

The Power of Effective IT Communications - Key Points from the CEC Virtual Session: The Wrap

By Tim Scannell

On paper, communications would seem to be a simple concept and an absolutely essential element in relations between technology providers and their business peers. For many individuals and companies, however, it is often a very complex topic since there are some very distinct communications barriers that exist between IT and the business. The definition of effective techno-business communications also varies from person to person, which adds to the confusion and frustration as IT works to become a solutions partner with business stakeholders.

This virtual session examines some of the communications roadblocks that exist between IT and business and provides some suggestions on how to better communicate within organizations and across departmental boundaries. It is part of a continuing series of conversations on the topic of IT Communications and the CEC's annual research and reports on this area.

Taking part in the discussion are: **Robert Galvin**, Chief Technology Officer for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey; **Doug Blackwell**, SVP and CIO for Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey; **Gerry McCartney**, VP of IT and CIO for Purdue University; and **Andy Santacroce**, VP of Global IT for BDP International. The discussion was led by Brendan McGowan, [CEC](#) Global Media Bureau and Client Research Manager.

The following is a summary of key points made during the Webcast, which can be viewed in its entirety by clicking here: [*The Power of Effective IT Communications 2016*](#).

The importance of trust and transparency in IT communications

Gerry McCartney, *VP of IT and CIO for Purdue University*

When IT isn't the core business of the organization, then the CIO has to be valued as a business peer and a colleague who is sought out as the business tries to renovate itself or keep up with changing opportunities.

Andy Santacroce, *VP of Global IT for BDP International*

One of the key elements around building trust is transparency and not trying to, in any way, filter or hide what's happening in IT from the business. If you're going to be a true partner, if you're going to be right in the middle as an IT partner and a trusted influential collaborator, then you need to be open, honest, and very transparent.

Being an IT partner and a business peer is not just looking at and applying technology solutions to issues or requests that come to you from the business, but really be able to help provide the feedback to potentially change the business processes associated with it. You're adding technology to an existing business process to enable an exponential increase in productivity because you've modified the process to truly be enabled by technology.

Doug Blackwell, *SVP and CIO for Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey*

One of the challenges how do you get IT out there for people to understand what's really going on within the organization that may be very different from their day to day jobs. We actually conduct something we call the IT Expo every year. It's almost a little mini-tradeshow that we have for all the folks in the company who come down and check out new technologies. We talk about new capabilities. We kind of give them a hands-on presentation/discussion on stuff that's happening.

It gives them a better sense that you're not just down there in the bowels of the data center delivering applications and systems, but you're actually working with folks on the floors, in the business to get work done.

Robert Galvin, *CTO, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey*

Understanding your audience, tailoring the message and the medium to each of those audiences and following up are critical items of any successful communications, regardless of the scale, whether you're dealing with just a simple project or whether you're working in a large bi-state agency.

I'll have different messages about the same topic depending on whether I'm dealing with the senior executives or whether I'm dealing with end users or whether I'm dealing with the general public. Each of them requires a different message.

You might also use a different medium to get that message out to people. So, internally I might send emails. Externally we hope that people subscribe to our e-alerts, which people can sign up for on our Port Authority website. We've got Twitter feeds that are pretty active depending on whether you're transiting the George Washington Bridge or

whether you're coming into one of our airports where they're using the PATH (Port Authority Trans-Hudson service.)

It's also important to be transparent if things are going wrong. When something has happened that negatively impacts me, you better tell me all about it and tell me in complete detail so I can have some confidence it's not going to happen again.

Essential elements and basic rules of effective IT communication

- It needs to be clear, concise and it needs to be done in business terms, not using the technical jargon that is typically in IT. You can accomplish this through the use of examples and analogies, especially when dealing with folks at the board level.
- It also needs to be memorable. IT leaders are business leaders and a major function of business leaders is to communicate, whether it's vision, direction, strategy or even the goals of the project if you're working on a project team. So, whatever you're communicating needs to stick with people.
- In delivering the message, you need to understand how IT relates to the business and how it can fulfill business needs. You also need to be able to explain to the business how partnering with IT can transform their business as well.
- Make sure that both parties have the same understanding and are on the same page at the end of a conversation. It is important that everyone is aligned on key issues.
- Different tactics are required for different situations. For example, how to deliver a centralized message in a decentralized organization, or how to deliver a message when you don't have an IT person solely dedicated to communicate on behalf of IT. Also, how to deliver a message to a global IT audience, or make that message 'sticky' for maximum impact.

What are some of the barriers, real or imagined, that create challenges in IT communications or difficulties in the line of communication between business and IT?

1. Business leadership does not view IT communications as important

Andy Santacroce, VP of Global IT for BDP International

I'm not necessarily sure I agree that **business leadership does not view IT communication as especially important**. With all businesses getting so much more reliant on technology, the business needs to know how to represent to its customer base, kind of once removed from IT: What's going on? What happened? Why won't it happen again? The key, I think, is finding the appropriate balance between the speed of getting the message out, the urgency around getting a message out, and getting that communication out and making sure the message is accurate.

If there's delay in getting the message out or if it's worded in such a way that it looks like a lot of time was taken in order to craft this particular message, then you're discounting the trust that exists there because it's like why is it taking so long. We know IT knows what happened. Why is it taking so long to get the message out? They must be trying to craft it in a way that doesn't put the blame back on IT or whatever.

That goes back to the transparency comment. I think it's finding the balance between getting the message out and the accuracy of the message. Make sure you've got the most accurate message out as quickly as possible to your audience so that you can continue to build that trust by showing the transparency.

2. There is no time for IT communications

Robert Galvin, CTO, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey

Lack of time sounds like an excuse to me. If you work away on a terrific project and you don't tell anybody about it, then you may as well not have done the work. It's really important for technology people to take credit and take up their space in the business and leadership pantheon for the great projects and the value that they deliver for the organization. I'm going to quote another sociologist, Erving Goffman.

"Reality is what people perceive it to be." So, if you're not communicating, nobody knows what you're really doing. Unfortunately, in our culture, at least in my organization, anyway, people tend to assume the worst in a vacuum. I think it's really critical that you take the time to take credit for the projects that you deliver in technology.

Doug Blackwell, *SVP and CIO for Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey*

I also think **lack of time** is an excuse. I think you have to make time. We're kind of talking previously about incident management, which was obviously this very critical time constraints associated with that. The projects were just as important.

I just got out of a three-hour meeting, where every month I go through every project in the company that's IT related as well as other projects that I run the program management office as well as IT. We go through every one, the current status, the financial status, the resource status and we communicate out to our business partners when we think we have a problem, whether it's red, green, yellow, we do the whole light thing. I think that is somewhat of an excuse.

Leverage folks in your organization. We leverage our communications department all the time to help improve communication, whether it's just regular ongoing status updates, whatever, as well as when we get into crisis situations. I've actually got people on my IT team as well who have communication responsibilities as part of their job.

3. A reluctance to communicate 'bad news'

Gerry McCartney, *VP of IT and CIO for Purdue University*

We take the practical applications of knowledge very seriously. Most people want to know if something isn't working why it's not working or if a new opportunity is exposed to them, what difference does it make to them? So, you start off from there. You've got good news or bad news. The good news is I'm going to do something for you that we didn't do before. The bad news is something that we had is either broken or going away.

The key role for a CIO is figuring out what is the core business of the place where you work. What is it that makes it what it is? And then tie those IT narratives to those very small number of core businesses.

In our case, we're in the business of creating knowledge through research and communicating it through education. So, if I'm going to have a narrative about IT, it better very quickly get to one of those two outcomes. It's not like we put in some new disc and it's ten times faster than the old disc. Nobody cares. Nobody should care. Why would they care? What does it do for teaching? What does it do for research?

If I'm in another line of business, I have to be able to show those connections quickly and clearly. That's all part of building trust...and not overpromising on impact.

How important is it to build IT's brand, and can there actually be a brand for IT?

Doug Blackwell, *SVP and CIO for Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey*

I think there can be a brand. I think it does start with this kind of active communication. Think of the relationships that you have to build with the folks that you work with in various business areas and make sure there are very strong relationships. We've got relationship managers and mini-CIOs that work with each of the different business units and maintain his kind of constant communication.

Over the years, we've changed from a lower-end of the service provider to more of a partnership. A lot of that has come through this kind of active relationship management and communication that we've put in place.

Robert Galvin, *CTO, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey*

I've been at the Port Authority for just over two years. I took over an IT department that really was kind of disaffected from the rest of the organization. So, part of what I wanted to do was kind of reaffirm why we are here.

I had a very frank conversation with my leadership team and I went out and talked to the business, that kind of listening tour that every CIO goes onto in a new job. I then came back to my team and asked what do you think I heard? I then asked do you want to fix the situation or leave things the way they are.

I think it was probably one of the most important conversations I had in my first two weeks because we came out with a set of principles of what we wanted to be when we grew up. It was really about partnering with the business, making

technology simple, having systems that are designed to sustain the organization with security that's integrated, not bolted on after the fact, and really promoting internal skills and access to information and then standardizing and centralizing.

We also changed the name of the organization from the Technology Services Department (or TSD, which sounded too similar to PTSD) to the Technology Department (since we have an engineering department and a finance department.)

So, that's kind of the new organization that we're evolving into, but you have to give people direction and branding is an important part of it. And having everybody at the table who's a stakeholder in that conversation is an important step.

Comments offered by participants during the virtual session

"Educate as well as inform to raise the level of understanding in addition to building trust." - *Keith*

"Building brand is crucial. If people trust you, your brand and what you deliver, you will be more effective and your communication will be better received. Half the battle is learning what not to communicate." - *Jason*

"My experience is that **lack of transparency is due to people's unwillingness to expose problems** in their organization or their own problems." "When things go pear-shaped and something is broken, the natural response [of technical people] isn't to start explaining what's going on. Their natural response is to just go heads down and say 'Leave me alone. I'm fixing it.'"

"That tied to **the universal and irrational optimism that a lot of IT people have.** I've heard it 10,000 times over the course of my career - 'This thing will fix it.' It's some combination of a natural lack of unwillingness to want to share information and a natural desire to try and work immediately on the fix." - *Kate*

What are some of the key goals and objectives in building a successful IT communications structure?

Andy Santacroce, *VP of Global IT for BDP International*

I think **defining a vision or strategy** is important. What are those top three things that make or break your business? How does it benefit the business' ability to deliver on those top three items? If you're focused on those top three items and basically deprioritize everything that's not in that top three, then I think you've really improved the relationship between the business and the technology division and can really become a true partner and build trust and credibility,

You're also able to more effectively communicate in the terms of the business if you understand what those top three make or break items are from the business' perspective because you're again speaking around the items that are most important to the business part of the company and that will translate less into a technical conversation and more into a business enablement conversation.

Doug Blackwell, *SVP and CIO for Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey*

Being part of the conversation at the senior levels of the organization is key. So, being an active member of a senior leadership team certainly helps a lot. Having reported to the CEO for a number of years and recently just created the role of COO, part of that process, having that relationship with those senior business leaders helps. That helps them filter down the message as well.

Transparency and being truthful is also important and helps build credibility with the board.. I've had some issues where I had to go every quarter in front of the audit and finance committee. That actually wasn't a fun thing to do.

Being a **liaison for IT** is also critical. This gets other levels within the organization thinking about IT and what we're doing, what they're doing and making sure that we're aligned with their business goals.

We created what I call 'mini CIOs', but in fact are senior IT leaders who act as divisional information leaders and sit with my peers within each division. Making sure there's a senior presence as part of the decision making process with each of the different business units was key. It's been pretty successful. It helps in terms of budget management, direction, IT investment, and making sure that we're doing things that support the business and their specific goals.

Gerry McCartney, *VP of IT and CIO for Purdue University*

Communicating with senior executives within an organization is important, although the one I'd question is **the board of directors**. That's a two-edged sword or a double-edged sword. It can also position you very oddly with line of business leaders if you're talking to the board of directors about their line of business. So, I would just say that's a little bit over the top.

Only one quarter of IT leaders have any sort of communications director dedicated to IT usually as a function of budget. If you don't have the budget, do you think a liaison of some kind is important?

Gerry McCartney, *VP of IT and CIO for Purdue University*

Anything that allows the objective media to assess you and hopefully find something good can present a powerful message. I know this option isn't available for many companies but we do collaborative stories with the media. That's an incredibly effective avenue for us. It's particularly effective around good news, if you're trying to get good news out.

Robert Galvin, *CTO, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey*

I like to hire people who are well-spoken. As a matter of fact, my assistant has a Master's degree in English. That is so helpful because a lot of technical people, they don't emphasize good writing and writing is important, not just for communications, but for solid requirements, documents and any kind of communication about what's being done.

One of the things that we struggle with in technology is how do you communicate something that's abstract or how do you communicate value to the end users.

Using the public media if you can and when you have that available is a great resource. I think we should have people that have a formal education and are able to communicate ideas, and able to use different vehicles such as Vine and Twitter and all the rest of that. I try to use social media when I can. I've recently posted for a deputy and I made sure to make reference to it on LinkedIn and on Twitter, and we got just a huge response based on that. I think it's there. It's available to us. We just have to know how to use it and tie it to the audiences that we're trying to reach.

Is there one piece of key advice you can offer to be more effective communicators, based on some of the practices that have worked well for each of you?

Doug Blackwell, *SVP and CIO for Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey*

Transparency, accountability, honesty and setting the appropriate expectations with the folks we work with.

Robert Galvin, *CTO, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey*

Totally agree. I think it's about making sure you know your audience, that you're focused on them, you repeat and emphasize and then follow up to make sure that the message that you wanted to deliver is actually received.

Gerry McCartney, *VP of IT and CIO for Purdue University*

Honesty above all things because you're only as good as your word. And then, to the extent that you can, hire professional people who know how to communicate.

Andy Santacroce, *VP of Global IT for BDP International*

Certainly everything that's been said already, but also identify what those top three drivers are for your business. Focus on those, de-prioritize everything else, and then just over-communicate in those particular top three areas how the technology division is there to further enable the business in achieving those goals.

The [CIO Executive Council](#), an IDG Brand and a business unit of IDG Communications, was founded to serve the evolving, challenging and demanding role of the Chief Information Officer (CIO). Now in its eleventh year, the CEC has expanded its highly regarded leadership services beyond the realm of the CIO to include professional advisory services for any executive charged with strategic technology leadership.