

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Scenarios, Not Stone

By Douglas E. Welch

One of the biggest challenges of a high-tech career is planning when you cannot plan. You spend your days trying to predict the future without enough budget, enough time or enough information. This doesn't mean you can't plan, though. It means you have to plan in new ways.

Flexibility

The key to high-tech planning is realizing that everything can, and probably will, change before a project is completed. This is true of any endeavor that involves more than two people. Software and hardware products come and go. People join your team, leave your team, and sometimes rejoin it. Budget is approved, then cut, and then changed.

Flexibility is the key to high-tech planning success. Instead of writing your project plans in stone, consider making them no more permanent than the scribbles on a white board. I can guarantee that each and every day you will be erasing some entries and adding new ones. It is simply the nature of the beast.

Trying to plan any project can be an exercise in frustration if you try to control issues over which you have no power. Instead of planning for specifics—specific hardware, specific software, specific networks—start thinking in scenarios. Scenarios are the heart of high-tech planning and force you to focus on the big picture instead of the individual brush strokes.

While you might have a project plan that calls for a specific piece of equipment, you want to think about what might happen should that equipment not be available. For example, you decide to base your network on Cisco equipment. Some thought should be given to what might happen if Cisco goes bankrupt during the course of your project. What other companies have similar equipment at similar prices? How would it integrate with existing equipment? This would be your “Cisco fails” scenario.

Perhaps a new technology is on the horizon. Wireless networking is one particular area where this is happening

as I write. Perhaps your project calls for the installation of 802.11b wireless networking equipment. What happens if the new, higher-speed 802.11g equipment becomes finalized and available during your project? Shouldn't you have a “high-speed” scenario that allows you to incorporate this new technology if the conditions are right?

Scenarios = Flexibility

Developing project scenarios allows you to remain flexible in the face of even the most daunting changes. If you create alternative ideas up front, you are much less likely to be thrown into turmoil when the inevitable changes occur. You have already done the thinking necessary to deal with the changes. You simply pick up the scenario, apply any additional tweaks that might be necessary, and you have a new project plan.

Of course, this means that you need to develop additional scenarios dealing with this new project plan. It might sound like a lot of extra work, but you are really just formalizing a process you probably already do internally. All these additional scenarios can often be developed into their own projects. The act of brainstorming new scenarios gets you thinking about new projects, new ideas and new solutions. This constant flow of new ideas and new plans is a great way to stay on top of the technology wave no matter how rough it might become.

Scenarios can give you a sense of control over the vagaries of life, dramatically enhance your effectiveness, and bring a new level of value to your high-tech career.

If you would like to learn a bit more about scenario planning, here are a few books to start you on your way.

Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation, by Kees van der Heijden (www.wiley.com)

The Art of the Long View: Paths to Strategic Insight for Yourself and Your Company, by Peter Schwartz (www.randomhouse.com/doubleday)

Scenario Planning: Managing for the Future, by Gill Ringland (www.wiley.com) □

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