

# Inspiration Is Where You Find It

Steve Ulfelder

**June 25, 2001** (Computerworld) When Phil Swift comes to the office with paint on his knuckles, his employees brace themselves.

In addition to serving as CIO at Esurance Inc., an online insurer in San Francisco, Swift is a painter (scenes depicting galleons and British naval ships are a specialty). He gets his best ideas when he takes his mind off work and focuses on his art.

One recent weekend, Swift was sketching at home, torn between conflicting requests. "My wife wants me to paint a portrait of our dogs; my son wants me to paint race cars on the walls of his [room]," he says.

Suddenly, Swift realized his personal dilemma paralleled one at work: In an effort to keep him happy, managers in his department were scattering resources among too many projects. They were trying to do cars and dogs at the same time. They needed to pick a priority.

Swift put down his charcoal and made some notes. The following Monday, he announced major changes. Most notably, he decided to reconfigure Esurance's architecture, "dropping the database away from the rest of the system," he says.

So, what inspires you? Where are you and what are you doing when you get your best ideas?

We asked IT leaders where they turn for inspiration. Not surprisingly, their answers were diverse. Some CIOs seek intense, risky challenges such as auto racing or mountain climbing; others prefer gardening, painting or distance running.

A common theme emerges, though, and is supported by experts on creativity and motivation: Inspiration is most likely to strike when the conscious mind is a thousand miles away. Moreover, IT's central role in the organization makes it critically important to achieve and harness inspiration. IT leaders, be they CIOs, programmers or help desk staff, are no longer viewed as back-room service providers; their creativity is both valued and demanded by the business.

Asked where most people get inspiration, John Putzier laughs and says, "Well, 99% of the time, it's not at work." Putzier, who is president of workplace consultancy FirStep Inc. in Prospect, Pa., and an author and speaker on workplace motivation and creativity, says the common denominator is that inspiration strikes "when you're not focused. That's when your subconscious is talking to you."

## Burning Rubber

Jon Ricker manages to hear his subconscious over the satanic shriek of supercharged Hemi engines. Twenty years ago, Ricker was serious about drag racing—"as serious as I've ever been about anything," says the president and CIO of Limited Technology Services, the IT subsidiary that serves The Limited Inc., a Columbus, Ohio-based clothing retailer whose brands include Victoria's Secret.

Some of his old racing friends, including Don Prudhomme and Jeg Coughlin, have gone on to win championships—and earn millions of dollars.

Ricker gave up competitive drag racing many years ago (although just for kicks, he recently "hopped in a gas dragster and went 260," he casually reports). But the strategy, discipline and teamwork of big-league motor sports continue to inspire him. So much so that when the National Hot Rod Association held a major race in Columbus last June, Ricker secured admission for all 800 Limited Technology Services employees and their families.

"I made sure everybody had pit passes," he says. "I wanted them to see the [race teams] thrash between rounds, stripping the engines down to a bare block, reading the computer printout."

## Where Lightning Strikes

Inspiration is fickle, but you can take steps to be ready for it. Author and consultant John Putzier says that when he gives seminars, the audience tells him they get most of their great ideas in these settings:

■ In bed

■ In the shower

■ While running or exercising

■ While gardening

■ In the car

When the inspiration stick whacks you on the head, you need to optimize it. Here are tips from the experts:

■ **Be ready for it.** Know and accept your own circadian rhythms; some people find inspiration only at 3 a.m., whether they like it or not.

■ **Capture it.** If you fail to capture a great idea when it occurs, you stand to lose it for good. Use any means necessary to nail down your thoughts. "I worked with an engineer at Boeing who traveled extensively," says author Jordan Ayan. "He kept a bunch of preaddressed postcards in his pocket, wrote ideas down on them and sent them home to himself."

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Ricker wanted his IT staff to see this high-pressure teamwork up close; he sees significant parallels between racing and IT. "In racing, you have specialists who are tops in their field; in IT, same thing—you've got Unix, Java, whatever," he says.

Ricker says the demands of drag racing represent "continuous improvement at its best - you're always realigning your resources." Several employees, including some with no interest in drag racing, later told him they were motivated by the field trip.

Can racing really serve as inspiration for IT pros? "Winners in every discipline have similar characteristics in how they deal with things," Ricker says. "It's all about team, all about strategy, all about being three-deep in strategies when the first one doesn't work."

Such flexibility has come in handy. The Limited had 24 IT groups and 24 CIOs when Ricker was hired to centralize the IT function in 1996. Ricker says contingency-planning strategies such as flexible systems inspired by race teams allowed him to complete the consolidation on schedule despite the continuing addition, consolidation and sell-off of various brands.

Walid Achi, CIO at CyBiz Inc., a Reston, Va.-based software company specializing in online procurement tools, is another racer, as well as a gardener. He insists the activities are surprisingly similar: "They're both all about timing," he says. Each allows him to "snap out," as he puts it, setting aside work-related problems. "I'm completely focused," he says. "It puts me in a different state of mind."

Recently, Achi, who describes himself as a hands-on CIO and who gets those hands dirty modifying his BMW M Coupe, has been struggling to bring a knowledge management application to an intranet environment. The technical challenges are plentiful. "I'll go out, do some gardening or work on my car, and strangely enough, the solutions just flow," he says.

Clearly, inspiration is personal and difficult to throw a rope around. But experts say it's more important than ever for IT leaders to harness their creativity. "Traditionally, companies looked to IT to be an implementer, not a creator," says Jordan Ayan, founder of Create-It Inc. in Naperville, Ill., and author of *Aha! 10 Ways To Free Your Creative Spirit and Find Your Great Ideas* (Crown Publishing, 1997). "But in the age of technology, if you want to strengthen your role in the firm, you need to play the creative role."

### **Distance Training**

Not all IT leaders risk their lives in search of inspiration. For Edward Jackson, the major risk is that one of his bosses will notice his late arrival at the office Monday morning. As chief technology officer at SkillsVillage Inc., a Sunnyvale, Calif.-based company that helps businesses hire and manage contract workers, Jackson works at an unrelenting pace common to employees at young companies.

But not on Monday mornings. Jackson saves that time for a 13-mile run, which is part of his training for his first marathon, which he will run this month in San Diego. "I run Monday morning no matter what," he says. "I'll carve a couple of hours out, get to the office at 11:30."

The Monday wake-up run is Jackson's last buffer before he attacks (and is attacked by) another jam-packed week. "I'll come in and have 22 voice mails and a couple hundred e-mails," he says. "But I've got a little buzz in my legs, I'm comfortable, I'm relaxed, I can handle it."

Jackson says solutions to technical and managerial problems often pop into his head while he runs. Recently, his IT team found itself enmeshed in a project in which the sales department had made grand promises to a client (a large East Coast bank he declines to name). The bank had a legacy general-ledger system, an Ariba Inc. order-management system and a third-party time-entry system, Jackson says.

"We had to integrate [with] and incorporate business rules from all these systems. My role was to detail how we would make that work," he says.

Stymied, Jackson sat down, wrote a few sentences, fiddled around, fetched a cup of coffee and generally procrastinated. "Then I broke away, did 13 miles, came back and pulled together a 36-page document," he says.

The run allowed him to organize his thoughts. "When running, your legs are flying, your heart is bursting, but there's such calm in your mind," says Jackson.

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