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Tech Chiefs Deserve A Round Of Applause

BYLINE: Bob Evans

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate a few richly deserving people.

I'd like to start with the CIO of the company that was ranked No. 1 in last week's InformationWeek 500, our annual ranking of the most-innovative corporate users of business technology. In particular, I'd like to tout Capital One CIO **Gregor Bailar's** advice about a highly unorthodox but nevertheless strategic piece of technology: the iPod. While the popular music player might not be a key part of the real-time infrastructure at Capital One, it can nevertheless be strategic, Bailar said, because it can help break down the ugly perception among many businesspeople that technology has to be dull, has to be inscrutable, has to be difficult and painful and frustrating, and should probably be avoided.

As my colleague Tony Kontzer wrote last week, "The iPod, [Bailar] said, [is] a technology that, while lacking the security needed to be a viable business tool, has the potential to build excitement around business technology. 'More business managers have technology at home that they know how to use than they do at the office,' Bailar said. 'It's amazing how much the bar has been raised by consumer electronics.'" So, Greg, congratulations on finishing in the top spot in the InformationWeek 500, and kudos as well for pushing this innovative type of approach that can break down archaic stereotypes that pigeonhole IT people and projects as being long on complexity and cost but short on value.

Along similar lines, FedEx CIO Rob Carter actually suggested that CIOs take the time to let their CEOs know them as individuals, as unique human beings who not only deliver great results but also care about such stuff as sports or music or world events. As with Bailar's suggestion, Carter is recommending an approach that might on the surface appear to be counterintuitive but that is, in fact, engaging in the short term and strategic in the longer term. So hats off to you, Rob, for the commonsense, though atypical, counsel.

Another CIO suggested that business technologists add a centuries-old type of networking to their arsenal of high-tech wizardry as part of their efforts to share information more effectively across business units. The must-have connectivity gear, said Unifi CIO and VP Ben Holder, is social networking. This is Unifi's second effort at such an information-sharing initiative, and Holder insisted that this untraditional tool will be the key to success this time around. As my colleague Laurie Sullivan wrote last week, "'We have the capabilities,' [Holder] says. 'What we lacked is the social network. It was an assumption it was there.'" So Holder hired the employee who headed up Unifi's Six Sigma processes to create a social network for sharing data across the company's business units. Congratulations to you, Ben, for acting on the belief that while all this IT stuff is great, the real indispensable ingredient is the human brain.

And for a few different reasons, Wal-Mart and its CIO Linda Dillman are also in line for applause and pats on the back. As Laurie Sullivan wrote of the company's response to Hurricane Katrina, "Wal-Mart also set up emergency lines for employees to call in, trying to account for all its employees and connect them to family members. Calls quickly exceeded 2,500 daily, swamping the existing call center and forcing the IT team to build a new one in a few hours. Wal-Mart also launched a Web site where employees and others in the affected area can post messages to friends and family. When it proved popular, the company expanded it for

use by non employees." Dillman said 40,000 messages have been posted, and the sites had more than 2 million hits. And I'd like to highlight one other anecdote from Dillman that reveals a great deal about the company and its processes: She said that as the severity of Katrina first began to emerge, the company used its IT systems to lock in a new set of rules that would forbid any price increases in stores in affected areas for products in high demand and short supply. Congratulations, Linda, to you and your company for the great example.

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