BROADCAST IT
Can Engineering and IT Co-Exist Peacefully (and Productively)?
By Barry Mishkind

[December 2021] The overlap between Engineering and IT has never been greater. While there are definitely areas where they have some specialized needs (RF and Server security come to mind), the need for both departments to be one as broadcasters has never been more evident.

It is instructive to visit a station and see the way that the engineers – audio and RF – and the IT folks interact – or do not.

All are educated professionals. Each serves an important part of the broadcast operation, and when they work together, things flow smoothly and any problems get resolved quickly. Staff can focus on their individual tasks, on air and off, which makes for better programming and everyone benefits.

On the other hand, when the two departments are in separate "silos" and only interact when forced to do so – and each tries to maintain control, a lot of bad things happen.

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS"

David Bialik relates an incident he experienced when working at a station in New Jersey.

His project was to install a new digital console system. The installation proceeded smoothly enough; the station began operations from the new consoles.

However, one day not long afterward, David got to the station only to be told "hey! we're down." Walking into the control room to inspect the situation, he found the IT person had pulled out every single CAT5 cable he had installed. David asked "what are you doing?" only to have the IT guy reply: "This isn't in my network. I don't know what it is. I'm getting rid of it."

David replied "What you have done is to just take the whole station off the air."

DIFFERENT WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Another common complaint in many places is that when something happens at night, or on the weekends – perhaps a switch or router goes "funny" – the IT department is quite happy to ignore it until Monday (unless it is a three-day weekend, when they will return on Tuesday to consider the problem).

Some stations have actually ended up being off the air for a day or two in that situation.

That might elicit "No, that cannot be true. There is no way that could happen." Yet, with programming often going down the public Internet, there are a number of ways and reasons that could cause degradation of interruption of the audio chain.

ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

Among the more common complaints that are heard from around the country, some IT folks seem consumed with "locking everything down" to the point that broadcast operations are hindered, if not prevented.

There is no question that security is so important today. With the malware, ransomware, and other issues that can be so easily triggered by one staff member among dozens or hundreds clicking on just one bad URL, and the whole system crashes, IT needs to be given a wide latitude and respect for their job.

But does that mean the engineering side must always receive a "NO!" to any request regarding the station's network and access issues?

THE COMMON GROUND

The answer itself should be "NO!" Engineering and IT need to find the Common Ground.

At first, you might think we mean the station equipment ground. It is true that anything electronic needs to be connected to the system ground for best operation. But that is not the point.

On the other hand, the common ground that is necessary find relates to the overall mission of a broadcast operation. What is that? To be on-the-air and attracting sufficient listeners to achieve a profitable advertising (or underwriting) revenue. It is certainly true that without such income, no one will have a safe job. So why is there friction in the house?

COMMUNICATION

What makes it sadder is that regardless of the department, we are in the communications business.

When staff members do not communicate, it does not take long for something to happen that is detrimental to operations (the above experience being possibly the worst outcome). If there is no communication it is like putting people to work in a room, and then turn out the lights.

One the other hand, if communication is fostered, operations will be smoother, with less problems – or even stress. But it has got to come from the top.

BRINGING EVERYONE TOGETHER

Yes, the General Manager is the one who generally sets the tone. The GM has got to "buy in" to the need for staff to work together.

To get there, not only does the GM need to respect his employees in the engineering and IT departments, he must endeavor to bring them together. And this attitude – which has to be nourished – needs to filter down through the organizational chart. No manager can merely say "Get along with each other!" and expect operations to come off very well.

Setting a positive company "attitude" brings us back to communication. This can, and should include three key aspects.

BRINGING EVERYONE TOGETHER

One of the most obvious steps is to bring everyone together, both to know and learn about each one personally as well as to share concerns.

Generally, when concerns are shared, the group pulls together to accomplish the task – at least in terms of making the GM happy. This actually works best when, as in some stations, the engineering and IT staff are really one department. When the lines of authority are clear, with the mission in common, there is less conflict and more cooperation.

Perhaps the most beneficial approach is to have education. Just like it helps when staffers know where the transmitter is – and even get to see it on a company "tour," both engineering and IT work together better when each sees what the other is doing, and perhaps understands the pressures each has to handle.

MAKING IT BETTER

If the engineering and IT folks work together smoothly in your building, congratulations! You are able to accomplish a lot of progress with less bureaucratic paperwork and other shuffling.

If you feel there is a chasm between you and other guys, why not build a bridge and see if talking over the problems with a cooperative attitude will bring a better working arrangement. Some stations have scheduled regular meetings to share problems and solutions. While some companies start to arrange an "endless series" of meetings, taking some time – even if it is mandated to be short – to talk will have a good effect.

What else works for you. Let us know! - *BDR*

- - -

Did you enjoy this article? Would you like to know when more articles like this are posted? It only takes 30 seconds to sign up here for the one-time-a-week BDR Newsletter.

- - -

Return to The BDR Menu