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# Information at your fingertips?

## A reality check and wake-up call

By Jon Collins, May 2007

A long, long time ago, I can still remember... when, at university, we were taught about how computers were going to help people have all the information they needed, quite literally at the speed of electricity. Hum. It's now 20 years later, and I don't feel any more like information is at my beck and call than I did back then. Indeed it's the other way around – I feel beholden to information, rather than feeling it is beholden to me.

I don't think I'm alone. In fact, I know I'm not – a research study we conducted at the beginning of the year showed that information access remains an area of weakness for many organisations. Quite ironic really, given that we supposedly work in "information technology", that is, the technology of information. Someone, and I suppose we all need to put our hands up for this, isn't doing a very good job.

But is it an impossible goal? Think: if you could tap into whatever information you needed right now, what would it look like and how would you access it? It's not an easy question to answer, and indeed, it is difficult if not impossible to do so without considering what facilities are already available to us. Every now and then I have a deep insight into my own information needs, for example when I am in a strange town, there's nobody around and I really, really could do with a curry. Weren't mobile software vendors telling us years ago that such a problem had already been solved? Perhaps it's just me – everyone else is enjoying fine curries, laughing into their Cobras at having managed to keep the secret – but I doubt it.

It's the same for business information. Whatever the reasons, many (if not all) organisations still struggle when it comes to pulling together whatever information is necessary for day to day activities. Again, there have been many promises over the years of how, say, we would be able to access a single view of the customer, or manage product information over the lifecycle. But, let's face it, if it is still a challenge to organise meeting room bookings – and indeed, in many places it is – what chance do we stand in achieving more esoteric goals. Even this is a simplistic view of the real requirement, as anybody who invites a potential customer for a meeting, only to be turfed out of the room by some irate jobsworth, will know.

So what's the answer? One thing is for sure - it cannot just be about technology. For an organisation to get on top of its information pile, it must be able to distinguish the important from the clutter – and manage the information accordingly. Long ago I went on a five-day information management course. What made it interesting was, four-and-a-half days were spent on how information should be managed, and in the last half day, the trainer announced: "And there are some technologies that can help people do it." One day perhaps, when information technology has slowed down from its current pace of change, organisations may put an equal amount of focus on the problem, rather than leaping straight to the solution. Until then, we'll just have to do the best we can.

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