

WE'LL TAKE CARE OF ALL YOUR PROBLEMS

By Isabel Beichl, Editor in Chief



OH, DON'T YOU JUST WANT TO BELIEVE IT? WHEN YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, AND YOU HEAR THE TITLE OF THIS PIECE, DOESN'T AT LEAST PART OF YOU HOPE THAT IT'S TRUE? *C&SE* READERS ARE AWARE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING UP

with new ideas in computing in science and engineering. But IT is yet another area in which we need to be at least somewhat informed as well.

Recently, a friend and I somehow drifted into a gripe session on IT support. My friend is now a professor of mathematics at the midwestern university where he spent most of his academic career. It had been suggested that all IT support for the mathematics department be outsourced. A small firm proposed to take care of all IT issues by providing two "expert professionals" to take care of operating system updates, printers, network connectivity, firewall installations, and so forth. It doesn't take much imagination to picture the faculty's reaction to this proposal. Some expressed real outrage when told that the two experts would, in addition, act as the CIO for the department! Yes, CIO—

an acronym whose mere mention chills the blood of even the bravest. The CIO will take care of all your IT problems, and you won't have to do anything. Hmmmm.

Janet Malcolm, the justly famous essayist and journalist, wrote a book called *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* (Knopf, 1981). It's tempting to hijack her inspired title and start writing *Chief Information Officer: The Impossible [...]*. The problem is how to fill in the [...]: "CIO" isn't exactly a profession. I think it's a function that an organization must have once it reaches a certain size. There's simply no way to have even a modicum of security and uniformity across computing platforms without some central "authority" to design standards and practices. Yet, in all institutions I know about, the CIO is the receptor of a flurry of complaints from below and a barrage of demands from above.

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At one large institution—after weeks of complain, complain, complain from the research staff—the CIO agreed to hold a general meeting and attempt to answer any questions. You can imagine:

Researcher: Why aren't we informed about changes before they happen?

CIO: You are.

Researcher: What? Where? When? How?

CIO: In the newsletter.

Researcher: Newsletter? What newsletter? I don't know about any newsletter.

CIO: It arrives in your mailbox every month.

Researcher: Oh that. I was supposed to read that?

CIO: Sigh...

Yes, we need to keep track of what's happening in IT support. The terms change, the services change, the policies change, and all of it very fast. Most of us hate it when things we use every day suddenly act and look differently. In computing, change is unavoidable, and in large institutions, it's the CIO who must oversee it. My modest suggestion is that we might do better to try to work with our local CIO before complaining or at least try to stay informed. A more radical idea might be to require senior scientists to serve a term as CIO or, even wilder, the research staff could elect the CIO from among themselves. Picture TV spot ads and slogans like, "Change: you have to deal with it!"



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