Greening your business: every little bit counts

By Roger Strain

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As humans get ever more conscious of the fact that we need to change the way we work, eat, live and consume - not just for the sake of the environment but for our own survival - organisations are under increasing pressure to use energy more efficiently. But it's not just new gadgets and new design techniques that will make the difference. When you turn an energy-conscious eye on any business, there are many small changes to make that can add up to big impacts. Even customer relationship management (CRM), my own area of expertise, has a contribution to make.

Energy prices are also rising inexorably, just as the facts of climate change begin to hit home, only adding to the pressure.

A recent Gartner research note makes the case that "few enterprises, and even fewer IT management teams, have truly grasped the scale and speed of the shock wave that is likely to hit them". Gartner says the imperative for change will be created by a combination of three factors:

- The escalating and combined costs of energy and carbon;
- Climate change affecting brand values and influencing buyer behaviour; and
- Regulations and fiscal measures.

Enterprises who are still wondering why they should bother about environmental issues, says Gartner, should rather start wondering about the risks they face if they fail to act.

Under the spotlight

In this process, IT is coming under the spotlight along with everything else. It's not obvious, but IT is a major polluter and consumer of natural resources. Computer hardware is full of heavy metals and toxic compounds that are, for the most part, not properly recovered or recycled. While they're being used, they consume vast amounts of power - which in South Africa in particular, means lots of coal burned and lots of carbon dioxide emitted.

Even the most superficially harmless Google search draws on the power of up to a million servers, each dissipating some of the energy it uses as heat which necessitates air conditioning, which in turn uses more energy.

Fortunately, our technology has the potential to solve many of the problems it creates. The industry is already manufacturing more energy-efficient hardware, and intelligent power management is increasingly built into systems from the individual desktop PC to the massive server farm. Attention is also starting to turn towards software itself, with the recognition that the way software is designed and developed has a direct effect on the power consumption of hardware.

Contribution to make

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For example, good CRM means more accurate customer information, which in turn means fewer expensively produced but wrongly addressed mailshots that go straight from the mailbox to the rubbish bin. Increased efficiency here is good for the enterprise, as well as the environment.

Organisations that know their customers well can also begin to make far more effective use of email, SMS and other electronic communication channels, eliminating even more of the need to send paper expensively around the country.

A seamlessly functioning CRM system that's always up to date and allows remote access should also make for a more efficient sales team. With less need to come into the office and a better menu of options for contacting their clients, sales staff should be able to spend less time commuting - improving their carbon footprint as well as their productivity and quality of life.

In the end, IT will be a critical part of the journey every organisation must make towards more conscious and efficient use of energy. We will need new ways of doing old things, all the way along the value chain - and in that process, IT is going to be invaluable and essential.

ABOUT ROGER STRAIN

As MD and founder of Liquid Thought Business Solutions (www.liquidthought.co.za, Roger Strain draws on his over 15 years of experience in the local IT business solutions market. After obtaining a BCom degree from UCT, he started his career as an ERP implementation consultant, and progressed into sales, marketing and ultimately management in companies such as Datatec, JD Edwards and Deloitte & Touche. He then moved to Microsoft South Africa where he was responsible for promoting Microsoft's full range of technologies to its largest corporate customers, and first became excited about the business potential for Microsoft's new CRM product. Email Roger at roger@liquidthought.co.za.

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