

## IT Provision - Great Expectations or Bleak House?

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...

When Charles Dickens wrote A Tale of Two Cities - his yarn about revolutionary France of which the above paragraph is the opening stanza - he was very careful about his choice of words for beginning the piece. He wanted to be sure of creating a feeling of ambiguity and confusion as a backdrop against which to set the rest of his story. And I think it's fair to say that they work pretty well in that vein.

It's also fair to say however, that they would work equally well in describing the current state of play as regards 'our mutual friend', IT.

OK, as links go, a comparison between information technology and Dickens would seem at first glance to be thinner than most. But even if my own purple prose can't quite make the association stick it wasn't me that invited the comparison in the first place. Actually it was someone who might be considered altogether more qualified - business guru, Sir John Harvey-'Troubleshooter'-Jones, no less.

In a recent comment to the press he said that he was appalled for example, that some parts of the NHS - a veritable hotbed of Dickensian methodology, according to one of the surgeons quoted in the piece - are still using Electronic Data Interchange as opposed to the newer, more dynamic XML authoring technology for disseminating their online information.

XML, said Harvey-Jones, is to HTML as light follows darkness - and many an eminent member of the NHS's technological top brass was heard to agree.

For the record, as you may or may not know, XML is a next generation Web authoring technology.

In more precise terms, whilst HTML can be regarded as the foundation of the WWW and perfect for presenting a multitude of web pages, problems often arise when large sites need a consistent look and feel with variable content. So while creating 30 almost identical HTML files might be fairly straightforward, few would argue that maintaining each of them and making sure that the changes in one are reflected in all the others, tends to be the most laborious and error-prone problem of web site design.

Enter XML.

First, things called CSS stylesheets began the process of separating the data (HTML) from the presentation, and thereafter the use of external CSS files common to a range of HTML files greatly improved the situation. However, this still left changes to the HTML meaning changes to every single file. XML however, continues the separation of data from the presentation, but to the point that one XML stylesheet contains all the common HTML code and a separate CSS stylesheet contains the formatting code. The XML file itself only needs to contain the code that is specific to that page... whew!

Complicated? Ostensibly yes, but also extremely valuable to today's corporate Internet presence.

The problem, (as Dickens himself said with such timeliness in his Boz cartoons and later in social commentaries like *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*), is human nature. It dictates that unless people are shown exactly how to progress, they are unlikely to go looking for the path forward to reform (or XML or anything else) of their own accord.

So it is and has it always been, in IT.

So just where is that path and how can we encourage companies and organisations like the NHS to walk down it? Here too Sir John had some quite pointed words of advice that should be heeded by anyone whose business model relies on technology - let alone having a strong presence on the Web.

"IT is still not being used in the way that it should be. IT is still being used as a means to reduce administration costs. And putting it under the finance function is one of the worst mistakes the UK has ever made", he said. "The ability to aggregate (systems and data) is still taking precedence over the operational needs and this leads to massive inflexibility and massive costs."

Here, the underlying point that IT should be being used as merely another business tool (although admittedly a very important one) is a fundamental part of what modern IT service provision should be all about. And as anyone who reads this column on a regular basis will know - without saying we told you so - we have long been a champion of this very point.

Once again however, as I have contended on many previous occasions, it is an argument that boils down to IT end users' relationships with their IT supplier - a question of trust. And, as I have also suggested, too many suppliers still begin their pitch from the point of view of the technology they supply, rather than from trying to find the path of least resistance to solving their client's business problem.

I guess that the point I'm trying to make is this.

Yes PDMS has in depth expertise in just about every area of Web development you might care to name, yes we can utilise the latest methodologies and thinking to provide our clients with some pretty swish systems and yes we even have some of the most sought after XML expertise

in the industry (actually we've been using it for almost two years). But that isn't what really counts.

... because in the end - whether its XML or anything else, all the expertise, knowledge and technology in the world won't help unless you know how to apply it to a particular problem.

"Bah," said Scrooge. "Humbug!"

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