

BUILDING BIG BLUE KNOWLEDGE IN THE IVORY TOWERS



Back in the '80s when we were both building our programming "chops" with a Fortune 500 company, the conventional wisdom for partnering with an IT vendor was as simple as it was straightforward: Nobody ever got fired for "hiring IBM." It was more than just one of our boss's favorite sayings – it was an edict that defined our IT strategy.



The idea wasn't as much about implementing the best technical solution to attack a business challenge

as it was implementing the best IBM solution (although 20 years ago, this was often one and the same thing). In this context, deriving business solutions was fairly straightforward at the management level. Most of the heavy-duty decision-making was more technical in nature. Getting the Big Blue Elephant to tap dance was the true essence of innovation at that time. Truth be told, it was also the spark that fueled our flame as programmers.

Today, of course, things are much different. The CIO job has evolved to become a liaison between the business world and the technical world. The challenge of pounding square pegs into round holes (think backup air filter on Apollo 13) has given way to a more flexible approach that looks to increase efficiency and gain competitive advantages through IT.

What's Happening in Vegas?

"Knowledge is the most democratic source of power." ~ Alvin Toffler in Power Shift.

Needless to say, the scope of knowledge required by a company's IT staff has changed as well. Employers now need people with a combination of skills: networking engineers who know databases, web designers who understand networking, and, most important of all, employees with enough business skills to see

the Big Picture, work as a team, and deal directly with customers.

Hold on now, before you run to the phone and call 1-800-Bangledesh to fill in these squares on your company's hierarchy chart, there's something you should know: IBM is listening. And quite literally coming up with a new school of thought tailored to the specific needs of the gaming and leisure industry.

At the risk of violating the hallowed "What Happens In Vegas, Stays In Vegas" mantra, we

think IBM's academic initiative with the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV) is an idea worth sharing in this space.

i, Student

Anybody who's worked on the IT side of the gaming and hospitality industry in Vegas knows these resorts have almost as many System i business apps as they have "eyes in the sky" overlooking their casinos. Producing a steady stream of homegrown computer and



business professionals with a System i background is in everyone's best interest: the resorts, UNLV, and certainly IBM.

But there's a big hurdle to overcome. Ever since the dot bomb implosion that marked the beginning of this decade, student enrollment in IT courses and degrees has been declining at a precipitous pace. The Big Question being asked by CIO's in the G&L industry and schools like UNLV is this: How do you rekindle students' interest in IT courses? How do you entice students to pursue these degrees and embark on these careers?

From IBM's perspective, one more question needed to be addressed: How do you get students interested in IT to develop System i skill sets in particular? It's not as easy as simply opening up the corporate checkbook and quickly installing some hardware on campus. Universities work at a different speed than the corporate world and a fair amount of politicking is required to get almost anything done.

One of IBM's program managers for their System i Academic Initiative program sums it up this way: "People at universities tend to work in silos, and there's not a lot of collaboration from the top or between the computer science and business schools. Generally, IT professors tend to teach the specialties they're familiar with (Windows, UNIX, etc.) and not explore a lot of new stuff. They go with what they know and are slow to adopt new technologies in their curriculum."

Producing a steady stream of homegrown computer and business professionals with a System i background is in everyone's best interest: the resorts, UNLV, and certainly IBM.

The Big Picture

In short, you need to take a creative approach in order to crack this nut. To its credit, IBM has always kept one ear to the ground and stayed close to its customers. So, sensing an opportunity to build a skilled labor force that is System i savvy in the gaming capital of the world, IBM galvanized Las Vegas's business community and set out to create an academic network that partners UNLV's business and IT schools with the main players in Las Vegas's gaming industry (i.e., the folks with the jobs).

It's a model that IBM has used successfully in other towns, where they've created vertical programs that cater to a community's largest industry. Naturally, in the case of Las Vegas, that would be gaming and hospitality.

Members of IBM's Academic Initiative Program for System i met with department chairs and university professors at UNLV back in 2006 to discuss the development of a program that not only teaches the technical aspects of System i architecture, but also educates students on "The Big Picture": How to use this technology to attack business problems and find solutions.

Students enrolling in MIS courses are future managers, not just programmers. IBM, UNLV and the Las Vegas business community have joined forces to create an academic program that combines the development of technical skills with related knowledge about the management of IT at a conceptual level. Regardless of whether or not a student actually works in an IBM System i environment, he or she will understand how to address business and IT management problems. At the same time, students will learn enough technical skills to leave school and become a competent entry-level professional in the IBM System i field.

Academic Initiative 101

This initiative is still in the beginning stages and will evolve over time. Currently, the plans call for an undergraduate course for the upcoming Fall 2007 semester at UNLV and a graduate course for the Spring 2008 semester. The undergraduate course will be more technical in nature and include "hands-on" projects, while the graduate version will have more of a managerial focus with a research paper deliverable.

The focus of System i courses will center on concepts such as system integration, application delivery and service-oriented architecture, as well as minor – but no less important – topics such as servers, middleware, operating systems, capacity planning, security,

The Big Question being asked by CIO's in the G&L industry and schools like UNLV is this: How do you rekindle students' interest in IT courses? How do you entice students to pursue these degrees and embark on these careers?

availability, virtualization and economic justification. An effort will also be made to incorporate System i modules into existing courses where appropriate.

Partnerships In The Real World

Perhaps the best part of this curriculum is the participation of IBM's customers and business partners, who will be collaborating with the university in a number of ways – everything from guest lectures and career days to internships and the development of case studies and real-world projects that students can work on.

The local relationships enabled by IBM's Academic Initiative for System i not only provides additional resources for students, but also offers the university valuable insights into regional business needs. Businesses should benefit from an increased pool of skilled employees in the community, and students should find plenty of grateful employers with job applications in hand after graduation.

You can bet our company will be standing in that line.

John R. Taylor and Ann I. Nygren are principals and co-owners of Key Consulting/Software (KCS), a computer consulting company with more than 15 years of experience in the gaming and hospitality industry. KCS provides IT professionals with expertise in systems analysis and applications, specializing in back-of-the-house and front-of-the-house solutions. Key Consulting can be reached at info@kcsoft.com.