I write in reference to From BackOffice to Boardroom: Repositioning Global IT By Educating the Line to Lead at British American Tobacco by Professors Wheeler and Marakas of IU and Peter Brickley, CIO of BAT. I believe this challenge of improving the strategic alignment of IT to more traditional business functions is of great importance, as IT becomes a differentiating capability for competitive advantage. Numerous approaches have been spoken and written about in recent years, including appointing CIOs with business backgrounds (and little or no IT knowledge) to bridge the communication gap; using consultants and relying on IT and e-business gurus; and most concerning, encouraging IT executives who appear “not to be solving the problem” to leave. But there is little compelling evidence that such interventions have closed the gaps between IT professionals and business leaders.

The approach adopted by BAT should be commended because it addresses the root problem rather than offering a cosmetic quick fix. The fundamental cause of the stress is the need for IT professionals to move both mentally and physically from the back office, without being given the training or resources to do so. The education of IT professionals, their career expectations, and the technologies they have deployed have largely been a product of the earlier back-office IT era – out of sight and out of mind. Anything short of re-educating IT professionals, and carefully shifting the company’s IT culture, is likely to fail – and usually does.

Equally, and in a complementary manner, internal IT clients need education. Numerous useful approaches for business leaders exist. They range from IS executive education programs for non-IT professionals to reverse-mentoring by bright, young IT professionals. Encouraging non-IT executives to embrace the potential of IT can be very successful, if the approach fits the company’s cultural norms. Success is even more likely when senior management leadership and drive are visible; often this is the CEO’s or COO’s job. The cliché, “It’s hard to lead where you have not been or are not prepared to go,” is a reality CEOs ignore at their peril when it comes to IT.

Taken together, reeducating IT professionals and their internal business partners at the same time leads to an effective two-handed clap. Extending the analogy, no durable benefit can be obtained by educating either alone; the efforts must be complementary.

Yet, even moving to this apparently more productive relationship leaves an unanswered question, “What value do shareholders see from an enhanced linkage between IT and other business areas?” Are companies that embrace technology more effective than their competitors, and more successful within their peer group as measured by the market? Given the promise
that technology can improve efficiency (cost reduction) and effectiveness (cycle-time reduction, speed to market, customer intimacy, etc.), shouldn’t we be able to see clearly higher performance from companies like BAT that more effectively leverage IT assets? Perhaps it’s too early to tell. This new dual education approach may still be evolving and not yet fully mature. So we may need to await the ultimate results.

About the Author

W. Roy Dunbar has served as Vice President and Chief Information Officer for Eli Lilly and Company since April 1999. He joined the company in 1990 as a market research analyst and then held a series of positions including general manager of Lilly Venezuela and corporate director of new product planning. Born in Jamaica, Roy graduated from Manchester University in the U.K. with a pharmacy degree in 1982 and an MBA from Manchester Business School in 1990.