

The Monday morning game

A CIO's job is a stressful one and has always been stressful. "There is stress at almost every job," you might counter. Sure. But during my research for this book, I came across an interesting study from *Gartner Research* which states that 2.6 years is the average length of stay of a CIO in an US company; in Germany, it is 3.5 years. It's hard to believe this figure; it does not correspond to my personal observations. I would have guessed that it would be around 5 years or so.

Being CIO is like sitting in an ejection seat, and the job rotation rate is similar to those of football trainers. This is not because one wants to progress in his career or make more money. Nor is it because the CIO is trying to hide incompetence by running away. No, the reason is that there is a Grand-Canyon-sized abyss between what IT can deliver and what users and management expect. When these expectations are not met (cf. football trainer), management will try again with a new face with the strong belief that the new guy will fix all the problems.

What's worse, consultancy firms make ridiculous claims in their glossy brochures and advertisements that "64 servers can be figured in 15 minutes," "the IT costs will be reduced massively," "with system xyz the efficiency will be increased explosively," and (my personal favorite) "with us disappears the complexity in your IT." If the CIO fails to explain to management that the truth does not correspond to these fairy tales, the going will get tough for the CIO.

Although working in IT is fun and can be the most exciting office job in the world, it can—quite literally—drive a person insane. A study from the German Institute *RISP* revealed that IT experts suffer from psychosomatic illness four times more often than the average population, and they consume 91% more of psychotropic drugs. The consumption of antidepressants is 60% higher in IT experts than in the rest of the population. This is common industry knowledge: in October 2008, the largest producer of microprocessors in the world launched its "New antidepressant for IT managers" marketing campaign, introducing a new processor which would give to the IT manager less stress and more control. This isn't funny.

If, by the time you reach the end of this book, you understand that the IT world these days is anything but easy to master, then I could say: "Mission accomplished." On one hand, every IT department is fully responsible for everything related to IT systems within the business and needs to constantly explain instability, lack of project control, and rising costs. On the other hand, IT isn't able to fully control such things, because it strongly depends on external providers, who are far away from becoming adult. This unsolvable conflict produces frustration both for the IT department and the users. The gap that I mentioned is a minefield that claims many victims.

As a CIO, there are always moments when massive technical problems come up and one wants to throw it all out the window and have a serious chat with Bill Gates (or any of his consorts) about the mess he created—preferably alone in a dark forest. These are the moments when it is good to remember that IT jobs are the most diversified and interesting jobs in the world.

The CIO magazine published an annual list of CIOs who earn the “Elephant” award (*elephant*, because the most discerning characteristics of this pachyderm are required to be successful in this job). There are a number of criteria in order to qualify to receive an “elephant,” and two of them are especially revealing:

- To be employed more than 10 years as CIO at different companies (!)
- To be at least for five years in the same position (!!)

I know many colleagues who are depleted after years in this position and give up. Others, who want to avoid the psychotropic drugs, react to the stress by venting their anger in an uncontrolled manner. My very first boss opted for the latter. It went like this: during all those years, every Monday morning, every member of his department participated involuntarily in the same game. They all tried to avoid being the first one to encounter the Head of Department. During the weekend, it seemed, an enormous anger had built up which waited to be unloaded, and he took advantage of the very first occasion for an immediate explosion. It was sane to be far away at that moment.

Everyone had a tactic of his own to be out of the way. Some arrived very early and hoped to be in the office before the boss, determined not to leave their desks even when a strong nature call urged them to do so. As soon as the roar could be heard in the corridor, it was enough to wait a few minutes until the storm had calmed down. This tactics often worked, but not always.

Then, there were those who intentionally came later in the hope that the thunder had gone by already. But the boss had adapted to this tactic, and sometimes he also came in a bit later in order to give everyone the opportunity to enjoy his outburst. There was a side effect for him as there was a larger audience then.

One time, about six months after I was hired, I was the victim.

“Mister Roeltgen,” he shouted in the corridor with maximum strength in his voice. He was not very tall, but robust and had a frightening glare.

“This is an enormous mess. Your Atlas project is a disaster—such as I have never seen in my whole career. You will have to account for it. You are a goner in this department, and I will personally take care that you will be downgraded as night-watchman. In my whole life, I have never ever seen a project being managed so badly.”

A careful attempt to open my mouth failed miserably, and he interrupted me and shouted even louder: “What the hell! Do you dare contradict me? No word anymore!” He slammed his office door and disappeared.

I received pitiful, but self-content glances from everyone in our office. I started thinking it would be a good idea to take off every Monday morning in the future.

Never before had I ever heard one single word about the Atlas project.