

First Dot The 'i'



Here's a refreshing look at what IT gurus need to fix first, before trying to indiscriminately apply technology to cure all society's problems!

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according to answers.com, the age-old English expression, to “dot your i’s and cross your t’s” means *to do something very carefully and with a lot of detail*. I wonder if it holds true even for doing something that borders on the absurd. Looking at the current state of IT, I think it probably does. To me, it makes more sense to play the movie backwards to get to some semblance

of logic. It might even be more fun. We could pick a problem today, and go forward to yesterday to find out what caused it, and finally arrive at which technology would solve it best—if at all—and then go about creating that technology.

I was asked to write about my ideas on how technology could solve some of the problems we face in India today. I had been thinking for a while, and had almost

succumbed to the temptation of using my Google skills to put something together in a way in which I wouldn't be accused of plagiarism. I knew it would make me look impressive and enhance my stature. I'm glad I resisted the urge, and am grateful that I found the courage to do so. Therefore, it might disappoint some that I am not about to prescribe any technology solutions to societal issues.

It might not come as much of a revelation if I told you that technology overtook human needs about a decade ago - especially IT. We had more and more

titled *Informing Ourselves to Death*.

We IT professionals seem to forget that we need to deal with information first, and then with technology. We seem to thrive in telling clients how our technological prowess and processes can take care of everything. How does a process tell you *what* to plan for? Isn't that something that needs application of knowledge, experience and judgement in a specific context? Sure, you can use a pair of pliers to hammer a nail but alas, that's not what pliers were designed for.

Look around. Delhi is replete with examples of a complete lack

colony road being metalled, only to be ripped apart by the phone department just as soon as it is completed—because the various departments do not find it necessary to plan things together.

How else could you explain that the tendering process has not been modified to get the most out of intellectual endeavour? We're still trying to force-fit Web design into the same ordering procedures that were used to procure steel. I would have to get the Web pages verified for quantity at the stores inspection! If the rules of the game have changed, we might as well learn the new rules, because the world will not wait for us.

IT could be our mainstay if we started looking at information in the context of its eventual use, viz, to fulfil the actual needs of business and society. It really doesn't matter how that need is fulfilled, or how much technology is used for its fulfilment. Technology must follow a trajectory that is defined by society, and not the other way around. Any takers?

Just in case you were wondering about the title of this piece, I think I have tried to clarify what is meant by first dotting the 'i'. We (IT professionals) must first pledge to deal with information; we must look for the right information in the right places, and bring all of it together into the socio-technical context. All else will follow logically—even technology. Notice how 'i' is the first letter in IT as well. IT has the same letters that are used in that expression. What a coincidence!

Do I hear applause for crossing [out] the 'T's'? **Li.**

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technology, without a clue about where to apply it. So we knew all there was to know about how to make something work, and little knowledge of what to do with it. The whole world has started looking like a research laboratory. Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying that research is a bad thing - quite the opposite, really. My problem is with IT companies pushing technology as being a wonder-drug that can cure everything.

"There is no escaping from ourselves. The human dilemma is as it has always been, and we solve nothing fundamental by cloaking ourselves in technological glory," said Neil Postman, in his speech

of planning for the future. We see flyovers being constructed to solve today's traffic density; it takes two years of chaos only to find that we get stuck at a traffic light a few hundred metres down the flyover. Then we construct another and another and another. Makes the road look like a row of camels. The Delhi Metro, however, is a refreshing exception.

Look at how the government uses IT. Let's take, for instance, the smart card initiatives we've been hearing about since the turn of this century. Why is it so difficult for us to have a single ID for citizens? Politics, you say. Well, I think it's born out of a mindset that says, "*It's not my job!*" So you'll still see a