

DeLisle Worrell: Challenges to increase IT efficiency

Address by Dr DeLisle Worrell, Governor of the Central Bank of Barbados, to the Information Society of Barbados (ISB), Barbados Hilton, Bridgetown, 2 July 2010.

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This dinner is an opportunity to revive the ISB, at a time when there are important challenges facing us, which can be addressed only by an organization which is structured like the ISB, bringing together IT professionals and users. When we started the ISB we were at the dawn of the era of personal computing, and today every adult and most children use sophisticated electronic communications devices as a matter of course. The simplest cell phone nowadays is capable of text messaging, and can be used for banking and financial transactions. So we are now past the stage we were at when ISB started, when the main concern was to introduce users to the potential of the latest IT products and services.

The new challenge is to make IT work for us as a tool to increase the efficiency with which we work, and to increase our productivity and effectiveness. This is a major challenge, and in order to meet it we must have effective interaction between IT professionals who provide services, and the rest of us who consume them. Going forward, I want to urge us all, through active participation in the society's activities, to contribute actively and fully to this dialogue.

I can best illustrate the problem by telling you about my recent experience as Executive Director of the CCMF. Soon after I joined the Centre we made the decision to deliver all our data and information services online, and to publish all our books and economics papers electronically. The CCMF publishes an academic journal, the JBF3E. As some of you will know, the publication of any journal or magazine is an onerous process, involving the collection, review and editing of all the material, written by several contributors. A huge problem in meeting publications deadlines is that you have to get all the material together, cleaned up and checked, before you can send the completed issue to the printers. A single tardy contributor can wreck your entire schedule, and prevent you from bringing the publication out on time. I've been in this business for decades, and this was the reality I'd always faced. It was only when we went to electronic publishing that it suddenly dawned on me that we didn't have to wait until the last paper was ready to put out the issue of the journal. Rather, each paper could be posted as soon as it was ready. So that is how the JBF3E is now published. As soon as an article has been peer reviewed, revised, copy edited and checked, it is published online. The journal is published in June and December. The June 2010 issues may be accessed now at www.ccmf-uwj.org, the Centre's website. As soon as the next six to eight papers are published, the December 2010 issue will be closed, and the next paper published after that will be designated for the June 2011 issue. In this way, electronic publishing frees you from the threat of being held hostage to the last laggard writer or editor.

Once we uncovered this reality we were able to extend the same principle to other publications, such as a book that is currently being prepared on the financial sectors of the Caribbean countries. Each central bank that contributes to CCMF's activities is contributing a chapter. Not all the chapters are ready, but those that are have already been posted to the website, and chapters are added as they are finalised. The same considerations apply even more importantly to data. When statistics are presented in printed form, as for example in the Central bank's *Annual Statistical Digest*, publication has to await the data that are available with the longest delay. That meant that the ASD with 2008 data appeared only in 2010. The Central Bank intends to get around this problem by moving to electronic publishing of data, which allows different sectoral statistics to be published as soon as they are ready.

Another thing we discovered at CCMF was that, even after we'd published a wealth of useful material to our website, people weren't aware of it. People would call or write us for

information which they could readily access on the site. A colleague of mine, a professor at UWI, sent a graduate student to the Centre in the hope of finding a copy of a paper he had presented at a conference organised by the Centre some years earlier. He was unaware that the paper was available electronically on the website. That made us realize that we needed a newsletter, to keep users and potential users up to date, and the CCMF's monthly newsletter was started. It features probably the most convenient summary of Caribbean regional business and economic news each month.

My point here is that we at CCMF were not the first to discover the fact that electronic publishing liberates publishers from being held hostage to latecomers, nor were we the first to confront the challenge of getting the word out about our online services. If we had been part of a network that might, at some point in its programme of activities, have included experiences of publishers and editors, we might have been spared the agony of having to rediscover the wheel, in this case. It is this kind of networking and dialogue that I suggest the ISB should seek to facilitate, going forward.

I could give many other examples of the need to share experiences to improve effectiveness and efficiency; many are in areas where I for one have not yet found a satisfactory solution, and there is at least one area where I have an amazing programme which I find absolutely indispensable, which no-one else seems to find useful. I'm really curious to know why.

However, I want to end these brief remarks with a suggestion for treating with an issue that needs to be high on the ISB's agenda going forward, and it has to do with the process by which organizations and businesses approach the design of major new systems. That process, when it is well done, begins with a thorough discussion of the user's needs for the future, so that the new systems can be designed to satisfy those needs as fully as possible. No matter how carefully this process is carried out, however, the resulting system never quite seems to be satisfactory, and sometimes the users are quite dissatisfied with the product. This frustrates the IT staff, who rightly point out that they have only provided the users with what they asked for. The users then feel stupid for not anticipating what they really needed, and put up with what they have, but with ill grace.

The users should not feel stupid. The reality, which I myself have only very recently come to accept, largely but not wholly as a result of my experiences at CCMF, is that you *cannot* know what you really want until you have had a chance to test drive the product. I do not consider myself a fool for not anticipating that electronic publishing of statistics would liberate the publisher from the tyranny of latecomers. It is not by accident that the things we do with computers resemble the things we used to do before we had computers. No matter how inventive we are, our imaginations are bounded ultimately by what we know. The beauty of IT is that it has introduced us to a whole new world, and to take advantage of its possibilities we must be flexible enough to allow ourselves to go down the unexpected pathways that the new technologies reveal. That is the new challenge for the IT professional. You have organized your work to give the user what he asked for. You need to go further, to empower the user to change his mind, to go off in directions he hadn't thought of before, and to change the ways in which he organizes his work and his use of IT services.

We are embarked on a voyage of discovery, in this age of IT, and we must work together, IT specialists and the consumers of their product, to rewrite the maps and charts that guide us, as we go along. We must avoid beating up on each other when we occasionally run aground because the charts we were working with failed to reveal dangerous shoals in our way. We must be able to recognize when what we had thought to be a safe harbor turns out to be an iron bound coastline, and change course accordingly. By sharing stories and experiences, and seeking advice among ourselves and colleagues at home and abroad, the ISB members can make it a more productive journey for everyone.