VIEWPOINT

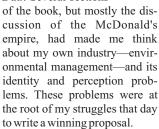
ENVIRONMENTAL MONITORING

NENO DUPLANCIC

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



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 wellequipped 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 informa-

> tion 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 rack-

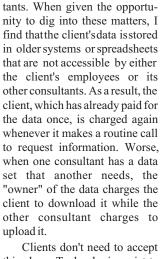
ing up billable hours. Technologies that would lower the costs of data acquisition, storage and retrieval, such as handheld electronic devices, remote control and automation systems. more accessible database management systems and electronic datavalidation, are not adopted much by

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 environment al 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



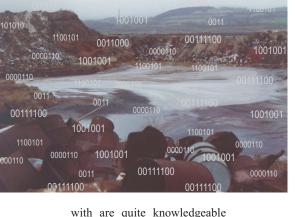
by its environmental consul-

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 Webbased 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 cur-

rently spends \$100 million per year on environmental monitoring, the savings could add up to 30% or more.

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about current and past site conditions and remediation measures that have been undertaken, but are not well-informed about anything pertaining to recordkeeping 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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