

## The power of collaboration

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By Melissa Solomon

After more than 20 years in IT, Ron Swartz has become all too familiar with what he calls the "limited engagement" model of partnering with end users.

"It's the minimum you can do," says Swartz, software developer at Exelon Corp.'s Power Team, which buys and sells Exelon's nuclear and power supplies.

Few will deny the value in strong partnerships between IT and end users. But for many, the work and logistics that must go into building those partnerships aren't worth the rewards. So they revert to the limited engagement model.

In that model, IT meets with end users. Together, they identify needs and outline business requirements, then IT retreats to its corner to prepare documents capturing the outcomes of those meetings. Then, end users read and sign off on the documents.

The problem, says Swartz, is that those documents are just words, and words have different meanings to different people. So, the possibility exists that IT will come back with a system that doesn't meet end users' needs.

"Then you get a lot of animosity and finger-pointing," says trader Joe MacCrory. "It gets really ugly."

MacCrory knows because he's been there. Before Exelon implemented VizTrade, the automated trading system that went live last summer, the company's traders used a PowerBuilder system integrated with Excel spreadsheets to manage complicated energy trades. "We barely got by," says MacCrory, who patched together the system himself.

Traders had to memorize varying energy costs, regulations, trading routes and procedures; spend time calling and inputting data about each customer; then share that information with the rest of the traders. They spent the first 20 minutes of each hour just setting up the deals, the next 20 capturing the details and the final 20 minutes evaluating the work they'd done in the last hour, and planning for the next hour.

Traders kept complaining about the system, so IT came in to try to replace it. They had the preliminary meetings, agreed on business objectives, then, inevitably, wound up with a system that didn't do the trick.

"Meanwhile, IT's invested a lot in this," says Swartz, so the system developers went back to the drawing board.

"What you really get into there is a death spiral," says MacCrory. "Our industry is changing so fast [that] if you stand still in this business, you're done."

### The Family Practice

"We're all in this together." That's the idea behind the Power Team, explains Michael Erdlen, vice president of IT for Exelon's generation division. The members of the team -- regardless of their job function -- all have the same goal of achieving the business mission.

"Nobody notices the technology in this place anymore," says Erdlen. "And that's the goal."

The homegrown VizTrade system has automated the energy trading process. Phones are connected to the computers, so traders can initiate calls with the click of a mouse and all the information pops up on the screen. Regulations, costs and trading routes are built into the system, and trades are conducted by identifying locations on a bubble map (created with East Windsor, N.J.-based Infragistics Inc.'s Interact Control software) showing all the energy trading participants. The system automatically defaults to commonly used trading

routes, and because the system is real time, the entire trading floor can see which deals are being made as they're happening.

The result: More trades are conducted, fewer errors are made and the time it takes to train new traders has been cut from months to days, says Swartz.

The way they got there was to move away from the "limited engagement" approach and toward the "family practice" approach, says Swartz.

"What's a partner?" he asks. "You make your partners' priorities your own. Partners succeed and fail together."

He goes on to list 22 principles of partnership, all following the metaphor of partnership as a marriage, and the systems that partnership produces are the children. Swartz and his partners, MacCrory and fellow trader George Barnes, admit that the principles sound somewhat corny at times, but they say their own experience is testament to the process.

"Being involved in the beginning was really key for us," says MacCrory, who recalls the days when they were using storyboards to imagine the VizTrade system. "Just to see this come alive was absolutely amazing. The first time I conducted a trade I almost jumped out of my chair."

The bottom line, says Barnes, is that his job is to trade energy. But now, he also has responsibility for VizTrade, and he says he will always look for ways to expand its capabilities along with the business.

### **All About Chemistry**

In 1999, Swartz immersed himself in the end-user environment. He would spend hours shadowing traders, then reviewing tapes of their conversations.

"Ron was doing two things," says Barnes. "He was learning the business [and] trying to find a partner."

Finding the right end user is key, says Swartz. He was looking for someone with the business expertise, willingness and ability to understand technology; someone who had the availability and passion needed for the job; and someone who would provide ongoing feedback and remain involved in the development process long after the system's launch.

Once he found MacCrory and Barnes, Swartz created soft prototypes -- flip charts, storyboards, screen shots.

"It's hard to tell people what you mean," says Swartz. "It's a hell of a lot easier to show them what you mean."

Barnes and MacCrory say that finding the right software developer is just as critical as finding the right end users. It was Swartz's passion that drew them into the process, says Barnes. "Chemistry's really key," he says.

Such a partnership is ideal, says Jim Jones, executive director of the Information Management Forum, an association of IT and business executives in Atlanta. But not many companies have the resources to let IT employees spend months just shadowing users, he notes.

But, says Barnes, if a system is critical to a company's mission and core business strategies, then the family practice partnership model is the best way to drive passion and commitment from both end users and IT.

"How much is it worth?" asks Barnes. "The question you've got to ask yourself is: 'Do I want to be a leader in this industry?'"

And the numbers speak for themselves. After 10 months, Exelon already realized its return on investment, says Swartz.

But, says Erdlen, "It's not a question of ROI. We need this to survive in our business."