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## ■ management solution

# REFLECTIONS

In 1981, as a condition for buying my first “microcomputer” my wife insisted I sell the tech toy I had purchased a year and a half earlier – a TI-59 programmable calculator complete with magnetic card reader and thermal printer. That baby hummed. It could store and execute programs of up to 960 “steps” in its nearly 1K of memory. Of course, the printouts from its thermal printer would disappear in a purple belch if left in direct sunlight.

“Could it do payroll calculations?” a prospective buyer asked. “Sure, you just need to program it.” I replied. “My sister works for IBM.” he said. “She can program it.”

And so I sold that TI-59 for \$300 to Stafkings, a local staffing company in my hometown of Binghamton, NY. A couple weeks later they were back at my door. It seems that sister thing didn’t work out. Could I program it to do their payroll? And so it began.

I’ve been writing software for the staffing industry ever since. 30 years. I hadn’t realized just how long until I started to write this.

So what have I learned in these past 30 years? What pearls of wisdom have I to share?

First and foremost, I have learned the truth in the words “the only constant is change.” The implications of this truth are far reaching.

I wasn’t really thinking of that when I ventured into the staffing software business and was admonished early on by a soon to be new client that “Buying computer software is like getting married.” She was absolutely right.

You may buy software that seems a good fit for your company at a given point in time but your company is ever changing. You may gravitate to a niche market that has more specialized needs or your clients and/or your competition may be imposing new performance requirements upon your company. So too is the government, at the federal, state and local level changing the rules, regulations, rates and reporting requirements.

And while all that change is going on the software company you are married to is out working to keep itself viable by selling to other clients as well as supporting you and responding to your needs.

Your business is changing, your provider’s business is changing and life itself, all around you is changing. Thunderstorms happen. Tornadoes happen. Andrew happens. Katrina happens. Power failures and data corruption happens. In 3 months time a father dies and then a brother – life happens. Change happens constantly. Oh and yes, a little thing called technology – that’s changing too – and rapidly.

And through it all, you and your software provider ride the changing tides together – in sickness and in health as it were – because the life that happens to you is the life they must support you through and the life that happens to them impacts their ability to provide that support.

Amidst all of this change, will you and your software provider grow together or grow apart? That may be more a matter of life and market forces than something you can reliably predict before entering into a relationship with a given software provider. And at some point you could find yourself parting ways. Still, knowing that the relationship is not a static one and attempting to evaluate the intangibles of a company’s character and commitment can help you maximize the likelihood of a long term relationship.

The second bit of wisdom I’ve acquired is, and I’ll stay with the marriage theme, take care not to marry for looks but for substance. My brother and business partner, Phil refers to this as the sizzle versus the steak. Essentially it gets down to building or selecting software with feature sets that efficiently perform the real work that needs to be done versus feature sets that are visually appealing but practically useless, inefficient or unimportant. Ideally, the software will have the best of both looks and substance.

This may seem like a no-brainer but I have closet full of (expensive) dusty tech toys that tell a sad story of seduction with sizzle and subsequent fizzle. It took me years to acquire the “satisfy a current need” mentality regarding technology. I still get tempted with the latest and greatest but I’m getting better at resisting the urge.

The last thing I’d like to share from what I’ve learned after 30 years in the staffing industry is the importance of gratitude. I never realized just how much it meant to me until receiving a letter last July from a longstanding client. One of my staff had helped his company through some non-standard information gathering and he was writing to express his appreciation to the staff and to my brother and me, not just for that incident but for our relationship over the years. “You treat us like family.” I recall him saying. And he wanted to let us know that “your efforts do change lives.” He closed with “Thanks for running such a great company.”

We’ve received plenty of thank you letters over the years. I’d call this the “Lifetime Achievement Award” of thank you letters.

There are some great software companies out there serving the staffing industry and the people working at these companies providing support are often working under very stressful conditions: there’s some payroll emergency, or the power just went down on the server, or the auditor has come knocking, demanding the impossible and wanting it yesterday. Life happens. And a good support person feels your pain. They truly care. And when he or she hangs up after working with you to solve a problem they pick up the next call and the cycle begins again.

Sure the support person gets paid and your software provider gets paid but after 30 years, I can assure you: it’s not all about the money. Thank you letters are badges of honor and they are displayed proudly in the cubicles and kitchens of the best software companies.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not soliciting. I’m just giving you some insight into how the thank you letters we receive are regarded. It means a lot.

And so am I filled with gratitude for the opportunity to serve the staffing industry for the last 30 years. I’m grateful for the opportunity to work side by side everyday with my son Matt who leads the next generation of our company’s product development. I’m grateful for the family that is Bridgewater. And I look forward to riding those tides of change. The future is bright and brimming with new possibilities.