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IT's worst addictions (and how to cure them)

BY DAN TYNAN | TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 14 2012

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Are you a jargon junkie? Got an insatiable appetite for information? Do you rule over your company's systems with an iron fist, unwilling to yield control until someone pries the keyboard from your cold, dead hands?

You're going to have to face it - you're addicted to tech. It's not an uncommon problem, but it can lead to bad decisions, lost productivity, wasted money, and data breaches, to name just a few downsides.

Fortunately, there are cures. But first you must admit you are powerless over your addiction to acronyms, your dependence on data, and your cravings for power. You must resist the illusion you can make your network perfectly secure or that technology can solve all your problems. And you must stop clinging to old ways of doing things - or lusting for anything shiny and new.

Consider this your first step on the long road to recovery.

IT addiction no. 1: Jargon

Geeks love their jargon. It's a way to show off, not to mention an effective technique for fooling others into thinking you know more than you actually do. But an acronym addiction ultimately serves no one well, says Glenn Phillips, president of Forte, which builds custom software and offers "nerd-to-English" translation coaching for executives.

"Some tech may say things like, 'We need a RAID 5 SAN or our backups will fail,' and management won't have any idea what that means," Phillips says. "Instead he could say, 'We don't have enough space to store our backups; we could lose all our data.' And if he's just making up a bunch of crap, management won't have any idea. You need someone technically competent enough to call BS or say the emperor has no clothes."

The cure: Smart IT pros know good communication skills are essential, and they work hard to develop those skills, says Phillips. But executives must also be willing to admit they don't have the slightest idea what their techs are telling them.

"A good leadership team can cut through the jargon by not running from it," he says. "If you don't understand what your IT guys are saying, say, 'That's fascinating; now try it again in language that makes sense to the rest of us.' Otherwise you think you're delegating responsibility for your company's technology when you're actually just ignoring it."

IT addiction no. 2: Power

A little power can be a dangerous thing, as any organization that has endured a rogue system administrator can tell you. Because technology is both so central to how modern organizations operate and so poorly understood by those outside the IT department, it's easy for tech whizzes to perpetuate their own internal fiefdoms.

"The worst addiction IT employees succumb to is what fire wardens call Lookout Syndrome," says Bill Horne, owner of William Warren Consulting. "It happens to wardens who serve in remote posts for long periods of time with little or no outside contact. After a while they start to believe they're in charge of everything that happens in their area. In like manner, system administrators start to assume they're in charge of everything that happens on the systems they maintain, which can lead to childish rules about which applications users are allowed to run, what their log-ons should look like, even what countries are allowed to send email to 'their' system."

As a result, IT pros often forget they exist to support the business, not the other way around, says Forte's Phillips. "Using a computer should be easier than not using one, but too many IT professionals have created private little kingdoms that make that hard or impossible," he says.

The cure: The tendency to consolidate power is not exclusive to IT professionals, notes Jeffrey
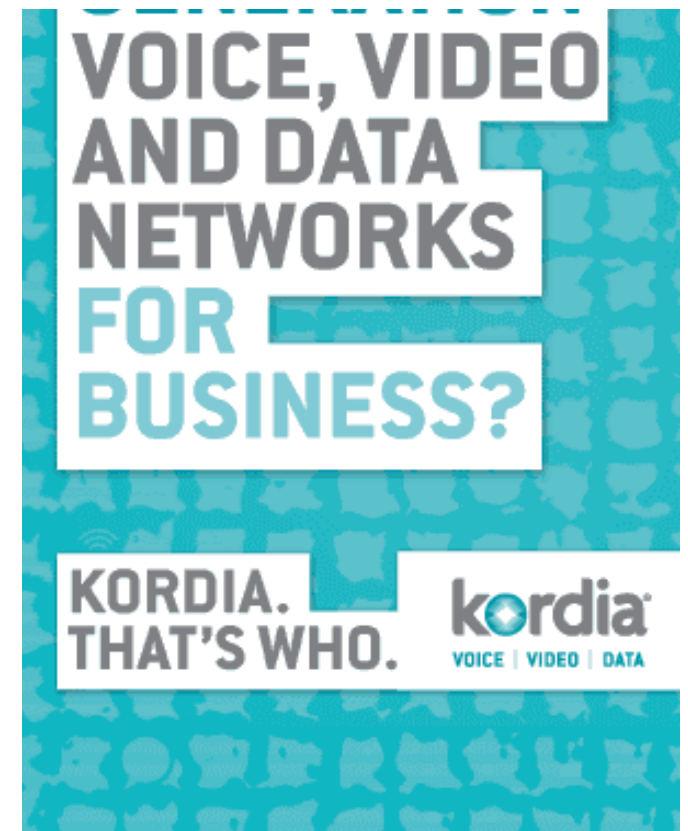
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Palermo, president and COO of Headspring, a custom software development and consulting firm. But it may happen more often in IT because that's where technology decisions and resources are usually centralized.

"The root cause is that most companies are organized by department instead of by function," he says. "Companies need to realize that having all of their computing resources in one massive IT department that's supposed to magically manage priorities and resources for every other department just doesn't work any more. They need to [disband the big IT departments](#), give each functional department their own tech staff and computing resources, and allow them to set their own priorities."

IT addiction no. 3: Data
Blame impossibly cheap storage or the magical belief that [big data will revolutionize your company](#), but many IT pros are unrepentant information junkies - and that can [lead to data overload](#), or worse.

"Technology departments are addicted to collecting an inordinate number of events that are not necessarily used for decision support," says Charley Rich, VP of product management at Nastel Technologies, a maker of application performance management solutions. "They just think they need to have all this information, but don't know what it means or what to do with it."

Collecting too much data not only makes it harder to reach decisions, it also increases the risk of damage caused by data leaks, says Dr. Donn DiNunno, quality director at engineering, management, and integration consultants EM&I.

"While data storage advances make data retention and distribution easy, they also make privacy hard," he says. "If data is never erased, potential threats to privacy and security endure for years, in the form of Social Security numbers, credit usage, medical information, and more. The power and visibility of this data puts us at risk."

The cure: IT needs to look more selectively at the data it collects and retains, says DiNunno.

"The cure is a more rigorous analysis of the whole value chain," he says. "Privacy controls, better understanding of the user's needs, working on the value and quality of data, and respecting the use of 'IT power' so that that power doesn't corrupt us all - these are the cures."

IT addiction no. 4: Old methods
It's natural to fall back on the techniques you know best. But if you're still [clinging to the methodologies you were using 5, 10, or 20 years ago](#), you have a monkey on your back - and it has a gray muzzle.

"Olde Tyme Methodologies are serious killers of productivity, especially when they're accompanied by an addiction to Voluminous Useless Documentation," writes Steven A. Lowe, CEO of Innovator, a consulting and custom software development firm.

For example, software developers who cling to waterfall methodologies or structured design techniques can end up creating software that's obsolete before it's even implemented, or pouring valuable resources into creating documentation no one else will ever read.

"Back when computing time was expensive and programmers were cheap, these methodologies made some sense," he says. "And if you are working on a static project with a low-skill implementation team, they may still do. But for modern systems with fast time-to-market, they're a death march."

The cure: [Get agile](). Adopt modern methodologies like extreme programming or behavior-driven design. Develop an understanding of the underlying business processes so that you can communicate intelligently with the people who have to use what you build.

"Letting go of beloved techniques can be difficult," Lowe says. "After all, if method X has served you well since 1970, why abandon it for some newfangled acronym-soup? For the same reason people traded bicycles for motorcycles and horses for cars: to get there faster."

IT addiction no. 5: New machines
Everybody loves new toys. For most techies, strolling through a data center full of gleaming servers, humming drives, and blinking lights is like waking up on Christmas morning. But having the latest and greatest of everything is a costly fixation that can drag you and your organization down the money hole.

Take storage, for example. Most big enterprises and government agencies rip and replace their storage systems every few years to store a ton of data they will never use again, says Anthony R. Howard, a best-selling author ("The Invisible Enemy: Black Fox") and independent technology consultant for Fortune 50 companies and the U.S. military.

"The shocking fact is that most IT data isn't touched again after the first 30 days," he says. "Companies are wasting millions buying storage for the big data they need now, and then forklifting it to a new system every three to five years. Imagine a tiering system where only the data you need would go on the expensive drives, and the data you don't would automatically go on the cheap drives. Imagine if organizations only paid for the components that actually needed to be upgraded, then added them to their current infrastructure. Imagine a world where our
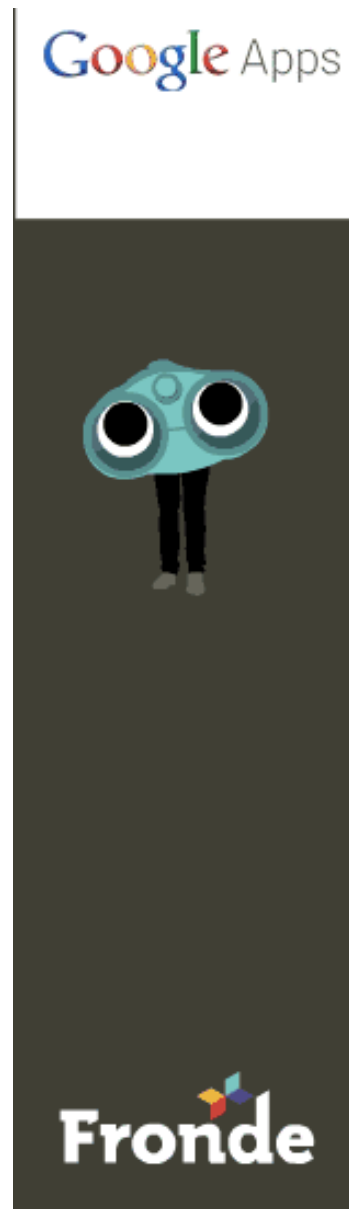
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government would never have to pay for multimillion-dollar forklift upgrades. Think about what they could do with that money."

The cure: Most IT pros are fixated on initial purchase price when they should be analyzing total cost of ownership, says Howard. A hard look at real costs may help [curb their addiction to the latest and greatest](#) of everything.

"Forget about the prices of the server or the storage," he says. "The important questions to ask are how much it will cost you to deploy, manage, maintain, and run these things over their lifetimes. Most companies let the vendors tell them what's included in TCO. Most vendors usually don't include the important stuff."

IT addiction no. 6: Illusions of security
In an age when [hackers make headlines almost daily](#), it's easy to see why many enterprise IT shops have developed a serious security habit. The problem? You can pour millions into building a "bulletproof" network, only to discover that it isn't - and never will be.

"IT departments are addicted to the perception of security," says Headspring's Palermo. "They think it's something you can turn on and off like a switch. Instead of using policy to guide employees about how to properly handle information, they embrace things like PINs, passwords, and user roles that offer the illusion of security."

Ron Bittner, IT director at computer parts distributor National Parts Depot, says security is still a crapshoot, especially for smaller organizations.

"I've established and monitored firewalls, antivirus, and other security tools, and I still don't know conclusively whether I'm properly protected," says Bittner, a 20-year IT veteran who has also worked for major book publishers and film studios. "Without major resources to dedicate staff to computer security, SMBs are constantly worried they haven't bulletproofed their operations so that amateur or organized hackers can't get to it."

The cure: Embrace the reality that [no network or organization can ever be 100 percent secure](#). Close the security gap through traceability, says Palermo.

"You want to keep improper access to data from happening, but once it does happen, you need to trace it back to its source," he says. "You want to be able to find the employee who broke company policies or the ISP that hosted the outside person coming in. And you want to advertise your traceability efforts so that people who try to break in know they're not going to get away with it. Technologists are constantly coming up with better ways to protect our data. Along with their advancements, rigorous traceability measures can be a powerful deterrent and smart investment."
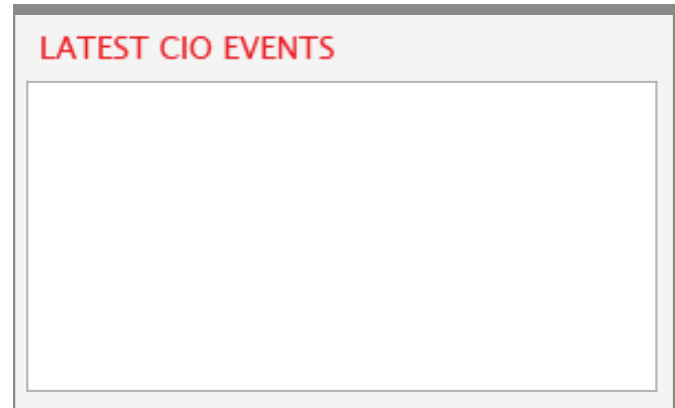
IT addiction no. 7: Delusions of grandeur

Call it the myth of omnipotence. Technology has progressed at such an astounding rate that many become addicted to the notion that anything is possible - no trade-offs or sacrifices required.

Some IT people still believe any problem can be solved if you just throw enough resources against it, says Michael McKiernan, VP of business technology at Citrix. If they could just collect enough data and dump it into a massive business intelligence system, they'd emerge with a single source of truth for making decisions. If they were only freed from the arbitrary constraints imposed by management, they could have systems that are affordable and always available, massively scalable, instantly flexible, and aesthetically delightful.

They can't.

"If you build something on Amazon Web Services that can do a million transactions in an hour, do you really think you'll also be able to do a hot fail-over disaster recovery site?" he says. "If you've created something that can process really large transaction volumes, do you really think you'll be able to change it every week? If you want it to be massively scalable, you may have to give up having it be highly available."

The cure: Get real. Develop an IT portfolio that balances risk and reward, and hedge your big bets. Don't swing for the fences every time unless you enjoy striking out. It's better to hit for singles and doubles to boost your enterprise batting average instead of going for personal glory.

"People need to realiSe they can't get there simply by being smarter or working harder," he says. "You can't have it all. You can have anything you want, you just can't have everything you want. The antidote is knowing what the trade-offs are, then trying to get as close to the edge as you can."

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