Ya Can Talk All Ya Want, But It’s Different Than It Was

By Gregory A. Jackson

The stage lights go down in the basement of the Arlington Street Church. Feet shuffle rhythmically, crescendo, gradually chuffing like a steam engine—exactly the intent. The lights come up. The foot-shufflers, playing salesmen just run out of Brighton, Illinois, wind their way downstage. They begin syncopated song-talk:

Cash for the merchandise, cash for the button hooks
Cash for the cotton goods, cash for the hard goods...
Cash for the nogguns and the pigs and the frikins
Cash for the hogshead, cask and demijohn.
Cash for the crackers and the pickles and the flypaper...

Ya can talk all ya want but it’s different than it was.
No it ain’t, no it ain’t, but you gotta know the territory...
It’s the Model T Ford made the trouble, made the people wanna go, wanna get ... wanna get up and go seven, eight, nine, ten, twelve, fourteen, twenty-two, twenty-three miles to the county seat...
Who’s gonna patronize a little bitty two-by-four kinda store anymore?...
Gone with the hogshead cask and demijohn,
Gone with the sugar barrel, pickle barrel, milk pan,
Gone with the tub and the pail and the tierce.1

It is the first time I have attended a performance of The Music Man. The rhythm is infectious, the syncopation engaging. This opening song, “Rock Island,” is what I remember when the evening is done—not Gary, Indiana, not seventy-six trombones, not pool. Only later do I pay attention to the “Rock Island” lyrics themselves, and only still later—much, much later—does it strike me that they speak to current circumstances in the support of higher education information technology.

Gregory A. Jackson is Chief Information Officer at the University of Chicago.
Success in IT support requires self-analysis, clear communication, and pragmatism.

It’s different than it was. The personal computer almost made IT support obsolete: “personal” seems the epitome of “organizational,” and the PC thus appears to make organized IT support unnecessary. Now, almost immediately, the PC’s reliance on networked services makes organized support essential again. The catch is, support is now more essential for very different reasons than it was before. And it unfolds in a very different political and economic context, especially in higher education: everyone else is the boss, authority is in short supply, and resources not used directly for research, instruction, and community service are resources being diverted from the One True Way. Both those who support IT and those who use IT need to think differently about the technology.

One way to think differently is to think about different cases and different contexts. The Music Man, for example, instead of Educational. The different cases and contexts I use here include “Rock Island” some other performance excerpts, two short case studies from closer to home, a few digressions, and a parable. Throughout, I hope to illustrate several conundrums that arise closer to home, a few digressions, and a parable. The different cases and contexts I use here include different political and economic context, as well as different institutional settings. The different cases and contexts I use here include the modern “sales force” and “organizational, ” and the PC thus makes organized support essential.

The Advocacy Conundrum

For those of you who have not seen The Music Man, I should review the setting, plot, and story line. (More detail is at http://www.themusicalmanonline.com/.) The setting is River City, Iowa, a midwestern town, conservative, not an easy place to sell stuff. The salesmen exiled from Brighton are taking the Rock Island train to River City to sell their usual products to their usual customers in the usual way. Unbeknownst to them, “Professor” Harold Hill is also bound for River City, with a somewhat different plan. Hill is not a professor at all. He, like the other men on the Rock Island train, is a sales- man. Yet as the other salesmen know, Hill is not the usual kind:

Ever meet a fellow by the name of Hill? NOT Never heard of any salesman Hill Now, he doesn’t know the territory Doesn’t know the territory
What’s the fellow’s line…?

...and he plucks and he shines, and when he plucks the zither, he’s like a king and he dallies and he gathers the kids in the town with the big trombone and the piccolo with uniforms, too with a shiny silver stripe…

...and Hill’s focus on inducing demand, not one, and the deal is open until the debt is paid. Success is harder to measure—selling product to a deadbeat better than not selling at all, for example? In today’s market, where market share and page hits are more important than profit—

Yet “Rock Island” is more than a lesson on traditional salesmanship. As the guys on the train espouse traditional tenets, they also ridicule an alternative view. This alternative view, exemplified by the Model T and by Professor Hill (and to a certain extent even by John Patterson, troubles and threatens the traditional salesman. In The Music Man, Hill sells boys’ bands by convincing prospective customers, who do not consider themselves to be such, that they have a problem they did not know about. Soon they agree:

Oh, we got trouble Right here in River City... With a capital “I” and “T” and rhymes with “P” and that stands for “pool”... We surely got trouble Right here in River City... Gotta figure out a way to keep the young ones moral after school.

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So the townspeople look around for someone who has a solution to their newfound morality problem. And there, socializing in their living rooms as a peer and friend, they find Professor Hill. Hill says that organizing boys into bands will keep the boys out of pool halls and will stave off trouble. Not incidentally, it will also require uniforms with stripes and piccolos and big bass drums and saxophones and trombones and other paraphernalia. Professor Hill is willing to help arrange all this, if asked; if he makes a little money, we suppose, no one will object.

When Meredith Willson wrote The Music Man, he portrayed Professor Hill as a con artist: someone who is manipulating the townspeople for personal gain. And Hill’s focus on inducing demand, rather than simply satisfying it, is what so bothers the salesmen on the train. But what if Willson and the salesmen were wrong? What if Professor Hill was simply merchandising his customers, rather than cunning them? What if there is a problem the townspeople should be thinking about? What if Professor Hill’s solution is cost-effective and is best negotiated in a normal, non-taxable venue there may be a conflict of interest lurking somewhere in Hill’s method, but it is a long way from conflict of interest to bunco.

IT staff can be a lot like Professor Hill, yet they are not, I believe, con artists. Until very recently, the typical IT cus- tomer in higher education did not approach IT in the same way that customers of a typical sales force might improve research, or instruction, or learning, or bibliographic searching, or discussion, or community, or any other combinations. IT staff spent a lot of time trying to show people that technology could simplify things that had been complicated by other constraints, such as large sales that were slow, and even enable things that had been impossible. They were, in a sense, showing people that there was trouble in River City, and they were trying a way to keep the trouble at bay.

If IT staff resemble Professor Hill in being a shrewd merchant, they do not necessarily need to be. They do not need to know the territory! No, terri- tory remains important. If IT staff do not know the territory, they will fail to convince those customers that IT is important. This means that a neat di- vision between IT staff and their customers is not unreasonable, and that IT staff must understand, and efficient it may be for other side, is never enough. On our campuses— our River Cities—IT staff must understand
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The essence of research, teaching, learning, and community service. But, following Hill’s method, the right place to do this may not be only the machine rooms and network closets and departmental IT staff meetings but also, ideally by invitation, in faculty meetings and other non-traditional venues.

What about credit? If IT staff ask their customers to take a product on faith, at least to some degree, then giving credit means this: they cannot expect to be absolved of risk. To the extent that IT staff advocate change, they must take responsibility for some of the consequences and cannot expect to be held harmless if they advocate the wrong thing. IT support staff cannot claim success just because they deliver product, nor can IT customers expect satisfaction without thinking about what they want.

Finally, as I pointed out above, having a clear line—the third principle of the traditional salesmen, and the first way they differ from Professor Hill—remains a problem for those who advocate and support IT in higher education. A complex matrix maps IT services to the specific technologies underlying those services. IT staff can define their line in terms of technologies, in which case lines among technologies get blurred, or they can define their line in terms of services, which in turn means among technologies that define it to be daunting.

Complex functionality creates more choices than simple functionality. Some of those choices inevitably confront the user. This happens because of the curse pronounced by IBM and other manufacturers (the Professor Hills of their day) when they called the microcomputer a “personal computer.” “Personal” implies control. Users thus expect to control their PCs. Choices symbolize control. Simple technologies constrain choice. To the extent that users lack choices, they perceive themselves to lack control. People face unnecessary and frustrating choices not because things are imposed on them but because they actually want those choices in order to feel that they are in control.

This is an immensely important yet widely ignored point. Users want control even when they find the very choices that define it to be daunting.

The Water Tower Place story exemplifies the simplicity conundrum that lies at the heart of the endless tensions between IT customers and staff. For example, consider whether the typical desktop or notebook computer is easy or hard to use. My polling suggests that “hard” wins hands down. Now consider the same question about fax machines or large copiers. People almost never find these hard to use, even though fax machines and copiers can be as complex, both technologically and functionally, as PCs. It thus is not IT that is hard to use; it is some IT.

Computers are hard to use because, unlike other technologies, they permit an almost limitless array of functionality. Complex functionality creates more choices than simple functionality. Some of those choices inevitably confront the user. This happens because of the curse pronounced by IBM and other manufacturers when they called the microcomputer a “personal computer.”

The Simplicity Conundrum

Time for a change of venue, from small-town America to the epitome of urban concentration: the original vertical mall, Water Tower Place in Chicago. I go into a clothing store, pick out some items, and present my credit card for payment.
appearing to be tyrannical, unhelpful, and even incompetent.

Another illustration comes from a call I received at home one evening:

*I was wondering why there’s no manual in the box with my new iMac here at home, and what I should do about it. There’s this card that tells me how to hook everything up, and then I should just turn the machine on, but I didn’t know whether I was actually supposed to do that.*

Calls like this are not uncommon. We know their roots from the Water Tower Place story. This caller believes that a new computer should present complexity and choices, since otherwise he (the real caller was male) has become a powerless weakling controlled by information technology. Facing a computer that appears to require no choices, the caller is baffled and anxious, thinking that something is being kept from him and that he is being dised. He has no idea how to proceed, even paradoxically—how to proceed is perfectly clear.

What Steve Jobs says about iMacs is largely true. You take them out of the box, you plug them into power and printer and telephone jack, and bingo: ten minutes to the Internet. There is no manual because there is no need for one. This very simplicity simultaneously attracts and discomfits the caller. If the iMac needs no manual, it is not complicated enough, and if it is not complicated enough, it is not good enough. Yet if a computer is complicated enough to need a manual, users like this caller will need help. And he is not unique.

The Shorthand Conundrum

Let’s review another instructive performance. This one plays much better live, so if you can, navigate to [http://www.abbottandcostello.net/clips/who1st.wav](http://www.abbottandcostello.net/clips/who1st.wav) (preferably on a networked computer; if you want a quicker-to-download version, make the URL [http://www.abbottandcostello.net/clips/who1st2.wav](http://www.abbottandcostello.net/clips/who1st2.wav)). The piece begins thus:

Well, let’s see, we have on the bags, Who’s on first, What’s on second, I Don’t Know is on third…

Are you the manager?

Yes.

You gotta be the coach too?

Yes.

And you don’t know the fellows’ names.

Well I should.

Well then who’s on first?

Yes.

I mean the fellow’s name.

Who.

The guy on first.

Who.

The first baseman.

Who.

The guy playing…

Who’s on first!

I’m asking you who’s on first.

That’s the man’s name.

That’s who’s name?

Yes.

Well go ahead and tell me.

That’s it.

That’s who?

Yes.

Look, you gotta first baseman?

Certainly.

Who’s playing first!

That’s right.†

*Who’s on First* is funny not just because of Lou Costello and Bud Abbott but also because it rings true. It differs from many IT support interactions only in subject matter and degree. I cite it to advance two linked and important arguments: one on the importance of language; and the second, which arises from the first and which will bring me back to the services/technology matrix I mentioned above, on the importance of perspectives.

Here, to introduce the language argument, is another bit of dialogue, from Patrick Marber’s play *Closer*. Two people are communicating seductively in an online chat room:

Shall we meet?

Y

Because you turn me on

I meant “Y” for Yes.†

Particularly when we speak in shorthand, or in the efficient common language that evolves within specialized professions such as IT, we tend to miscommunicate. We get misunderstood: we say things that we think are completely clear but that others perceive as completely opaque. Perhaps more frequently we do the opposite, much what the first chatter does with the second’s “Y”: we assume that others are being very clear with us because we attach specific meaning to their words, but in fact they are being vague. Strange interactions ensue.

For example, a customer calls and complains, “The network is down.” Whoever answers the call takes this at face value and routes the complaint—or more frequently, and sad to say, the complainer—to the network help desk. The network help desk has the customer do the usual tests (“Can you see the university Web page? How about amazon.com?”), and when the answers are “yes,” the help desk very correctly informs the customer that the network is working fine. Case closed.

The result is predictable: now the customer is annoyed, because the case remains open from his or her perspective.
and the IT support staff have been unresponsive. There is still no incoming e-mail on the customer's machine, so the network is down! The help desk should have understood that “the network is down” was not meant literally but instead telegraphed the most frequent complaint at most IT help desks: “My e-mail is broken.” Unfortunately, the translated complaint typically fares no better than the encoded one. Help desks want the user to specify exactly what he or she means by “my e-mail is broken” before they will help—sometimes before they will even answer the phone. But the user has already reported exactly what is wrong: “my e-mail is broken.” The help desk’s “exactly” and the customer’s “exactly” aren’t the same. Curiously enough, we have returned to the same problem we had in Water Tower Place (and in “Who’s on First”). There, the technology and the staff were working at different levels of abstraction and causality and were thus failing to communicate. For problems to be solved, staff and customers must communicate clearly.

Although vagueness and shorthand figure prominently in miscommunication, so do other problems. As I noted above, there is also the problem of perspectives, of the complex matrix translating an array of technologies into an array of services, and of the different ways those who use the services and those who manage the technologies organize their thinking about the matrix. This brings me to the second argument emerging from “Who's On First?”

The Matrix Conundrum

For years, IT staff have taught customers to think about information technology in terms of applications. The good news is, they have succeeded. Although e-mail is in fact a complex layering of network hardware, network protocols, servers, authentication, messaging protocols, post-office software, client machines, client operating systems, mail clients, and individual workstation and configuration preferences, for example, customers think of e-mail as a seamless whole. However, most of the technologies underlying e-mail also serve purposes other than e-mail. The network carries other traffic, servers provide other services, clients run other applications, messages flow by other means, and so on. In most cases it makes sense to manage each of these technologies as a coherent entity that serves diverse purposes, rather than run each of them the way customers have been taught to think about them. For example, IT departments properly avoid running separate networks for separate applications such as e-mail, Web traffic, file transfers, authentication, and so forth. And although it might simplify their lives to do otherwise, faculty, students, and staff like to use one desktop machine to perform myriad different functions.

So the bad news is, it makes sense to organize and manage IT services along technology lines rather than around applications, as customers have learned to think about them. On most campuses, even though the IT department may try to present a unified front office, the network—and therefore the network help desk—is separate from, say, the PC hardware-repair operation. The way customers have been taught to organize their thinking appears to be the wrong way for IT staff to organize their work, and vice versa. Yet the customer who says “my e-mail is broken” does not care about departmental organization. He or she wants someone to run through the whole path, find the problem, and fix it. This is the same thing the clerk wanted back in Water Tower Place. And it is the very thing IT operations typically are not organized to do.

There is really only one practical way to solve this problem. Even if IT operations are organized technologically, their training, help, dissemination, and advocacy mechanisms must be organized conceptually, to complement the way customers think about IT—that is, integrated around applications. Yet technologies themselves must continue operating somewhat discretely. There is no escaping the matrix. Professor Hill sells bands, even though the underlying products he will provide are different instruments, uniforms, banners, and so forth. Similarly, IT must “sell” services, even if efficiency demands that the technological components constituting those services operate somewhat separately.

River City, Next Station

In his short but wonderful book Joke: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters, Ted Cohen, an inimitable professor of...
philosophy and the long-time emcee of the University of Chicago’s famous hamentashen-lakre debate, tells the story of Berl. Having volunteered and been chosen to represent his small Jewish village in a theological debate in which the penalty for not knowing an answer is instantly losing one’s head, Berl discovers that his Jesuit opponent, the guest of the prince, is the best debating scholar in all of European Christendom. The uneducated but confident Berl gets to ask the first question:

Berl looked into the steely eyes of his opponent. In a small, barely audible voice he said, “What does this mean: ‘Ani lo yodea’?”

The Jesuit priest was a master of biblical languages and many other languages as well. He knew, of course, that this Hebrew sentence means “I do not know.” He said so at once: “I do not know.”

Today I thought, if the great Rabbi Weinstein didn’t know, then surely this Jesuit priest does not know?

Often, people take us to be wise not because we are, but because we appear to be. If we remain introspective, looking for wisdom only within our current practice, our own organizations, our own campuses, or other traditional contexts, then in due course we will become unwise. We need to keep looking for novel sources of metaphor and insight, for ways to think differently—and better—about the conundrums that make our work interesting.

Those involved with information technology, whether as customers or as providers, must never forget that this work is intrinsically difficult. The conundrums we all face—the contradictory effects of simplicity, the multiplicity of meanings, the myth of exactitude, the unmanageable matrix translating technologies into services, the confusion of apparent with actual wisdom—mean that supporting IT will never admit elegant, efficient, simple, or replicable solutions, however much vendors might argue otherwise.

It’s different than it was. The core job now, and the core skill, is to choose that inelegant, inefficient, complex, and unique combination of tools and methods that best permits IT customers—students, the faculty who teach them, and the administrators who enable it all—to do their work. The only way to gain this skill is to work and communicate with one another, even across institutional and organizational lines. Only then can we all move toward success—and away from trouble in River City.

Notes
2. Ibid.
4. The origins of the “Who’s on First?” routine are obscure and somewhat controversial. According to Lina Countess’s daughter, the routine resulted from collaboration among Bud Abbott, Lou Costello, and John Grant, who later wrote most of the Abbott & Costello sketches (Chris Castellini and Raymond Strait, Lou’s on First [New York: Cooper Square Press, 1984]). On the other hand, according to other sources and the obituary of Irving Gordon (better known for writing Nat King Cole’s hit “Unforgettable”), Gordon wrote the routine while working as a composer of parody numbers in the Catskills during the 1920s (Myrna Bitter, “Irving Gordon, Composer of ‘Unforgettable,’” Los Angeles Times, home edition, December 3, 1994, 26). Folding complicating, unprocessed manuscript documents in the Samuel L. Goldman Papers at the University of Chicago Library include a pencil-on-foolscap version of the routine apparently dated before 1928. Peter B. Howard, a Berkeley bookbinder, takes this version as evidence that Goldman, a vaudevillian and author of comedy bits in the 1920s and 1930s, wrote the routine or a precursor to it, since Abbott and Costello apparently did not work together until around 1937 (administrative files for the Samuel L. Goldman Papers, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library). Then again, Goldman may simply have heard the routine on stage and transcribed it, mincing arguments by others that the Abbott & Costello routine was simply a compilation and synthesis from routines widely used by many performers in vaudeville during the 1930s. The routine was first performed by Abbott and Costello on radio in 1935, although they had apparently performed it on stage for some years before that. Many recordings of their some-what varied radio, television, and live performances exist.
7. Ibid., 99–104.

We need to keep looking for ways to think differently—and better—about the conundrums that make our work interesting.