The emergence of a new career —
The chief information officer

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THE CHANGING STATUS OF INFORMATION

Changes in the nature of the commercial marketplace due to its increasing dependence on information technology will have far-reaching effects on the nature of IT education at all levels. There was a time when the physical assets of an organisation were thought to be its most important resource. Gradually there dawned a realisation that perhaps the people who enabled the enterprise to function were more important than the bricks and mortar. Today, few would argue that even more important than the people is the information upon which the organisation depends.

A useful measure of the importance of any part of an organisation is the necessity for its replacement if lost or destroyed and the ease with which that replacement can be effected. The loss of premises and equipment in a disaster such as a fire or earthquake is disruptive but recoverable from by their replacement. Indeed, we can even lessen the financial impact of such a loss by insurance. Recent times have seen the mass resignation or termination of service of a large percentage of the personnel associated with certain occupations and services. Invariably, however, these people are replaced, albeit with some initial degradation of the service provided.

Lost information cannot be replaced. Imagine a large insurance company or a bank which had its entire collection of information destroyed. There is almost no conceivable procedure by which the organisation could recreate that resource. Without the resource, the business ceases to exist.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

If information is so vital to the life of an organisation, whose job is it to manage that resource? Surely that manager must be one of the key personnel in the organisation. There is a perception that every manager in an organisation should be responsible for the management of their component of the total information base for the enterprise. There was also that perception, once upon a time, about the management of staff. It was assumed that the person in charge of an organisational area would be responsible for the hiring and firing of his or her subordinate staff. Eventually it was realised that this policy does not work. Some managers manage staff well and others do it badly. Some managers can select appropriate staff and nurture them to provide a smooth operation of the organisation’s affairs. Others are hopeless at this task.

Out of this realisation emerged the human resource management function which is an essential feature of today’s business environment. There is a universal recognition that the management of staff is a specialist skill requiring professional expertise and education. There is an emerging recognition that professional expertise is also needed for the management of information. This recognition is to have a dramatic impact on tertiary education. Education in information technology and computer science has tended to concentrate on just that — the technology and the science. The recent shift in the Victorian VCE curriculum from computer science to information technology is a recognition that IT should be introduced within an application framework rather than in the nature of a pure science.

At a tertiary level there is the need for graduates entering the business marketplace from either a commerce or computer systems background to understand the total information needs of an organisation and the means by which that most important resource should be managed. There is an old aphorism which states: The information you can get is not the information you want. The information you want is not the information you need. The information you need is not the information you can get. At first thought it seems presumptuous to suggest that an information manager should be telling, say, a production manager or a finance manager or a sales manager what information they need to do their job effectively. Remember, however, that it is not long ago that the same presumption would have been imputed to a personnel manager telling another manager what type of staffing policy to pursue. The times are changing.

This change of professional emphasis is exemplified by Deakin University’s new Bachelor of Commerce (Computing) degree. Following the recent amalgamation of Deakin with the former Victoria College, all courses have undergone extensive scrutiny to update their professional relevance. The new BCom (Computing) is recognised at the highest level of accreditation by the Australian Computer Society and combines the traditional information systems and commercial software majors with quantitative management support and decision making studies as well as the accounting, economics and law which are essential for a commerce degree. The degree also allows its graduates to satisfy the educational requirements of the Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants. A management information systems major is available to all other BCom undergraduates to enable them to combine their specialist discipline with professional information management education.

THE CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER

It is significant that this degree programme is sited in the Faculty of Management. Courses such as this will become more the rule rather than the exception as the newly emerging role of the CIO, or Chief Information Officer, becomes as commonly accepted as the Human Resource Manager. It is as pointless for a computing graduate to enter the contemporary commercial workforce without a thorough grounding in business as it is for a business graduate to expect to pursue a managerial career without a thorough understanding of the principles of information management.

Traditionally, computing graduates have seen their career paths leading towards information technology management. They have been able to aspire to a level of management but restricted to a technological capacity rather than being able to participate in general management. The combination of the professional disciplines of computing and business management needed to produce the information manager will enable such graduates to have a wider choice of options in their career paths and have every expectation of full participation around the board room table.

So, those students seriously considering becoming managers should keep in mind the necessity to manage their enterprise’s most important resource. The only business resource which is not renewable is lost information. The reward is an exciting combination of technical and management expertise. The CIO is the manager for the next millennium.