Do You Work in IT?

by Danny R. Faught

"I don't have much experience in IT," I recently told a client. He answered, "What!? Why did we hire you, then?"

What I meant was—during most of my career I've worked on projects that produce a product for sale, rather than delivering software to internal customers. In the product development world, I don't hear anyone calling what they do information technology (IT)—that's the people who fix broken computers. In the IT world, where the software serves a support role in a company that probably doesn't sell software, the belief often is that all software development is under the IT umbrella. I've spent most of my career in the product development world, but in the past few years I've had several opportunities to see the IT world. In both worlds, software is designed, developed, and integrated, but I've found notable differences between the two.

Note that I'm making generalizations here; I'll discuss cases where the two worlds overlap later. In product development, the failure of a project can have a major impact on the company's revenue. In IT, a project failure may still have serious consequences, but they're not as likely to keep the company's products out of the market entirely. So I think the stress on the staff varies more in product development, with a higher risk/reward ratio that sometimes leads to dramatic failure and sometimes to huge success; people on IT projects are more likely to encounter an almost constant stream of moderate frustration punctuated by the occasional satisfaction of completing something.

For a company selling widgets, IT is an overhead expense that management tries to minimize. Software isn't a core competency for the company; the company's focused on building widgets. When you consider that testing sometimes is considered undesirable overhead within the IT group, you can appreciate

the challenge the testers in that environment have in acquiring resources. Budget limitations could force IT groups to hire people who don't have the necessary skill level. Acquiring resources in a product development organization is perhaps not quite the same struggle, because those resources are contributing more directly to the value of the company's product line—though expenses still must be controlled in order to maximize profit.

Every company has political battles that entangle people, but IT environments seem to have more than their share of politics. One source of problems in IT is the clash between operations and development. A tester may depend on several silos in the company, each of which tends to tightly control the resources that it manages, with both production and development equipment guarded with equal zeal. This may include a database management group, network maintenance group, a group that manages user access to servers and workstations, a group that allocates hardware resources, and groups that maintain services such as an ERP, data warehouse, or Web application server. In my experience, it can take months to get the various silos to grant most of the resources you need to do your testing.

The political struggles in a product development effort have a different flavor. The product development team is usually organizationally independent of the IT group. IT policies, which tend to be designed with the average novice computer user in mind, often conflict with the plans of the product development team. IT policies may restrict who has administrative access to computer systems, prevent non-approved software applications (like test tools) from being installed, and restrict operating system and hardware configurations on personal workstations, even though the

standard IT system image may not be a good representation of the systems that the customers are using. All the while, the IT team may be struggling with all of the issues mentioned in the previous paragraph for its own software development efforts.

There isn't a clear boundary between the two worlds. One example of the gray area is an eCommerce Web site, or any application service provider. Software development gets high priority because the software is part of the product offered for sale. But the company has to maintain the production servers that run the software, using all the disciplines of an IT group. Another example is custom development where there is only one customer. Though there is a product sold to an external customer, the customer often gets closely involved with the project, which sets it up as more of an IT environment than a mass market product would have. In a custom development project, the customer's hardware may be the only system available on which to conduct system testing, and the development team is likely to get involved in supporting the software deployment.

What can you do with a greater understanding of the two worlds?

- Recognize which world you're in now, and adjust your expectations to fit the realities of that world.
- Identify which world you're looking at when you interview for a job. Consider whether your skills

and preferred work environment are well suited for the unique challenges of that world.

• When you're talking to someone who works in a different company, keep in mind that his context may be completely out of this world compared to where you're working. The approach he needs to take to solve his problems may be very different from yours.

I'm a latecomer to the IT world, but I now have an appreciation for the formidable challenges that internal IT projects face. I'm not sure where to find market research on this, but I'm guessing that there are significantly more software development and testing jobs out there for software with internal customers than for software developed for sale. People like me who have been sheltered from IT could expand their opportunities by developing an appreciation for the IT world. **{end}**

Danny R. Faught's independent consulting practice is Tejas Software Consulting (www.tejasconsulting.com), based in Fort Worth, Texas. Danny enjoys exploring new worlds. When people ask, "What kind of software do you test?" he answers, "Only the kind of software that needs to work properly." He thanks Rick Brenner for his help in developing this article.

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