Ever get the feeling that you're being held hostage by your IT guy?

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You have a clear strategy for the overall success of your school, and this vision is typically supported by your colleagues. It will only ever be challenged on sound basis by like-minded educators, and through reasons which you wholly comprehend. But occasionally there is one team or individual who seems to have the ability to trump you. Veiled in technology jargon, the IT guy can weave a reason as to why teachers cannot use a certain digital tool, app or website. Your very own team member has the power to say that something is simply not possible, and you feel that you have no other choice but to accept the outcomes due to 'technical limitations'. I'm sure that some principals have had it happen to them, or know of a peer that has been seemingly held hostage by their own IT specialists!

Technology in education should be a catalyst for innovation and creativity, being told "no" on grounds that are not crystal clear to you, is simply unacceptable. A "This cannot be done because the server/software/licensing won't allow it" is simply defeatist and an example of a fixed mindset. I personally have witnessed this on a few occasions, and it always leaves me feeling very uneasy.

Most commonly this stand off might be seen over the decision of your computer hardware choice. Perhaps you have chosen to switch your student device from laptops to tablets, or even… from PC to Mac. I have seen this very proposal lead to threats of resignation in protest from the IT manager. And on that occasion this particular principal backed down; it was an unfortunate outcome to say the least. The IT guy failed to realise that it wasn't the technology itself that is important. It is, of course, the readiness and the vision held by the leadership team. And it doesn't matter if it's "Mac or PC", tablet or laptop. What matters is how the tools are being used to enhance education, and that decision is yours to make.

School IT personnel come in either one of two setups: an ex-teacher who has acquired the necessary technical skills; or a thorough IT specialist with good technical background to keep your networks and services ticking. Now, one is certainly not better than the next as an IT Manager (and ideally a combination of the two is recommended for a team), but I believe that these positions must be held by passionate and supportive enablers. People that will always embrace a challenge with enthusiasm, and people that encourage others.

Another example I have witnessed saw a department head wanting to train their own team using a laptop from home. It was thought that this would be both quicker and cost effective. However, the bureaucracy that followed, with regards to connecting the computer to the network, and the choice of software used, meant that the project was scuttled by… the IT department. Not doing anything to assist (and actively blocking innovation) simply demonstrates that the IT team is both resistant to change, and worse still, feel threatened.

If it works, why change it?

This statement suits many, but from an IT perspective it can seriously stifle progress and creativity, especially in an education environment. I have heard this response from some who have worked hard, establishing an in-house and personally tailored tool. Technology is moving in such a way that centralised services can now be transitioned to larger external providers, and in some instances these services are free and superior to locally hosted solutions.

Take Google Apps for Education or Microsoft 365. They both provide remarkable services when the suite of apps are used to their full potential. And they both alleviate a lot of responsibility and time commitments from your IT team. However, your IT guy might be the first to challenge the security of these platforms. You may expect a response such as: "It's out of the question, the servers are overseas". At this stage I would expect a summary of the privacy policy and options as to what the school could do to accommodate. The benefits are too great for an individual to outright block a proposal, especially one that has such huge potential when driven by curious teaching staff and determined leadership.

Collaboration for innovation

Change adverse departments like this, or even whole schools that cling to the status quo and don't promote collaboration, will determine whether or not your school grows and thrives. Prof Rosabeth Moss Kanter identifies this in her book *The Change Masters*. Kanter uses the term 'segmentalism' to describe departments which operate independently or alone. Creativity can only be fostered when people step out of their usual roles and collaborate with others. I believe that this is particularly true of the IT team in a school.

IT specialists have a unique skill set, allow them to step out of their usual roles and integrate closely with teaching staff and students. In my experience amazing digital projects have been created as a result of tight and constant integration between curriculum specialists and technology 'geeks'.

If you are fortunate enough to have a dedicated on-site IT team, encourage them to develop teacher professional development sessions, and to work closely with students on extra-curricula learning. Many schools have already made the natural transition of merging the IT Support with the library department. We are now living in a time where these two information services are so closely entwined that this merger is a natural progression for your school. Speaking from experience, the merge between library personnel and IT personnel can be very challenging but the results after two years have been very fruitful.

The role of your IT guys at your school is absolutely critical. Their workloads and responsibilities are vastly different to that of a teacher's and it is easy to let this department stagnate. Consider Kantor's identification of segmentalism, and it's negative effects. Otherwise your next tech-orientated innovative idea, might just get railroaded.
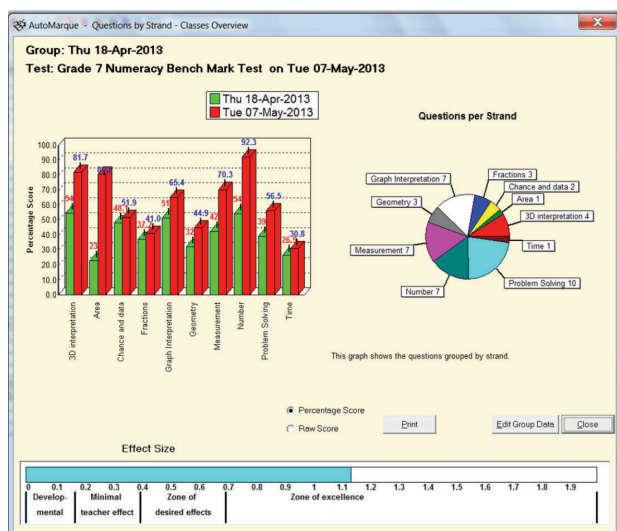
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