Remember that classic line from the 1970’s Monty Python film, “The Life of Brian”: “But apart from the sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, fresh water system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?”

What have they done for us? In an industry characterized by a seemingly endless roller-coaster ride between fashionable technologies, we in IT often feel inclined to ask this question. And, as with the Judean People’s Front in “The Life of Brian,” it is very easy to overlook the real answer.

Following last year’s crazed obsession with dot-coms, and the subsequent despondent reaction to the “bubble burst,” this seems to be an opportune moment to ask, what has the web ever done for us? Well apart from revolutionizing the way we access and share information, communicate with friends and colleagues, shop, invest, learn, and entertain ourselves...

For the web-enabled individual (and let’s not forget that half of the population who still won’t or can’t go near the Internet), the Internet has certainly done a great deal — however low the dot-com share prices fall. But what about the enterprise? Is the data center a better or a worse place since the e-revolution gathered steam? Put another way, does the Internet help or hinder us in our quest to support corporate systems and the people who use them? That’s a tricky one. Better or worse? Help of hindrance? Ummm.

But how many companies can really rise to the challenge? How many have had the luxury of stopping, stepping back, taking a look at “the big picture,” and building a long-term integration strategy for legacy and e-business systems? Not many, I would guess. The truth is that over the past few years, web technologies have been embraced in a blind panic, as CEOs struggle to stay one step ahead of their competitors, and CIOs battle to comply with the edicts issued from the boardroom. Faced with the most acute skills shortage that has ever hit the IT industry, IS directors have turned to off-shore development companies, application service providers (ASPs), and high-priced contractors to fulfill many of their e-commerce requirements. In many cases, the question of integrating these disparate applications into the enterprise system management infrastructure has had to be put on hold until the basic functionality is up and running (and until system management framework suppliers work out how to provide hooks for web-based traffic!).

This year may well be remembered as the year when, at the very least, we started to put e-business into perspective — to see it in its true light as a new, highly effective sales and distribution channel — and not as the universal panacea that once it appeared to be. This year will be the year when, with luck, CIOs can stop peering over their shoulders and focus instead on the integration of the various e-business components. Last but not least, 2001 will be the year when we finally come to grips with the issue of the “extended enterprise.”

Extended enterprise? Ah, yes, one of the things that e-business-to-business and the “extranet” have definitely done is to blur the boundaries between your organization and the next — to draw together your business partners and members of your supply chain. Whether you view this as a help or a hindrance probably depends on how sociable you are. But for the enterprise data center, it raises the following fundamental issues:

- **Security:** Security policies can no longer be drawn up in isolation. The
traditional view of access management, with outsiders outside, employees inside, and RACF in between, is beginning to look distinctly inadequate. It has long been realized that companies face a potentially greater threat from malevolent insiders in a position of trust than they do from the hackers beyond the firewall. But in the extended enterprise, the distinction between insiders and outsiders is far less clear; and security policies need to be sufficiently flexible and watertight to cover information access across boundaries.

- **Performance:** Many enterprise system performance managers must be feeling that the web was devised deliberately to make them prematurely gray. Not only do they now have to gather performance data in a range of formats from different platforms (there are stacks of stats available from NT, for example, but not in a language decipherable by mainframe specialists), but they also need to measure the performance of applications that cross both the uncharted territory of the web and the boundaries of numerous other companies. E-performance management will remain a black art until well into the millennium.

- **Speed of progress:** In the extended enterprise, the army marches at the pace of the slowest man. Recent research from the Hurwitz Group, for instance, shows that, despite all the hype surrounding e-procurement, many projects are failing because only a small proportion of supply chain members have managed to implement the technology or garner the support of senior management.

So, what has the web done for the enterprise? Ask me next year.

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