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Eliminate Before You Automate, or EB4A

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At our recent InformationWeek Fall Conference on "Business Process Innovation," Linda Dillman, CIO of industry juggernaut Wal-Mart, delivered many pearls of wisdom to the crowd of more than 400 who participated in the three-day event. But one point in particular had the whole crowd dropping their heads and putting pen to paper. It was a simple phrase nestled within Linda's deck of slides: "Eliminate Before You Automate." We'll call it EB4A. It was like watching an entire classroom taking a test, when the answer suddenly comes to all and they confidently fill in the bubble.

I was intrigued, so I embarked on my own quest to talk with attendees about this visceral reaction to a seemingly simple point. (I know, I know, not the typical cocktail party conversation!)

Some of the observations and examples discussed throughout the conference on this topic were especially insightful. The thinking behind EB4A isn't new. It has been a best practice in the software development and IT world for several business-technology cycles. The "ah-ha" or "duh" moment for many I talked with was the idea of business-technology leaders actively involved in applying this elimination of business processes and requirements before even thinking about recommending or developing a technology solution. This requires CIOs to continue becoming even more involved in setting strategy and business requirements and getting themselves and their teams in the trenches of the business. Others warned me to just wait until Web services become mainstream and organizations go from deploying the huge apps we use today to lots of small apps that are tied to millions of processes. This is when EB4A will be mandatory in business technology.

The consensus on how to EB4A? Spend quality time participating in and observing the way things work inside and outside your company, looking at the entire process from company and employee to customer and back again. This roll-up-your-sleeves technique builds credibility with your colleagues (business-process owners) and lets you make smart suggestions about what's required to truly fix the problem or capitalize on the opportunity. The potential upside with customers, a.k.a. your revenue and profit source, is even more compelling. At FedEx, the IT teams frequently ride on trucks and work in the distribution centers to understand how to engineer time to deliver more value. At Capital One Financial Corp., the number one companies in InformationWeek's annual list of the most innovative users of technology; CIO Gregor Bailar and his team staff the call centers to better understand employee and customer experiences. Several times they've discovered that technology isn't the only answer. They found they could suggest process changes and then devote time and resources to other projects that drive company growth.

An interesting, unexpected insight I gained is that EB4A can be an unbiased tool for saying "yes" or "no" to supporting projects or initiatives based on their potential contribution to the business. With this learning-in-the-trenches approach, you begin the dialog from a position of strength with credibility. Instead of being perceived as the "no" or "won't do" person, you can apply experiential, rational analysis and provide alternatives.

For fun and as a running experiment, let's all watch Randy Mott, HP's new CIO, and see how he deploys EB4A. I think it's safe to say that in his career he's had significant impact on companies such as Dell and Wal-Mart, with some decent results using technology and process to deliver business innovation.

Are you executing an EB4A strategy? Let me know your experience at svaughan@cmp.com.

For highlights from the InformationWeek Fall Conference, go to informationweek.com/conference/05fall/followup.