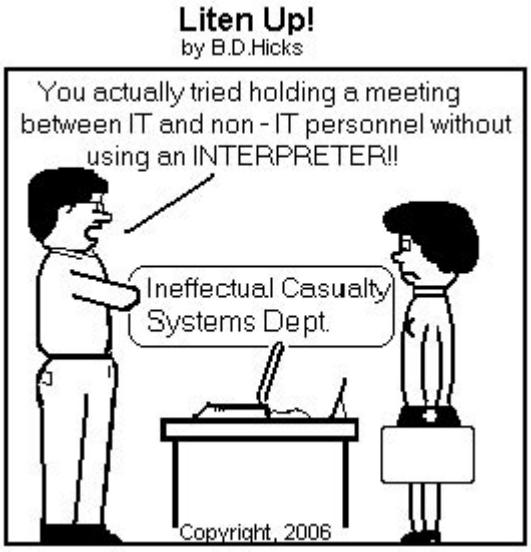
In response to continued demand for the IT Section's popular turnkey presentation, "Identity Theft: Targeting a Modern Problem with Modern Solutions," co-author **Lynn M. Davenport, CPCU,** has updated the program with current data from the Javelin "2006 Identity Fraud Survey Report." The Javelin report, published in January 2006, is an update to the research company's 2003 study. The revised edition is based on consumer surveys performed over the past three years.

The IT Section's PowerPoint presentation is available online to download from the "Hot Topics and White Papers" area of the IT Section's web site. Handouts and speaker notes are available through PowerPoint's "View Notes" option.

Any CPCU Society member may use and present "Identity Theft" to chapters or to other organizations. Outside groups should be particularly interested in receiving the valuable information contained in the program. Licensed insurance professionals may have the additional benefit of gaining CE hours as some states have previously approved CE credit for the presentation.

Please visit http://infotech.cpcusociety.org, and click on "Hot Topics and White Papers" from the menu on the left-hand side of the page. Or contact Lynn Davenport at (970) 395-5911. If any CPCUs have personal identity theft experiences, please consider sharing them with Davenport for future program updates. ■

What's In This Issue



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