

END LAPTOP SERFDOM

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Time to end personal technology serfdom!

I hate company-specific technology standards, at least those that specify technology in terms other than file formats, access protocols and application programming interfaces. In most companies I am in touch with, employees get a laptop and a cell phone and are required to use a set of standard capabilities of some sort. More often than not these are unnecessarily complicated, old-fashioned, expensive and singularly uninspiring. This is often for good reasons: The IT department wants to make things manageable for themselves and for the organization, and employees need to have a standard frame of reference and a compatible set of tools for work. The helpdesk can figure out which keys to press and the employees can see the same screens. Well and good, but the users are beginning to rebel at the lack of options - especially those they have on their own or former computers.

Locking things down may have been a reasonable strategy through a phase when personal computers were an expensive and new technology and moving data between applications and machines was hard. Those days are largely gone. Yet we continue to dumb down software and limit technology use, pandering to the most basic of needs and the most common of denominators. The mechanism is very similar to what causes network television to be so vapid and undemanding. To quote David Foster Wallace, from his brilliant essay *E Pluribus Unum*:

TV is not vulgar and prurient and dumb because the people who compose the audience are vulgar and dumb. Television is the way it is simply because people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests and wildly different in their refined and aesthetic and noble interests.

Employees in large corporations aren't vulgar and dumb - and they certainly are much less similar than organizational and technical processes force them to be. This becomes important as competition in the Western world becomes less a matter of cost than competence, less a matter of getting the many to do things right than the few to do the right things. It is time to release diversification with the hope and expectation of new, profitable innovations!

Today, technology is largely perceived as a hindrance to innovation but a boon to control. The ability to reach people electronically has resulted in an avalanche of electronic forms and survey both inside the company and at the customer interface. I know IT consultants working for large consulting companies that run around with 3-4 laptops (one for each client) yet do most of their work on their private computer, where they can choose their own tools and environment. Not just the company they work for but also their customers have Stalinist technology policies, solidly built on the premise that thou shalt only work for one

corporation throughout the day (try doing that if you are a university professor doing some consulting on the side, as well as some rather involved Board memberships), and absolutely forbidding any deviation from the norm. This kind of thinking even permeates grade schools, where teachers are supposed to help their students become digitally competent, yet are forbidden to install innovative teaching software or even, in one instance, read email from home. At a recent conference, a young woman (of the net-native generation) reported that she was almost fired because she had downloaded some business-relevant material from YouTube - this had triggered alarm bells in the IT department, generating memos to her boss and a call to the carpet.

This excessive control attitude also means that organizations can be extremely slow in adopting new technology, running two or three generations behind the technology front and never getting around to trying out new applications until there is a proven need - i.e., until some other company has captured the competitive initiative.

However, there might be some hope. BSG Concours, a research company I am associated with, has recently started a project called Redefining Employee Computing. This project came about because a number Fortune 500 CIOs asked us to investigate what it would take to get them out of the PC business. What would happen if you took the view that what kind of computer or other client technology you want to use should fundamentally be a personal choice - if you wanted to have a Tablet PC for teaching (like I do) or a Mac to signal your responsiveness to advertising - that should be your own decision. Would this be doable, and if so, how? Right off the bat we could say it would require the IT department to clearly define and communicate file formats and various interfaces, and the IT competence and accountability of each employee to increase. But it would also increase motivation and, hopefully, innovation. Plus, as the technology becomes more consumer oriented, it would free up the IT department from a task where it (or its outsourcers) are adding little value. Moreover - it might even save some money, since cheap consumer laptops in many instances are just as good as the more dour and pricey corporate versions, even if you have to change them because they break down or ingest too many milk and cookies.

I thought this trend - consumerization of technology and decentralization of technology choice - and made eminent sense. Much functionality that could be immensely useful in a company setting - what you find in Facebook, Youtube, wikis, various forms of chat and VoIP applications - simply is not provided inside companies. So employees, against company regulations, use these tools in the consumer space rather than within the company infrastructure, with all the dangers that represents. Furthermore, you can now get a decent web site with 600 email accounts and ample storage and bandwidth for less than \$10 per month - a fraction of what the IT department will charge, if they even can provide it.

Yet the prevalent IT culture in many companies is fighting to keep the PC as much as they fought against it in the 80s and 90s. When I tested the idea out on a group of IT executives a few months ago, the reaction was almost visceral: This was totally unacceptable, you cannot trust the users, the technology is not mature, chaos will ensue. Yet, the reason BSG Concours is taking this project on is because we were asked to do so by a number of very large companies. They are tired of controlling something that doesn't

necessarily need controlling. If those companies, with their many thousands of employees and Sarbanes-Oxley reporting requirements, can think about it - maybe the idea has wider applicability?

Besides, good CIOs know that the really creative IT users don't care about standards anyway. And they are happy about that and keep in touch with the renegades, for there they have a test environment, a source of ideas and a shot at the future.

Personal technology should be a personal decision - it is time to end technology serfdom!