

“Untangling IT”

By Robert Tipton

Book Review

By Gloria Seltzer

Robert Tipton and I have been in the IT business for over 25 years. If I were to write a book on IT, I would have written a similar book, which is more about people than technology. After all, people make technology work. We are the master, technology is merely a servant.

My first IT job was with a multi-national oil company in their Business Systems department. Since business came before systems, our mission was to solve business problems with technology. Robert hit the nail on the head when he said solving business

problems is tough. Business processes are tangled and messy. Business users are random and irrational, do not know what their requirements are, and do not understand what technology can do for them. The Business Analyst’s role is to understand the business better than the user, reengineer the business processes so that the system design can be simple and streamlined to reduce development effort and cost, and to facilitate system enhancement.

My many years with the private and the public sector witnessed many examples of a technical solution looking for a business problem. If I were a “techie” who only knew Data Warehouse, I would implement it everywhere, whether the business needed it or not, whether the business users could formulate queries to slice and dice the data to produce ad hoc reports or not. If I were a hammer, the rest of the world must all be nails! This is when multi-million dollars are spent on “white elephants” which are eventually abandoned by the business.

IT was on a spending spree with Y2K. After 911, organizations become obsessed with security and disaster recovery. With the dot.com bust, stock market and economic downturn, organizations are coming to their senses and expect value for their money, or some assurance for a return on their IT investment. Open systems architecture may sound good but it affects the bottom line. Smart organizations want one system architecture they can afford and support, much like a buyer wanting either a Victorian style house or a gothic style house, but not both.



Gloria Seltzer


Robert said people get disappointed when their expectations are not met. Business users want everything in sight, like a child in a toy store. It is up to the IT Manager or Project Manager to educate them on what they can afford. By estimating resources and time line which usually translate into cost, the business users are brought back to reality to limit their requirements to what are basic and essential. People manage expectations in their lives, why not with IT? Imagine the surprise if a bride were to wear a traditional Chinese bright red floral embroidered gown to a church wedding, when it is perfect for a reception in a Chinese restaurant.

I like Robert’s distinction between leadership and management. A “servant leader” nurtures other team members’ need to lead and incorporates their ideas and suggestions to deliver an optimal solution. A leader gets his hands dirty to fill in the gap when there is no resource to undertake a mission critical task. A manager oversees the team members to make sure they do as they are told and tends to be controlling and self-serving. I also like Stephen Covey’s distinction in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. A leader views a forest from above and has a vision of where to go. A manager follows the path and chops down bushes which get in the way. My definition of a leader is one who has no



ego and is one with the team; whereas a manager has a superego and the “prima donna” syndrome.

My MBA program included a number of Organizational Behaviour, Group Dynamics and Interpersonal Skills Development courses as mandatory. Being young and ignorant, I thought they were a waste of time compared to marketing, accounting and finance. Like Robert, I now appreciate the importance of corporate culture, positive climate and interaction with teams in order to conduct effective meetings and produce desirable results.

Untangling IT is a must read for any IT professional, or any professional who works with people. Last fall I attended Robert’s *Healing the Angel Within* session at Common in Denver, Colorado where he talked about life’s four promises of peace, power, purpose, and problems. This summer I read *Untangling IT* which talks about people, process, projects, product, promotion, perception, politics, passion, poetry, perfection, professionalism, preparation, participation, psychology, and prayer. I was not disappointed, for he is a great communicator and teacher, both inspirational and spiritual. 

About the author of the book review: Gloria Seltzer holds Bachelor of Science and Master of Business Administration degrees from McGill University, Montreal, and the Certified Management Accountant designation. She is currently an IT consultant with the Ontario Government and the City of Toronto. Contact her at gloria.seltzer@toronto.housing.ca.

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