STEP AWAY FROM THE TECHNOLOGY

By Stephanie Maddocks

I love IT guys.

IT guys are creative and technical and smart and all-powerful. As they are the ones that control my access to e-mail and the network printer, I am compelled to say all these nice things. And I really do mean them.

At the same time, they love technology. They love the pretty, shiny new gizmo that is the next best thing since sliced bread and which promises to make their lives easier by getting them out of the office or keeping them in the office longer to play with their pretty, shiny new toy. They are the ones that quietly wander around the gaming shows and computer electronic shows, gathering brochures and asking "techie" questions that only a fellow techie would understand, honing their laser eyes on the latest and greatest must-have equipment. They love opening the boxes and pulling off bubble wrap and spending hours setting up their new IT widget. Personally, I get the same thrill opening a new box of shoes. But that's just me.

And, best of all, casino management believes that these IT gurus hold the golden key to the solutions box. While "the suits" may never begin to understand what the IT team actually does, they do know that the IT department is programmed into the first spot on the speed dial; as soon as something happens that can't be fixed by a reboot, when they're on the verge of shaking the computer like an Etch-A-Sketch, they call the IT geek squad and it's fixed with a few key strokes. This magic that IT wizards perform reinforces their mystique. Once this happens a time or two, it becomes easier for IT management to justify all the new bells and whistles that they need in order to "keep the systems up 24/7" or "ensure that everyone stays connected." After all, management doesn't want that Etch-A-Sketch problem or, goodness gracious, a virus.

However, once the garage or office or data closet is full of boxes and switches and power cords and various computer parts, sometimes reality must settle in. Maybe it's time to consider a return to simplicity. Not that I will ever advocate returning to the typewriter—because I could not live without spell check—but perhaps there is a fine balance between technology and use-ability.

Is it possible that the casino industry has become over technologized?

Too many times, casinos implement technology for technology's sake, pinning all their hopes and dreams (and sometimes even revenue projections) on technology to save all (or at least to save their budgets). What started out as a manual punch card or raffle ticket, player-tracking systems evolved into automated casino management systems. One would be hard pressed to find a soul who thinks this progress is bad as long as these systems are still combined with face-to-face interaction between casino personnel and guests. Nothing will ever replace human interaction when it comes to superior customer service. (Big red flag to all those companies who choose automated phone systems for access to their service centers. No one wants to press or say "three" fifteen times to reach a human.)

It is a fact that gaming systems provide lots of features, functionality and amazing tools to help casinos perform more efficiently. Jackpots are processed faster; tax forms print at laser speed; finance completes audits in half a day. All of these benefits directly relate to the profitability of the casino. However, when the systems are used as a crutch instead of a tool, they detract from the customer service nature of the casino. Club booth employees are now handed scripts to describe to the guest how the promotions work, the same as a telemarketer that dials the phone to sell you the latest and greatest gizmo. When the slot machines don't work, players are told it's a system thing and not to worry, that it happens all the time. Technology is the apex of pleasure and the bane of existence for casino players and casino managers alike.

For those of you old enough to remember the television series "The Six Million Dollar Man," this may be a familiar refrain:

Oscar Goldman opening narration: "Steve Austin, astronaut. A man barely alive. Gentlemen, we can rebuild him. We have the technology. We have the capability to build the world's first bionic man. Steve Austin will be that man. Better than he was before. Better, stronger, faster."

That same paragraph could be written for today's gaming system and has probably been said by more than one gaming system sales person:

System company sales pitch: "Cool Software.com, gaming system. A system barely alive. Folks, we can rebuild it. We have the technology. We have the capability to build the world's first working system. Cool Software.com will be that system. Better than it was before. Better, stronger, faster."

Casinos too often seem willing to search for a custom solution to their problem. "We like that system," I've heard a casino manager say, "if it only did X-Y-Z, too. Do you think we could add those features?" I wish I could ask Bill Gates at Microsoft that question, because I have a list of things I'd like Windows to do differently. It would be helpful if when reviewing systems, casino managers would remember that these are like Windows or Adobe Acrobat or any other software application. It takes code development and time to make changes. I often wonder how much operations would be affected if the casino just adapted to the way the software worked, instead of trying to make the software adapt to their business practices.

And, if I had a dollar for every time I heard," if only these 12 systems could interface and communicate with each other, my life would be perfect," then I could buy that island after all. Non-techie people often forget that systems are designed and built in a vacuum

and that most were not designed to talk to any other system, especially if it is a competitor's system. Interfacing disparate systems is not only a challenge, it is also a recipe for finger pointing and frustration unless clear specifications are provided to all parties and sufficient time is afforded to all groups to fully develop and test the solution. Too often these interfaces are designed on the back of a cocktail napkin and rushed through development, and not many casinos are happy with the results of this shotgun marriage.

In many cases, casinos search for technology to solve management problems. For example, the employees on the casino floor are surfing the Internet and looking at sites that are not for public exposure. What does the casino do? They add technology to restrict access to these websites. Problem solved, right? Wrong. Where is the manager who should be supervising these employees, ensuring they are focused on their job responsibilities and tasks? The manager is putting the onus on the IT department to know what people are doing and become the Internet regulators and to manage the manager's people remotely. Managers have a tendency to believe there must be some technology out there that can control their employees, even if they themselves don't control them.

Nothing replaces knowledge and education and experience for casino management. Technology is also implemented in casinos because the managers many times don't understand casino operations. They ask IT to develop systems, databases, and reports to provide them information because they don't know what is going on in the casino and they don't want to step outside their office to find out. What happened to the days when casino managers wandered the casino floor and knew their players by name? Or knew what the table inventory was, or the drop, or the number of jackpots paid that day? It is understood that casino operations have become larger and more complex, yet at the same time the size of casino management teams has grown to deal with the increased size and volume of guests and transactions. Once again, technology systems will never replace face-to-face guest interaction.

Technology does have its place in the casino environment. It does create operational efficiencies, manage expenses, and can positively affect the bottom line. It does breed competition, initiate competitive advantages, and can provide solutions to many every day challenges. However, without proper management and a plan, technology is nothing more than a box.

I imagine IT guys watch late night television, speed dialing their programmed phones to Fry's Electronics for the latest gadget, while programming their universal remote at the same time. I really don't want to see the casino of the future look like George Jetson's house where everything is automated and robots and kiosks and machines are the only interaction that a player has with the house. In that event, I'll just start playing poker at home and hand dialing QVC on my rotary phone.

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