

Why Lemmings Won't Make it to the Top of the Food Chain

By [David Nichols](#)



One can only imagine famous cartoonists Gahan Wilson or Gary Larson drawing a cartoon depicting a mass of lemmings as far as the eye can see; all of them heading for a cliff, and one lemming saying to another, "Hey, I understand things are better at the bottom of the cliff."

While it's a popular myth that lemmings commit mass suicide, they've come to symbolize an unthinking mass reaction to some sort of external stimuli. In the lemmings case it's normally over population which causes an urge to migrate. The difficulty arises when geographical obstacles such as cliffs, rivers and lakes are on the migration path. In the lemming's "society" it's not a good idea to be a leader because even though it's readily apparent to the lemmings up front that cliffs, rivers and lakes represent danger, the pressure from the masses can be overwhelming.

One can draw a parallel to the situation that businesses worldwide and their respective IT organizations find themselves in today; the credit crunch, slowing sales, shrinking market share, reduction in the workforce and disappearing budgets. The corresponding obstacles we face are concepts of "doing more with less," "working smarter, not harder," and my favorite, "everyone must share the pain equally." Of course these platitudes are most often spouted by the same political and business leadership that failed to adapt to an ever changing social and economical environment.

There is evidence that suggests that the greatest evolutionary change occurs when populations experience significant stress. The choices that IT individuals, managers and leadership have to make in the next few months will result in the next evolutionary phase of Information to Business Technology (BT). The survival traits IT professionals must adopt will lead to the evolution of a much more aggressive BT organizations that will focus on the information used by the business, and the processes necessary to achieve the desired business process outcomes. Overall agility, both organizationally as well as technologically will require the adoption of increased utilization of partnerships in meeting the needs of the business, because business problems will become more, not less complex. Complexity will symbolize the new normal and Business Technology organizations that fail to develop a high tolerance for dealing efficiently and effectively with complex business problems will be replaced by those that can. Technical skills, while important will become secondary to those focused on information and process as the pace of technology commoditization increases.

Almost two years ago Gartner published a paper predicting that IT organizations would undergo a fundamental transformation from technology centric to one that splits into four primary domains; technology, information, process and relationships. While at the time that was written, IT was operating in a rather benign environment. Gartner used the term "transform" which is synonymous with "metamorphosis" ... "a marked change in appearance, character, condition, or function." Today's environment requires evolutionary change to something new and improved; and that doesn't mean an IT caterpillar dressed up like a BT butterfly.

Evolutionary Niche

Evolution occurs when a given population adapts to take advantage of an unoccupied ecological niche. Today that niche is Business Technology. We'll exam the "genetic adaptations" that today's technology professional must adopt in order to be able to fill the developing Business Technology niche.

Adaptations are structures or behaviors that enhance a specific function, causing organisms to become better at surviving and reproducing; in other words, the things that give individuals, managers and leaders a survival advantage.

Individuals

It is anticipated that because of the commoditization of technology there will about 40% fewer in-house technology jobs in the future than there are now. While technology jobs will still exist and be in demand, they will be concentrated in external service and technology provider organizations. Since those organizations survive and thrive through leveraging economies of scale, overall there will be fewer technology jobs in the future. Today's technology individual has some critical choices to make; remain focused on a specific technology and compete for a shrinking number of jobs, or focus on acquiring a skill set and knowledge focused on information, process and relationships.

In a recent a Network World article by Denise Dubie the today's economic reality was made clear,

"... Globe One assessed its client base and learned that present employers prefer that candidates have ITIL certification, and will reward them with salaries that are 40% more for such qualifications. Without ITIL certification, employers would expect potential candidates to have 10 to 15 years experience to earn the same pay. Globe One estimates IT professionals with ITIL certifications could see salaries increase by as much as \$28,000 per year. ITIL has steadily become an industry imperative, and by offering higher salaries, companies are clearly recognizing its business value."

Managers

Today's businesses expect IT to understand and connect business and IT processes to create and capture value. Tomorrow's businesses will demand it. Gartner projected that in the next three years those business that are able to achieve this will outperform their competitors by as much as 15%.

Technology Managers must focus on acquiring skills in the efficient and effective management of processes that support the achievement of desired business outcomes and link them closely via governance to enterprise goals. Tomorrow's Business Technology organizations will focus over 50% of their efforts on supporting information, process and relationships.

Leadership

The old joke about CIO meaning "Career Is Over" probably isn't too far off the mark today. Not because of the "Peter Principle" but the changing environment today's technology leadership finds themselves in. It's not about technology any more. If the popularity of Doug Adams' Dilbert comic strip is any indication, there might be a perceived shortfall between leadership expected and leadership delivered in IT today. While many IT executive have been able to survive by "speaking in tongues" (techno babble) to the amazement (or bafflement) of business executives, tomorrow's BT executive must actually be able to communicate a clear and unambiguous vision of the future and the skills the Business Technology organization must possess in order to realize that vision.

Business Technology leadership must focus on the design and management of processes and relationships and less on technology. This includes developing supplier relationships where technology or technological support is provided externally. Tomorrow's leadership will be involved in driving the merger of business and technology architectures. This requires organizational skills in process design, management of organizational change and relationship management skills.

Summary

IT, as we know it today, is on its way to an evolutionary dead end, or at least a cul de sac. Technology professionals are now faced with very stressful conditions. Only those that are able to adapt to the new reality will be among those that will become part of an evolving Business Technology "species." Those that don't may find themselves in "a better place at the bottom of the cliff."