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# The Expert's Opinion

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*Interview conducted by Karen Mowery*

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**IRMJ:** How do you make top executives aware of the importance of information resources?

**South:** Internal selling is at least as difficult as selling to "real" customers. But structuring meetings around critical success factors for business functions does get attention. We recently had a strategic planning conference at which executive management discussed ways customers have used I/R for competitive advantage and the status of IBM's efforts across the corporation.

**IRMJ:** What is the role of information resources in the overall growth and success of an organization?

**South:** No matter what an organization actually produces, it must have information to be successful. Information about the marketplace, customer requirements, competition, reaction to the organization's product, availability of raw material for the manufacturing process, etc. are all essential to the overall growth and success of any organization.

In fact, access to timely, accurate and current information is key to making good deci-

sions. One of the current trends in the industry is to provide executive information systems which cut business performance in a variety of ways. It is the challenge of the I/S organization to collect the data from a variety of systems and present it as usable information for non-I/S executives.

**IRMJ:** What do you consider to be some of the major problems in management of information resources in organizations?

**South:** Some of the most significant problems are incomplete or inaccurate inventory of the resources, duplication of information, timely delivery of the proper information to the right user, and avoiding information overload.

**IRMJ:** Do you consider information resources as important as other major corporate resources, such as material, financial, human or management resources?

**South:** As I indicated earlier, information may be the most valuable corporate resource. Most business decisions are made easier and with greater confidence by having accurate, timely information.

**IRMJ:** What is your assessment of end-user computing?

**South:** End user computing is part of a growing trend to empower employees and increase productivity by providing users with more access to applications and information at their desks.

Technology is driving costs down and power up at such astounding rates that today's programmable workstations (PWS) are capable

of delivering applications to end users that, just a few years ago, could only be done on very large mainframes.

Managing this growth is a challenge requiring, among other things, software tools to ensure the currency of applications, and performance tools to resolve performance issues.

**IRMJ: What is your assessment of technological developments of the past two decades in this field?**

**South:** The past two decades have seen incredible improvements in technology. Who would have thought 4 million bit chips would be produced commercially or that a desktop workstation would have more processing power than the mid-range processors of just a few years ago? Technology has allowed industries to produce products and provide services more efficiently and to more customers than ever before. Consider the use of robotics, tools that can't exist without an information system.

**IRMJ: How do you manage the constant need to educate both end users and executives from other functional areas who don't have a good understanding of the possibilities of this technology?**

**South:** This is definitely a challenge. It takes skill and persistence to develop education programs that focus on the benefits of applying information resources technology and not on the technology itself. Many I/S folks are too enamored with the tool and not interested enough in seeing how that tool might satisfy a customer's needs.

Thus, an internal education process is required to develop the "consulting attitude." I/S must concentrate on developing partnerships with users so that education needs are not satisfied merely by attending classes but through regular discussions with users.

**IRMJ: What are the challenges of integrating traditional information system processing, office automation, and telecommunications that traditionally were separate from one another?**

**South:** IBM has attempted to reduce the confusion of users and give a common goal to developers in these three areas by creating standard architectures that cut across the disciplines, and enhance communication, while allowing flexibility for innovation. SNA (systems network architecture) is an example of how traditional I/S processing can use telecommunication services to deliver applications to users and allow efficiencies and greater control.

**IRMJ: What is your assessment of expert systems in general and what do you anticipate to be the future of this technology?**

**South:** Expert systems are an increasingly valuable tool for improving a company's competitive advantage. They have shown exceeding promise in the operational arena, building product configurators, handling education requirements, etc. They will continue to be refined in performance and function and will some day provide a significant portion of the application benefits to users.

**IRMJ: What is your assessment of information resources management education, the level of training and preparation of students coming out of college in programs dealing with information systems, information resources, and information technology?**

**South:** In general, colleges and universities have stepped up the challenges of producing students who not only survive but also thrive in the fast-changing environment of I/S. Some of the ways business can ensure that training is relevant and current are to form joint projects, support early learning of keyboard/computer

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skills, and provide the latest hardware and software. IBM has a good track record in this area.

***IRMJ:*** What do you see as future trends and issues in information technology management facing corporations?

***South:*** More and more corporations are recognizing that information is a company asset and are using it for competitive advantage. This will have significant organizational impact. There will be a greater need for networked organizations as opposed to the traditional hierarchical

structures which slow down information flow. Empowered employees will make more decisions that affect the bottom line closer to the customers. This will make companies more customer driven.

There will be an increased need and desire to form business alliances as companies focus resources on their core business and allow business partners to provide missing expertise.

An ever increasing desire to improve quality will require the I/S community to respond with better applications written in shorter time with fewer resources.

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