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The Consulting Consortium

- CompanySmith Inc (617) 250-3210
- Conover & Co., Communications, Inc. (508) 303-6666
- LeDuc and Sikowitz (617) 523-2250
- Management Strategies Group (508) 877-9255
- Partners for Creative Solutions, Inc. (508) 845-1546
- Vibrance Technology Corporation (866) 842-7262

DVD-RAM Backups, Part II

By Rich Eichacker
Vibrance Technology Corporation

Last quarter, I discussed replacing traditional tape backups with DVD-RAM. This quarter, I'll present two of the main drawbacks to DVD-RAM, talk about the drive I've been using, and give you a glimpse into the future of DVDs.

DVD-RAM has many advantages over tape media as a backup and data archiving tool, unfortunately, it is not the perfect solution. There are two main drawbacks that make tapes more attractive:

1. Tapes have a greater capacity, anywhere from 10GB-200GB (or more), compared to 9.4GB on the largest DVD-RAM.
2. Backup times for DVD-RAM far exceed tapes. Some tape backup drives can operate at 200 MB/min, about 100 times that of DVD-RAM.

If you are backing up a network with even a small number of machines, you'll find that the capacity and speed of a tape backup system will easily outweigh the advantages of DVD-RAM. For example, a 30GB tape can backup about 5 PCs or one server drive. With DVD-RAM, you would need two 9.4GB disks and would have to flip the disks over

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Understanding your Customer (Part II)

By Heather C. Conover
Conover & Company Communications, Inc.

In the last issue, I discussed taking a systematic approach to collecting information about markets; customers; competition; and the economic, regulatory, and political environment in order to be equipped to make informed business decisions; deal with potential problems; develop targeted marketing, advertising, and public relations campaigns; minimize risk; and achieve predictable and measurable results for your organization.

If, for example, you are planning to sell a product to other businesses, you may have already broadly defined your primary market and identified other key information, such as industry type, company size, and decision maker of your primary and secondary customers. You will also want to learn as much as possible about buying habits, budgets, purchasing policies, current products and services used, and attitudes toward current vendors and their products and your own company and its products.

There are two types of research to explore: primary and secondary. Primary research provides original information that cannot be found elsewhere. A sample of the target population is taken and conclusions are subsequently made about the entire population. Primary research can be quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative research provides statistically valid information and is generally in the form of surveys – in person, telephone, or mail.

Qualitative research – usually personal interviews or focus groups – provides more in depth information about a particular attitude or opinion and feedback on the positioning, marketing, and advertising of a product or service. It can be used prior to quantitative research to help frame the questions for surveys, they can be used after quantitative research to further probe particular opinions and attitudes, or both. Qualitative research is not statistically accurate, but is very valuable in acquiring useful information about and insights into a particular customer group and their opinions on a variety of topics related to your product or service.

Secondary research is information that is already available. This information can be found in publications, trade and business associations, government documents, and the Internet. While a lot of this information can be obtained for free at a local library or via the Internet, some must be bought. Even if paying for the data, the biggest expenditure in secondary research activities is apt to be the time spent to find the many resources and organizing the information.

Whatever method(s) you choose, the research will be well worth the expenditure when based on your research you scrap your plans for a product or service and save many thousands or millions of dollars, see sales rise, and/or your revenues increase well beyond what you spent for research.

Also in this issue...

Taking Time to Lead

By Tom McBride
Partners for Creative Solutions, Inc.

A common problem for both new and experienced managers is the difficulty in transitioning from successful "doer" to effective leader. While this challenge is prevalent in companies of all sizes, it can be particularly difficult in smaller organizations where managing is only part of the job. This article is for managers who cannot seem to find enough time to lead and manage effectively.

Obstacles to success may include a strong attachment to the work or a belief that the work will not get done without the manager's help. Whatever the cause, if the problem is allowed to persist the manager will surely fail. Taking the following steps can help leaders, from "working" supervisors to CEOs, find the time to manage more effectively so they can better serve their organizations.

1. Identify leadership tasks you should perform, and estimate how much time they will take for you to be effective. As an example, a working supervisor might estimate that training, coaching, promoting teamwork, setting goals, monitoring performance, and scheduling workers would require three hours per day. After setting your goal, use the following steps to extract the additional time you need for leadership from your existing workday.
2. Analyze how you currently spend your time. How much time is spent leading versus doing? What portion is truly value-added (time your customer would be willing to pay for)? You need to thoroughly understand your current work habits in order to determine what you need to change. I suggest using a watch that generates alarm signals at random intervals (vibrating is less disruptive) and recording what you are doing each time the alarm goes off. A couple weeks of data consisting of about 10 readings a day will help you better understand how your time is consumed.
3. From your analysis, identify wasteful activities to eliminate. Find ways to avoid unnecessary interruptions and distractions that consume precious time. Steven Covey provides valuable advice about eliminating time-wasters and working on the right things in his book "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People".
4. Identify value-added activities that can be delegated to others. Managers often hesitate to delegate because they feel their people are already overloaded. The better solution is to delegate but help subordinates prioritize better, eliminate time-wasters, and improve efficiency.
5. Look for ways to improve your efficiency. Use the 80-20 rule to focus on the tasks that absorb the larger amounts of your time. Solutions could include using technology better or improving the organization and efficiency of your own work area. The possibilities are endless, and being creative is the key to success.

Following the above process will help leaders strike a more effective balance between working and managing.

DVD-RAM Backups, Part II

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because the capacity of each side is 4.7GB.

Despite this, I can still recommend DVD-RAM in the following situations:

1. A small business environment (consulting, accounting, field sales office, etc.) with 1-3 computers.
2. Backing up or archiving selected, critical files (in any environment).

Panasonic SW-9571 DVD Burner

I purchased a Panasonic SW-9571 drive for about $250 last summer. It came with an external drive kit with USB and FireWire connections, making it very portable. For $175, you can purchase just the IDE drive which mounts internally (and therefore is not portable). The SW-9571 can read and write DVD-RAM, DVD-R/RW, and CD-R/RW. Panasonic recently replaced the SW-9571 with the SW-9572. Both internal and external configurations are still available.

The Future of DVD-RAM: Blue Laser

Today's CD and DVD technology uses red laser light to read and write information. The next generation of DVDs, coined HD-DVD, will use blue laser light, which can store more information because of its smaller wavelength.

Currently, there are two competing standards for HD-DVD: Blu-ray and Advanced Optical Disk (AOD). It appears that Blu-ray will become the standard mainly due to its increased capacity. A Blu-ray DVD can hold around 25GB per side (50GB double-sided or double-layered), making it ideal for both video and data storage.

But don't pull out your credit card just yet, Sony's Blu-ray drive is selling for about $4000. This technology will probably be affordable in the next 2-3 years.

Are They Ready to Bolt?

By John A. Haas, Ph.D.
Management Strategies Group

During the last 18 to 24 months, many companies have downsized, some quite significantly. Many of us know talented people affected by these actions.

Downsizing Repercussions

Staff reductions can negatively impact productivity and efficiency, putting more pressure on "the bottom line." Fewer people remain, assuming greater responsibilities and expected to accomplish more things. People react to the added stress, and perhaps "guilt" from being a survivor where close and equally skilled associates weren't so fortunate. While grateful for remaining employed, they keenly feel the increased demands and scrutiny.

With fewer options and constant pressures to achieve plan, managers at all levels take on more themselves, try to delegate more responsibility or try to export responsibility to peer units. This, in turn, can thrust people into roles for which they are ill prepared. They try to learn what they need to know (or take action not knowing what they don't know!), which slows things down and produces errors. It's a vicious cycle.

Soon you have disgruntled employees who feel exploited, overworked, underpaid and irritable. They decide (but won't say) that as soon as the employment picture improves, they're "outta here."

Addressing the Problems

While you can't eliminate stress and performance pressure under these staffing conditions, the following ideas may help mitigate the effects:

Acknowledge the problem, empathize and assure the team that we're all feeling stress and will survive with teamwork.

Introduce or improve performance-based *Cash* Incentives to conserve cash and offer exciting upside pay potential.

Discuss Career Advancement opportunities and steps they and management can take.

Change Roles - Accelerate personal growth and insert new energy by reassigning people or changing responsibilities periodically.

Create Short Term Goals - 90-day individual or team goals, each with measurable priorities, can help keep people focused and fresh. Tie rewards to success.

Offer Personal Growth Support - Employees value continuous learning and competency-building through education, mentoring, etc.

Reward Productive Tenure through public recognition, celebrations, perks, awards, office size/location, furniture/equipment, training, etc.

Tell People How They're Doing - People want to do a good job and want honest, constructive feedback.

This list is not exhaustive. For more ideas, ask some key staff--they'll have suggestions!

Health Savings Accounts—New Federal Law for 2004

By Sandra LeDuc, CPA, CVA
LeDuc and Sikowitz

In the spirit of taxpayers, employees and patients taking responsibility for their own health-related expenses, the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003 has added a new section to the Internal Revenue Code to permit eligible individuals to establish, with deductible contributions, Health Savings Accounts (HSA) beginning in 2004.

The accounts are similar in operation to IRAs. They are for the benefit of a single individual. They are portable and can be accumulated over time. Contributions are based on the type of insurance coverage of the individual covered at the time of the contribution.

Eligible Individuals

An eligible individual is any individual who is covered under a high-deductible health plan (HDHP).

High-Deducible Health Plan

This is a health plan with an annual deductible of at least $1,000 and not exceeding $5,000 for a self-only plan or $2,000 to $10,000 for a family plan.

The eligibility of a plan is not affected by the existence of workers' comp, disability, health coverage under property insurance, long-term care and other similar types of coverage.

HSA Custodians and Trustees

A plan can be established at any bank or insurance company that chooses to provide such accounts.

Contributions

Contribution limits are determined monthly and may total as much as $2,600 for individuals and $5,150 for a family.

The contributions are deductible even if the taxpayer is not able to itemize his or her deductions. Employer-paid contributions are not includible in employees' compensation.

Distributions

Distributions for eligible medical expenses are not taxable. Eligible medical expenses generally include the same types of expenses that might be expected to be covered under a health insurance policy. Distributions for purposes other than eligible medical expenses are both taxable and carry a penalty.

Massachusetts

Practically speaking these accounts are not commonly available in Massachusetts because the HDHPs that these accounts are designed to supplement are not available in Massachusetts. As health insurance premiums climb, Massachusetts may see more eligible policies.

The plans are also suffering from a general lack of interest in the insurance and financial communities causing institutions at which the accounts are to be held and administered to be slow to promote them.

Essentially though, these accounts are another attempt to help manage ever-increasing medical costs by involving the consumer in the risk proposition.

Measuring Teamwork

By Dennis Smith
CompanySmith Inc

Teamwork is critical to project performance. After having a clear goal and a well built plan, it is the next most likely factor to compromise project predictability.

A challenge for team leaders has always been to determine when the team is working at peak performance and when it is underperforming. Answers to that question are often from the gut, through consultant's interviews, or outright guesswork since the minute by minute interworkings of a team are largely unseen by project leaders.

Guest Column

Use of Social Network Analysis (SNA) to measure teamwork is growing rapidly since it provides fact-based data on a team's working relationships. Its results are not tied to personalities and openness of discussions with facilitators since it actually measures the working interactions between team members.

Social Network Analysis has been available in academia for about 10 years and its predecessor, sociograms, for 50 years, however powerful desktop analysis and viewing software is only now making SNA more broadly accessible.

The methodology is straightforward. Team members answer a few questions regarding their working relationships with other members of their team. These questions can be as simple as asking where they get information about the project or if they might benefit by having more information from other team members. The questions can also probe deeper into team performance by asking about dependability or trust.

The answers to these questions are turned into link-and-bubble graphical diagrams showing the strong and weak links within the team. The diagrams show the team's answers to key questions through multiple lenses including by department, by physical location, by project role, or by any team demographic. To see examples of these diagrams or read more about this technology, go to www.companysmith.com/6241.

And you don't have to wait until you actually have a problem to use this technology. It is appropriate at the beginning of a challenging project, as a preventative measure, or even to find root cause issues in an over-stressed organization.

Teambuilding is a wonderful thing. But when you're looking for fact-based answers, Social Network Analysis takes it out of the realm of a consultant's flip chart and gives you the facts at a cost that is less than you are likely to pay for a complete facilitated team tune-up.

Contributors:

Dennis Smith is founder and President of **CompanySmith Inc.,** a consulting firm that works with project leaders and teams to improve project predictability and business results. CompanySmith uses field-proven processes and their extensive expertise to help clients bring projects in on time and within budget. By focusing on four key elements of project success – customer, team, process and ideas – they help clients quickly and cost-effectively improve their project results.
34 Ridge Road, Norfolk, MA 02056 (617) 250-3210 dms@companysmith.com www.companysmith.com

Heather C. Conover, founder and CEO of **Conover & Company Communications,** has over 20 years of strategic marketing communications and public relations experience and has worked with a wide array of firms ranging from start-ups to Fortune 500 companies. Through the development and implementation of marketing communications and public relations strategies, she helps companies achieve their corporate goals and reach and motivate their target audiences.
245 Turnpike Road, Southborough, MA 01772 (508) 303-6666 F: (508) 303-9566 hconover@conoverandcompany.com www.conoverandcompany.com

Rich Eichacker is president of **Vibrance Technology Corporation,** a software consulting firm specializing in the development of custom software applications. Vibrance creates software from the ground up, using the client's ideas and requirements to provide a solution that meets their unique needs. Vibrance has successfully implemented solutions for a wide variety of businesses and functional areas.
P.O. Box 1424, Warren, MA 01083-1424 (866) 842-7262 rich@vibrancetech.com

John A. Haas, Ph.D. founded **Management Strategies Group** in 1987, building on many years of consulting experience, mostly with The Hay Group. At MSG, he works primarily with small and mid-sized companies and non-profits toward improving organizational effectiveness. Working closely with entrepreneurs and key staff, he helps develop and implement creative, practical approaches to organization design and development, team building, shaping corporate culture, employee empowerment and performance-based management and sales incentive compensation.
365 Boston Post Road #200, Sudbury, MA 01776-3003 (508) 877-9255 F: (508) 877-4562 jahaas@gis.net

Sandy LeDuc, CPA, CVA is managing partner of **LeDuc and Sikowitz**, a local CPA firm working with small to medium sized, closely-held businesses in the areas of accounting, auditing, tax planning and compliance, and business consulting.
100 State Street, Boston, MA 02109 (617) 523-2250 F: (617) 523-6220 sandy@leducandsikowitz.com

Tom McBride is president of **Partners for Creative Solutions, Inc.** a consulting firm that assists businesses in improving performance and productivity, either in the office or in the factory. After helping clients discover their most significant improvement opportunities, PCS facilitates the design and implementation of customized solutions involving lean manufacturing, kaizen events, or other waste-elimination techniques.
P.O. Box 551, Shrewsbury, MA 01545 (508) 845-1546 F: (508) 845-8757 tmcbride@pcs-info.com www.pcs-info.com

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