Chapter III

Repairing the Broken Information Technology Department

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Executive Summary

After 13 years of IT experience in private enterprise, taking over the City of Rockford’s IT Department proved to be a shocking experience. The state of the city’s IT organization, processes, technology, network security practices, customer service practices, and organizational relationships were all examples of industry “worst practices”. This case study documents the initial state of the IT Department as the author found it and the steps taken to turn it into a responsive, value-adding organization. The study examines all aspects of the process including:

• Communication and relationship building with other city departments;
• Taking ownership and responsibility for IT strategy and decision making;
• Centralizing IT purchases;
• Establishing hardware and software standards;
• Establishing a centralized help desk;
• Technology assessment and improvements; and
• IT process improvements.
Background

Located in northern Illinois, roughly 90 miles west of Chicago, the City of Rockford is Illinois’ third largest city with approximately 150,000 residents. Like many industrialized cities, Rockford’s industry took a major hit following World War II. Many core industries, including furniture and agricultural equipment manufacturing, were nearly extinct by the 1960s, while others, including machine tool and fastener manufacturing, are a fraction of the size that they once were (2005). By mid-1983, the city’s unemployment rate hit record levels of 25%. Today, Rockford suffers from one of the highest crime rates in the state and the local school district’s truancy rate is four times the state’s average. To say the least, our community has some challenges to contend with.

The municipality has about 1,200 employees and is comprised of 10 departments: Police, Fire, Public Works, Community Development, Human Services, Building Department, Legal Department, Finance, Personnel, and the Mayor’s Office. Like many municipalities, the city is funded by property taxes, sales tax, a variety of “use” taxes, along with state and federal funding and grants. Compared to other Illinois municipalities of similar size, Rockford’s $202 million dollar annual budget is only 69% of the City of Aurora’s (2005) $290 million dollar budget, and is a meager 60% of City of Naperville’s (2005) $332 million dollar budget. In short, Rockford does not have a lot of financial resources, and maintaining basic capital equipment and core services has been difficult.

Setting the Stage

The City of Rockford municipality has traditionally not been on the cutting edge of management practices, business process review, or technology adoption. Perhaps this is the result of the “status quo” attitude of previous administrations which seemed to take little interest in wringing any efficiency out of the organization. This attitude seemed pervasive throughout the top levels of the organization.

Not surprisingly, the city’s IT leadership and staff suffered from the same lethargic attitude when supposedly providing technical leadership and service to its customers. Coming from 13 years in private industry IT, I was shocked to note the complete dependence on paper-bound process, lack of motivation to become more efficient, total absence of IT standards, and no business process automation efforts in many facets of the city’s operation.

Illustrative of the organizations attitude was a comment made to me by one of the city’s department heads when I was explaining the need to upgrade the archaic PC hardware for one of the few GIS technicians at the city. “We’ve never had a discussion related to the efficiency of our employees”, the department head declared. I was absolutely dumbfounded and discouraged by this comment. Was employee efficiency something that really needed to be debated? I could certainly understand if new hardware was not a fiscal priority, but that was not the argument. Not surprisingly, our GIS technicians continued to struggle with inadequate tools.
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