

Are we ever going to Change?

At the end of 2011 I attended the annual itSMF Conference, and came away feeling really despondent.

It wasn't the conference – the guys at the itSMF did a great job. We [Pink Elephant] were the Platinum Sponsor again and the show and exhibition went very well for us, so why did I feel so down?

Let me explain. On our exhibition stand we had a competition to win a trip to our annual conference in Las Vegas in February. Over the past few years we have delivered a workshop entitled the ABC of ICT, which in a nutshell helps organisations address poor Attitudes, Behaviours and Cultural issues that will, a) stop their IT service improvement programme [ITIL] dead in its tracks and, b) be detrimental to delivering excellent IT Services. We deliver these workshops to both IT Services and their customers – preferably at the same time. When we ask the customer to select a card that best describes their IT department, one card gets chosen more often than all the others - we asked entrants to our competition to choose what they thought this card would be.

The most identified 'worse practice' identified by the IT customer community is the Queen of Clubs – this card shows a space shuttle that is just lifting off, and in the foreground is the man from the IT department presenting a disk to the flight director. Underneath is the caption: "Here are the emergency updates to the on-board navigation software". This card is titled: "No understanding of Business Impact and Priorities". This is what our customers think of us.

Many of the entrants to the competition chose this card – we put them in the hat and drew out a winner. I had to go up on stage just prior to the last session at the conference and read out the winner. It was only then, when I was looking at this card that I got really downhearted.

Why? Just indulge me a little longer. In the late seventies I was a Computer Shift Leader with British Aerospace [now BAe Systems] at their Military Aircraft division in Warton, Lancashire. Here they designed, developed, built and tested military aircraft, and I worked in the Data Processing department which basically provided computing to all the other departments in the company. We had a huge IBM mainframe, with big half inch spinning tapes, removable disks, printers the size of a small car, and a console full of switches and flashing lights. It was great, we could make this thing sing and dance, and we all worked there because we loved computers.

One of the departments that used our services was 'Flight Test'. For some reason the MOD wanted us to 'prove' the aircraft in flight before they bought it – they just wouldn't believe the computer modelling! So the Flight Test department was the pinnacle of the aircraft's development – they had test pilots in their department – really cool.

The test pilots would take up the aircraft, put it through its paces, land [that was always a bonus], the engineers would download the data from what was basically a black box, send it over to us, we'd process it [whatever that entailed] produce a small disk and send it back to them. They'd take the disk, make some adjustment to the aircraft, and the whole process started again. You can imagine this was a very expensive process, and any delay cost a lot of money.

It was during one of these flight test programmes that we decided we would update the operating system on the mainframe, after all we wanted the latest and greatest system from IBM. So we told the man from Flight Test he'd have to wait – big mistake!! They had turned the aircraft round, and sent it to the end of the runway to await the update. So we had a multi-million pound Tornado ticking over waiting for us to process the flight data.

I'd never seen such a red faced Director of Flight Test storm into our building, and, being quite young, had never heard half the words he was using. Apparently the gist of it was that none of us had parents. The expletives and profanities flowed for about ten minutes, but one of the comments I remember to this day, and was something that changed my whole outlook on delivering IT services, was: "You bunch of [left blank for your imagination], have no idea of the business impact of your actions – you need to understand the priorities in this business". He was so right – I suddenly realised I was in the aircraft manufacturing industry and not the IT industry.

When I was stood up on stage at the itSMF conference, holding this same card, I was hit by an overwhelming feeling of déjà vu. My little encounter with the Director of Flight Test happened thirty five years ago! Yet here we are in 2011 and nothing has changed. The technological advances have been immense, but [generally] Attitudes, Behaviours and Culture of the IT Services department just hasn't moved on. If the ABC of ICT was available back then, we would have identified the same worse practice cards that we do today – when, are we going to change?