

Managing Change on Campus: Revolution and Counterrevolution

Good change management requires that IT attend to the university's deep regard for the past and the future

By **Luke Fernandez**

In the world of university IT, change seems like a near constant. Workstations get upgraded from Windows 95 to 98 to XP (and maybe now to Linux), the course catalog and course registration move online, student information systems are migrated from one database to another, e-mail changes from Outlook to Novell, and the campus online learning management system moves from one vendor to another. All the while faculty are asked to adjust and keep up.

If such changes occurred without complaint or incident, they might go unheralded or even unnoticed. But on my campus, at least, change rouses trepidation and expectation, some satisfaction, and a fair share of remorse among users who claim that the old system was better or that the new system's advantages are outweighed by the amount of time it takes to learn how to use them effectively.

If these were minor upgrades and inexpensive, we could move ahead without further ado, hoping that we'd learned something from the experience and that we'd do better next time. Some of these changes, however, take place over a long period of time, are costly to implement, are hard to back out of, and have ambiguous results.¹

When change is big, expensive, and has ambiguous results, we need to spend commensurate amounts of time evaluating whether the change was successful. Robert MacDowell, a vice president at Microsoft, suggests that most organizations don't do enough to evaluate



the success of their software rollouts. McDowell wrote:

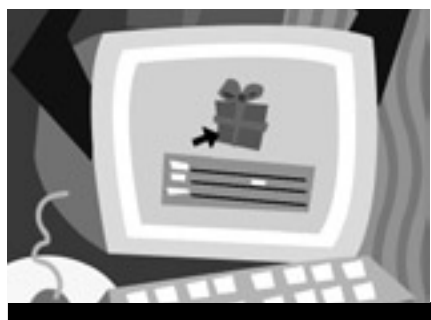
By far the largest percentage of companies, when pushed, say that they do not do a disciplined job of auditing after a project has been installed. They don't verify whether or not the goals were met.²

What is left out of the process of evaluating past change and planning for future change is the need to pose questions about the culture of technology change in the university, how much change should be tolerated, and what imperatives should drive this change. A clearer understanding of these

cultural issues can help in identifying reasons why change occurs or is allowed to occur, and what campus forces promulgate and which ones resist it. Hindsight and more formal auditing go a long way in legitimating or condemning past IT strategy. But understanding what university cultures endorse or resist change and what type of change they accept can also play an informative role in helping IT departments formulate clearer strategies for future change. This essay focuses on delineating two of these cultures and the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary tendencies that reside within them.

Within IT departments a fair amount of prospective planning occurs when considering technological change. Typically, the younger and lower echelons of IT embrace new technology, whereas management generally takes a more tempered stance. Deciding how much technical change is necessary and when requires answering many questions: "How long can the old system run?" "How receptive are its users to change?" "What other changes are occurring, and when?" "Should we wait for the version slated for release in December, which will probably be less buggy, or do users want the features slated for release in September?" At my university, managers usually answer these questions pragmatically and through joint committee decisions. Experience and principle merge in the wisdom articulated by groups.

When end users balk at moving to something new, the resistance is usually understood within IT circles as simple unfamiliarity with the technical advantages of the new technology; the best way to overcome this resistance is to offer training. Campus resistance to change isn't always based on unfamiliarity, however. It is often rooted in an attachment to particular forms of efficiency not included in a new software package. Or, it might be entrenched in the histories and ideologies that lend some partial definition to a university's identity and to the people who study and obsess about these histories and ideologies. While discussion about change in campus IT generally avoids



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abstractions, in the interest of appearing flexible rather than doctrinaire it helps to remember that the problem of managing change has existed for a very long time. As we undergo a technological revolution in the university, it is helpful to recall some thinkers who have reflected on the change accompanying past revolutions.

Resisting Revolution

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* gave the issue of change the most consideration. Burke, an English parliamentarian who lived in the 18th century, is most famous for his opposition to the French Revolution. Arguably, he offered some of the most eloquent polemics against change written in the English language. In resisting change, Burke embodied what is called classical conservatism. His vision offers an interesting contrast to most of the perspectives articulated by campus IT professionals.

Writing during the Enlightenment, when reason was beginning to be heralded as a pretext for regime change and revolution, Burke urged people to place more faith in the tried and true organizational arrangements of the old regime, to regard the volatile powers of unalloyed reason (that had no respect

for tradition) with deep skepticism, and to consider the possibility that even when given the best possible reasons, people aren't generally receptive to change. He wrote:

... [I]n this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings, that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree.... We cherish them because they are prejudices and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital ... of ages.³

The point in citing Burke isn't to endorse his position or suggest it as a pretext for curbing the enthusiasts of change. His words, however, help elucidate conservatism and suggest the more deep-seated ideological rationales that some faculty might rely on when they resist change. If Burke celebrated prejudice and emphasized its resistance to reason, he was also adept at casting doubt on those who always pursue the new:

... [T]he enlightened among us essentially differ [in regarding prejudice and tradition positively].... They have no respect for the wisdom of others; they pay it off by a very full measure of confidence in their own. With them it is a sufficient motive to destroy any scheme of things, because it is an old one. As to the new, they are in no sort of fear with regard to a building run up in haste; because duration is no object to those who think little or nothing has been done before their time, and who place all their hopes in discovery. They conceive, very systematically, that all things which give perpetuity are mischievous and therefore they are at inexpiable war with all establishments.⁴

Burke built his arguments on an eloquent command of the English language

and metaphor. This is especially evident when he compares the state to a castle (better to repair the walls than to tear down its foundations and start anew) or to an oak (better to prune a tree and tame its wilder growth than to chop it down and plant all over again).

While Burke used these metaphors to describe European states, they have utility when considering whether to move to a new technology. Older technologies might seem a hodgepodge of features that grew organically (rather than by design) as needs manifested themselves. This collection of features may contravene reason and the principles of good design, but if they've endured for any length of time, they may have more merit than is immediately evident. Moreover, the prejudices end users have developed while working and adapting to an evolving piece of software may be so entrenched that they're not open to something new, even if the new is, in an abstract sense, better designed. Pure, unalloyed reason might tell us that a better, more efficient, more logically designed technology exists to meet our needs. Nonetheless, technologies that evolved in parallel with a culture's traditions are often held dear by their end users, and it would be incautious to discount their merits.

Promoting Revolution

Many thinkers in the Enlightenment advocated change, among them the American revolutionary Thomas Paine, who took issue with Burke. Although the following passage advocates change in government, it is not hard to read it as a manifesto for just about any kind of change (substitute "software" for "government"):

Whether the forms and maxims of Governments which are still in practice, were adapted to the condition of the world at the period they were established, is not in this case the question. The older they are, the less correspondence can they have with the present state of things. Time, and change of circumstances and opinions, have the same progressive effect in rendering modes of Government obsolete as

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they have upon customs and manners.... [P]rosperity ... require[s] a different system of Government, and a different species of knowledge to direct its operations, than what might have been required in the former condition of the world.⁵

Even if universities attend to the past, that doesn't always breed antiquarian thinking, nostalgia, or conservatism. As Paine argued, institutions often cater effectively to the era in which they were created. History sometimes leaves these institutions behind, however, and when it does, it seems sensible to push for change.

Some people might think that dredging through history won't yield anything fruitful for devising a contemporary IT strategy—and they might be right if it weren't taking place on a university campus. Whether Burke and Paine have as much to contribute to the formulation of a viable IT strategy as, say, Nicholas Carr, isn't the point. On a university campus, these thinkers matter.

On the surface, campus politics and IT seem driven by overt imperatives, obvious public agents, and obvious and pragmatic technical questions. But significant agents of change (and significant agents of stasis) are not always public or embodied in public individuals. Sometimes change and stasis are determined by deeper undercurrents of culture and ideology and by more secretive processes. In the university, ideas, history, and tradition tend to have more traction than in other institutions not tasked with, among other things, being custodians of the past. Any change management strategy would be foolish to dismiss these intellectual legacies.

Reconciliation

To bring the argument full circle, the university plays many roles and encompasses many factions, some looking to the future and others to the past. Some subscribe to ideologies and fulfill university functions usually allied with technological change, whereas others are engaged in occupations and the study of ideologies more resistant to it. The lion's share of campus change management strategy must be determined by pragmatic considerations, but the histories and cultures making up university life are relevant political factors when planning and evaluating technological change on campus. Wise planners should be aware of these cultures and attend to their differences when implementing technological change in the university. *C*

Endnotes

1. For example, during the past two years our university has migrated from a home-grown learning management system (LMS) to WebCT's Vista. The change has been challenging politically, logistically, and technically. The project has accomplished many of its goals and by many accounts has been a success. Student surveys and focus groups corroborate much of what many campus CIOs fret over: major-vendor LMS solutions have enjoyed only a lukewarm reception on the nation's campuses, and they are routinely criticized "for skyrocketing prices, bugs, and ease-of-use problems." See the *Syllabus 2004 Conference Yearbook—A Virtual Tour Through the July 18–22 Meeting in San Francisco*, December 2004, p. 41. See also <<http://www.campus-technology.com/article.asp?id=10074>>.
2. R. McDowell and W. L. Simon, *In Search of Business Value: Ensuring a Return on Your Technology Investment* (New York: Select Books, 2005), p. 80.
3. E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1973), p. 100.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
5. T. Paine, *The Rights of Man*, quoted from <<http://www.ushistory.org/paine/rights/c1-025.htm>>.

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