

Every day I get a little bit better

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The old joke about quality standards in manufacturing is that having a quality system doesn't mean that you make a good product, it simply means that if it's bad at least it's consistently bad. Often the need to meet quality standards is driven primarily by marketing concerns and on the shop floor it is at best seen as a necessary evil. The process which is all about being able to prove that business activities follow a standard pattern, can add a layer of bureaucracy which is both costly and stifling.

But quality thinking has come on a long way; there is now an acceptance of the inevitability and even the desirability of change within an organisation. Partly because of the need to be fleet of foot in a competitive market, and partly because we never get it right first time. The new watch word is 'continuous improvement', in fact under the latest International Standards Organisation (ISO) guidelines for quality accreditation, ongoing change is actively promoted as an indicator of quality within an organisation.

This emphasis on continuous improvement has considerable implications for the way in which an organisation designs and manages its Business Systems. There is an obvious conflict between the desire to specify precisely what you want and then buy a system that fits your requirements for a fixed cost, and the simple fact that by the time you have specified precisely what you want it has almost certainly changed. This problem has always existed and it is compounded by the rapid evolution of technology which tends to render systems obsolete rather more quickly than they are written off in the accounts.

On the other hand, some very important parts of our business systems do not obsolesce at anything like the same rate and are generally independent of the detailed specification of individual screens and functions. The underlying information is one of the core resources of any organisation, and along with its people and its cash forms, the foundation on which the organisations success is built. And of these Foundations TM , two at least should lie at the heart of all new business systems.

It is also true that although the detailed functionality required of a business system will evolve and change over time, the underlying structure of the business systems often referred to as the systems architecture, need not. This overall structure or Architecture transcends the detailed requirements of a particular business system and provides the basis for the flexibility and agility that is required of a successful organisation.

The systems architecture reflects the IT strategy which in turn should reflect the overall business strategy and consequently the degree of change or 'continuous improvement' foreseen

by the management. Detailed systems implementations on the other hand are essentially a matter of tactics and should be budgeted for accordingly.

In an ideal world we would be able to think of our information systems as a black box which holds all of our information and is connected to everyone with whom we do business. Any information in the black box is consistent and is available, under our control, to anyone who needs it. How we use this information and the connections we have with our staff, customers and suppliers is up to us and whilst it can sometimes be quite complex to work out how best to provide the services and communication we want, it does not require a detailed understanding of the underlying technology within the box. After all you don't need to understand the workings of the internal combustion engine in order to read a road map and plan a route. In this world 'continuous improvement' would be the natural order of things at least for those organisations for whom quality is a key to success and IT would simply be a tool involved in getting the job done.

The interesting thing is that the IT industry is moving surprisingly close to being able to deliver this utopian ideal. The question is whether their users believe them and their backers can afford to let them do it.