# A New Breed of Friendship

**(A call for much greater Business-IT Collaboration)**

This article was drafted for Corporate IT Strategy and the Financial Times IT Review in 1995/6.

**The business world says that it is *still* not getting the results it needs from Information Technology. Why is this problem taking so long to resolve and how can we introduce a new era of IT productivity for the business world?**

**A new breed of friendship between IT and the business community seems the obvious answer but, as we approach the millennium, this much needed friendship remains elusive. Why is it taking so long to build up and what can be done to speed up the process?**

**David Jacobs points the way to a solution...**

How many users of a new computer system have you ever heard say "It's wonderful, it makes our jobs easier, it's so well designed, it's boosted our morale and our business, it's so well aligned to our daily needs, etc..."? None? If so, sadly you'd be in the majority. So what is going wrong? We have wonderful new technology and tomorrow it's always more capable than today. Where is the problem exactly and how can we resolve it? Are our expectations too high? How can we get more out of the same?

The first step is to acknowledge that we have got a problem and that the business world is having severe, even increasing, difficulty making the best use of IT. Press reports and research show how slowly business management and IT have been learning to work together and this gives serious cause for concern. More worrying is that the infamous brigade of highly valuable business/IT cross-breed professionals that was proposed some years ago as being the likely solution is not much in evidence. Why is this? We know it's a good concept. A senior IT manager was quoted in 1995 as saying "We need a different breed of player both IT capable and business literate.." In 1996 the British Computer Society supported cross-breeds fervently in a major article in their Bulletin and many highly reputable bodies such as Warwick University Business School have recently stood in full support for integrated business/IT information management. So what's causing the difficulty and why are these cross-breeds not being given a chance to sort it all out?

The first obstacle is the IT industry's obsession with technology and consequent lack of focus on business objectives. Aspiring IT professionals find business acumen stifled as they are channelled towards technical activities. Of course we need good technologists but the 'Information Grand Prix' cannot be won by mechanics alone, good drivers must also be found. IT professionals with any leaning towards being communicators must be encouraged (sadly the reverse is usually and embarrassingly true in the IT skills market). Technical geniuses are of little use without the ability to apply that technical skill to the pursuit of real world business objectives. And that skill is the *really* difficult one in the current climate although it needn't be.

Admittedly the concept of software is still relatively new and new management techniques are required to exploit it. Unfortunately many of these techniques are not yet mature. To make matters worse non IT business people are afraid to get involved and display what may be criticised as a lack of ability. IT could help here by displaying a more welcoming attitude than the usual self-protective 'techie-ism'. Especially when everyone stands to gain.

Another consequence of this technical 'over-focus' is that many projects fail because the

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business requirements are not correctly identified. I believe IT or somebody should be explaining to the business how crucial accurate business requirements are and helping users to formulate them (instead of laying the blame on the users for 'changing the requirements' or just not knowing or even caring as is so often the case). This customary IT attitude to business requirements displays a distinct lack of appreciation for the fact that real business processes necessarily change every day and accurate and 'updatable' requirements are essential not optional. I surmise that if IT people were to be suddenly transferred to the department that used the system they'd just built and were required to use it 8 hours a day, they would invariably be horrified at how difficult it was to use; one misguided piece of programming can mean thousands of unnecessary user actions in a day's work.

Further on in the production process IT people should be begging the users to thrash the system at test stage and make sure it's a suitable fit rather than trying to avoid the whole issue as is the case so depressingly often. Imagine a Formula One team designing, testing and tuning the car with no involvement from the driver. If Damon Hill first gets to sit in the car at the starting grid of the British Grand Prix who's going to win?! And yet this is what happens in IT, the driver users are invariably not only under-consulted but even positively discriminated against with "They don't know IT, they don't know what their requirements are so we in IT will make them up". Well, IT, you've just lost the race. Let's get working together. Perhaps if we do, the business side will gain more confidence and pull back a fraction on those ridiculous time scales they so often hit IT with!

I also believe somebody should be explaining to the business world that the development of a computer system will typically involve a business in making the kind of rigorous pre-emptive decisions it has never had to worry about in the past (because of the precise way software works). Also that businesses must be prepared to second very significant human resource to a project if success is to be had. Introducing these 'realities' would help so much - even if only in terms of understanding and morale.

IT should also be coming clean about the risks and realities of software development. Many systems are technically far too ambitious and expectations have not been realistically set. If the business objectives were used as the main criteria rather than IT's indulgence in using tomorrow's technology today, dependable results might be achieved with more regularity. Where technology is risky it isn't technical skills that will have most effect in minimising that risk, it's sensible business objective-driven management.

So what of the hybrid manager who should be able to sort all this out? Is she or he getting the chance? In other walks of life the problem of two parties failing to communicate is usually resolved by a mediator. Therefore the obvious answer would be to use professionals with experience of both sides of the IT fence. However the potentially significant number of people who could fulfil this role are precisely those who may have found themselves being herded towards technical roles by the IT industry (that seems to believe lots of software coding is the answer to almost every business problem) or else being deemed as insufficiently expert in the technology by the business itself. This creates a skills shortage right where the skill is most needed. Businesses can help themselves here by looking more at candidates' contextual experience when recruiting and then supporting the development of those wider abilities in the workplace.

The wrong impression is constantly being given by clients and recruitment agents alike that specific technical experience is almost all and everything else is almost nothing. In fact, I believe, it is the other way round and that the IT industry has too long been wagging the tail of the dog in the mistaken belief that the tail (software code) is the dog and the dog (real business needs for information) is the tail. Meanwhile we are losing those desperately needed individuals

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who can mediate competent technology into place. The new generation of software professional of, say, under 35 years of age have probably now always been in IT unlike their predecessors who will often have worked in other areas of business before coming into IT Therefore what perspective we may have ever had on real business needs is evaporating and the problem of misunderstanding between business and IT is likely to get worse unless something is done.

Each and every company can make a start for themselves by encouraging active communication and understanding. If you don't have anyone who can set this up then hire somebody who can. Find a hybrid business information/IT person and support them strongly. The results will speak for themselves. Make sure however it is somebody who believes in batting hard for the business or you will merely end up back at square one with lots of software code and not much else. In respect of ageism also bear in mind that a good cross-breed will typically (although not exclusively) be over 30 years of age so don't let IT try to throw away these most valuable (and contextually qualified) people and keep the youngsters in the dark with nobody to guide them! Also bear in mind that such a person doesn't have to be a 'master of all trades' to fulfil this function. The importance of the interpreter is obvious when the American president holds a summit with the Russian leader. Without him or her there would be almost no communication at all and yet he or she may know comparatively little about the precise issues. In any case your 'cross breed' will probably know at least as much about the issues on both sides, if not more.

Consider the potential benefits of such an interpreter working in your business who understands the structure of IT, its methods and your needs enough to bridge the communication gulf - less misunderstanding, shorter time scales, better productivity, earlier warnings, business objectives fully addressed, higher likelihood of success, less maintenance, better morale and so on. If you decide to take this route though be realistic; technology is advancing fast and these people should not be expected to understand every nuance of the technology. They don't need to and, if the industry supports them, they will be able to help the business world and restore IT's flagging reputation.

Working against us in the past we have had IT project managers who have tended to come from a pure IT background so they will be technically qualified but not sufficiently business-sympathetic. If they have come from the business itself the IT department (and even the business) may sometimes not trust their technical skills. This does however seem to be the preferred route for successful project managers as recent reports (in Director magazine for example) of senior business managers taking charge of IT projects have revealed a consistent degree of success. This is logical as IT people are so often not good at managing their own projects and, secondly, there is a ready-made connection to the business requirements via the senior 'non IT' manager in charge. Probably the answer is a mix of both - collaboration!

A further problem is that modern IT job advertisements seek experience of a growing multitude of technologies. These positions are predominantly technicians' jobs and not for those who will manage the successful *application* of the technology to the business need. IT now owns too much of this process and business must regain control. So whether you put a non IT manager in charge or hire a new cross-breed 'business information systems specialist', at the very least make sure you have your own business representative at a fairly high level. Doing this at a lower level may help but may also cause as many problems as it solves. Workshops are being used these days to resolve the inevitable problem of business people disagreeing amongst themselves and this is certainly an encouraging trend. I believe it is up to IT to facilitate such debates and help obtain a consensus. This comes back to the business having to understand that they will have to make rigorous pre-emptive decisions when they have never previously

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needed to in order to pre-program a box of electronics to do their number crunching.

So far, IT's answer to the requirements problem has been the relatively clinical role of the business analyst. However, the role of the new breed of business information systems professional is much wider than that of a business analyst. They have a much more positive contribution to make to the overall management and organisation of the project, forcefully directing it towards the business objectives. They will work with business analysts and IT project managers and represent the interests of the business.

In conclusion, to 'give it a try', make sure you have a good 'translator' on the user business/IT interface. Hire an IT consultant and you will often get IT on its own. Hire a business information systems specialist and you might get something that not only sympathises with your business need but actually addresses it head on! If you can't afford one or can't find one then train your own - there are plenty waiting to help out but so far they have not been given the chance - what a waste! Remember however that this strategy can only be effective if the business organisation and the IT department support the individual concerned. As IT strategy is a dual activity, IT and the business must learn as much as they reasonably can about each other's practices and work to common goals. The new player can help to establish what those common goals are.

So, to give IT the best chance of helping your business, make sure you have suitable representation across the divide and, being fair to the IT department, give them plenty of business resource to define the system needs. Also don't be too ambitious to use the latest technical products, they may be too risky - you will have to decide. In general, attitudes must change. Those who can talk to the business must be encouraged to do so. The principle to be preached is that it is not the technology that will resolve the business need but the *application* of the technology and IT development should be a dual activity by the business and the IT personnel. There's no need to take things to extremes and run off into the sunset together but a new brand of mutual friendship would not go amiss!

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**Footnote**

The FT IT Review eventually decided not to print this article as they felt that it was 'highly interesting but too controversial'. A shame because I considered it could have helped a lot of people. Perhaps it can still help some people?! It is a little out of date now as my approach and techniques have moved on considerably but I still consider it a key article in the quest to have the benefits of hybridism recognised.

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