

Marriage counselling

Ian Angus, who was NCR Australia's Managing Director in the mid 1980's, was the first IT executive to advise me to look at the relationship between a CIO and their IT supplier as a marriage. I have, subsequently, heard this advice on many occasions during my IT career. The implication is that problems and challenges are inevitable in both a marriage and an IT project and that the secret for success is communication. While Ian's advice certainly helped me in my work life it failed, unfortunately, to make any impact on my own marriage. Ours was one of the 40% of Australian marriages that are reported to end in divorce.

Recent research from the Australian chapter of the Institute of Arbitrators and Mediators (IAMA) indicates that the links between marriages and IT projects may, perhaps, be even closer than we might think. According to their research, conducted in Australia last year in conjunction with the local Computer Society and the Project Management Institute, it seems almost the same percentage of IT and matrimonial partnerships end up in difficulties. The evidence is that 46% of IT projects result in some sort of dispute. Therefore, like a marriage, it is clear that IT executives, whether they are vendors or end users, will at times need some external help in problem resolution.

Maybe then there are other lessons that IT executives can learn from matrimony. For a long time the only recourse that sparing spouses had for settling their difficulties was through the courts. However, it was clear that these outcomes were often fraught with failings. As a result, overtime a series of facilities have been developed to which couples can turn to when their marriage hits problems. Resources like counselling, mediation and arbitration are all designed to provide a less antagonistic environment for resolving problems. In the end the court is usually a rubber stamp for actions decided elsewhere.

Unfortunately, it seems that in IT disputes the court is seen, all too frequently, as the first port of call. In recent years it has been common to find entire conferences devoted to writing better IT contracts. The inference is that this will make your court case stronger. Yet the IAMA research highlighted that of the various dispute resolution avenues available the highest level of dissatisfaction was with litigation. Around 50% of respondents were either very dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the outcomes. Clearly the adversarial nature of a court case can be an unpleasant experience. However, other concerns raised were to do with the cost of the process and the time taken before a resolution was determined.

Therefore, I wonder whether IT can take another leaf out of the marriage book. I think it is time for this industry to give more emphasis to a role for neutral mediators who can work with both IT suppliers and CIOs to determine how problems can be amicably resolved. Interestingly, this has been increasingly happening in the building industry in recent years, another sector where disputes are common. The outcomes there seem impressive. Faster resolutions are being realised and these resolutions are usually more creative, flexible and cost-effective.

As someone who has been through a marriage breakdown I know from first hand experience that it can be exasperating, frustrating and mentally draining. No side wins during the process. Yet it was only when we drew on mediation that we started to gain an agreement on how we could go forward. The mediation process brought calmness and objectivity to the dialogue which made it easier for the parties to appreciate the other person's point of view. The evidence from the IAMA is that, rather than wallow in some quagmire of discontent, many local IT projects could similarly benefit from mediation. Who knows what might eventuate? Perhaps CIOs and IT vendors could even live happily ever after.