

WCU BOOK REVIEW: by William Richmond

Title: 'The Entrepreneur's Guide to Managing Information Technology'

Author: C. J. Rhodes

Publisher: Praeger.

Length: 183 pages

Price: \$26.95

Reading time: 3.5 hours

Reading rating: 10 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 4 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

In CJ Rhode's book "The Entrepreneur's Guide to Managing Information Technology," she abjures entrepreneurs, executives and managers to learn about technology. All business decisions are now, at least in part, technology decisions, and you cannot depend on technologists to make them. They have different incentives and a different view of the world. Further, making bad technology decisions costs money, while making good ones can propel your business to new heights. Unfortunately, there are more losers – those making bad decisions – than winners.

The book's goal is to provide a guide for making good IT decisions by pointing out the typical pitfalls – and how to avoid them. Changing technology, unfathomable IT people, over-hyping vendors and baffled non-IT people are all addressed with wit and humor.

To understand the technology, map it! In creating this map, what is important is the technology the organization uses, not all of the technology that exists. It is a mental map of the organization's technology, people and processes and how they work together. It becomes the basis for evaluating new technologies, and if a new technology does not fit, then ignore it.

Understanding the technology is the first step. The business leader must also understand why non-IT people find IT so difficult and why IT people themselves are so difficult to work with. IT is difficult because it is new, so the terms and concepts are not ensconced within our everyday language and culture. The solution is training and education.

IT people, however, are another issue. They really are different. They interact better with computers than people, because computers are logical and predictable. Their jargon is not meant to obfuscate, but instead provides precise meanings at a level of detail they need, but that business people don't. They truly have a different culture and different values. Give them recognition. Give them leading edge toys to play with, but also focus them on what they do best that also serves the organization.

The final piece of the IT puzzle are the vendors. Although it may seem obvious, IT vendors are salesmen just like used-car salesmen, snake oil salesmen and Madison Avenue advertisers. No one believes that wearing a specific aftershave will require a man to beat off hordes of adoring women, so why do business leaders believe the IT hype?

The solution is to ignore the hype and wait for “the tipping point” when the technology becomes standardized, well supported and ubiquitous.

Putting this all together requires the business leader to understand his or her business – its processes, people and technology – then to adopt technology in a way to minimize risk. That is unless the technology supports the business’s hedgehog concept. Then the organization should pounce like a tiger. This potentially requires completely transforming the organization to take advantage of the technology, for only then will the organization accomplish far more than their competitors and use IT for a true competitive advantage.

Overall, this is a great book. It’s fun. It’s informative, and for the most part, the advice is dead-on. Entrepreneurs, executives and managers need understand their business, their people, and their technology. They then need pounce on those technology innovations that truly support their business model, can be used by their people and that fits with their technology. The rest of IT, the whiz-bang gadgets and the latest silver bullets can all be safely ignored.

William Richmond is an Associate Professor of Information Systems in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. For previously reviewed books, visit our Web site at ww.wcu.edu/cob.