

ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING

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Data Runaround Costs Clients

Several days ago I was working late on a proposal. Stuck with writing a section on how a prospective client could benefit from using Web-based technologies, I decided to take a break to grab a hamburger across the street. Although it had been a long time since I had eaten at a McDonald's, the company had been on my mind ever since I had read Robert Kiyosaki's *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*. Several sections of the book, but mostly the discussion of the McDonald's empire, had made me think about my own industry—environmental management—and its identity and perception problems. These problems were at the root of my struggles that day to write a winning proposal.

If you were to ask people, "What business is McDonald's in?" most would answer with little hesitation that it's in the fast-food business. But though its franchises are, the parent corporation is not. Rather, as Kiyosaki convincingly argues and as McDonald's founder Ray Kroc himself once stated, the company's primary business is real estate. Similarly, if you were to ask executives of environmental firms what business they are in, most would answer "consulting" or "engineering." I would argue instead that firms that perform site investigations, and then write up reports of their work and make recommendations, are primarily in the information gathering, storage, and distribution business. Unfortunately, most are not well-equipped for that work.

That is not likely to change anytime soon, given that there are few internal or external driv-

ers to compel such a change in my industry or others. American consumers often wonder, if they call their telephone company and are handed from one call center to another, why they have to repeat their contact information and describe their problem all over again. It's because each call center is a different profit center, perhaps even a different company. Each profit center charges the parent company for each call.

Something similar happens in the environmental business, where having satisfied clients is important but so is racking up billable hours. Technologies that would lower the costs of data acquisition, storage and retrieval, such as handheld electronic devices, remote control and automation systems, more accessible database management systems and electronic data validation, are not adopted much by consulting firms. Many lack the resources to invest in research and development or to lose billable hours while implementing new technologies.

Perhaps most telling is the level within firms at which decisions about environmental data management are made. Because firms do not perceive themselves to be in the information technology business, top-level management rarely gets involved. Instead, IT decisions are more often placed in the hands of environmental project managers. They often reject a new technol-

ogy because the implementation costs are perceived to be too high to be borne by their project alone. Or they may permit a test run, but the review is placed in the hands of the very individuals whose workloads would be threatened by the new tool.

UNINFORMED. Clients of environmental firms cannot be depended upon either to demand the use of better tools and more efficient work practices. On many occasions in recent years I've met with clients that have many contaminated sites and I've asked to hear more about the general condition of their sites, the monitoring and reporting commitments that exist at each, and the status of the records (both paper and electronic) that document site conditions. Invariably, the people I speak

by its environmental consultants. When given the opportunity to dig into these matters, I find that the client's data is stored in older systems or spreadsheets that are not accessible by either the client's employees or its other consultants. As a result, the client, which has already paid for the data once, is charged again whenever it makes a routine call to request information. Worse, when one consultant has a data set that another needs, the "owner" of the data charges the client to download it while the other consultant charges to upload it.

Clients don't need to accept this chaos. Technologies exist to deal with it, particularly those based on XML (eXtensible Markup Language). I encourage clients to move their records from individual (and often incompatible) data bases of their various consultants to a central Web-based repository where they can be accessed by all parties involved, thus eliminating data transfer costs, issues of data inaccessibility, and endless need for synchronization that plague so many projects. For a large corporation that currently spends \$100 million per year on environmental monitoring, the savings could add up to 30% or more.

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with are quite knowledgeable about current and past site conditions and remediation measures that have been undertaken, but are not well-informed about anything pertaining to record-keeping or information management. There seems to be little correlation between a client's level of understanding of these matters and its business type, size, or most surprisingly, the sophistication of its IT infrastructure.

What accounts for such ignorance? Most records pertaining to a client's sites and all of its sampling and analytical data are kept

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