

Riding the Swing

By Russ Teubner

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I first met Dave McCormick in 1985. Dave had recently retired from a long career with IBM, and was first introduced to me as ‘the father of the IBM 3705.’ Fortunately, I had been in the industry long enough to understand the significance of this title.

At that time, I was putting the finishing touches on the first version of A-Net, a software product that allows IBM 3270s to access non-SNA networks, computer systems and applications. Dave was intrigued by what I was doing and came to Stillwater, Oklahoma to check it out for himself. After several hours of discussion and demonstration, Dave rendered his verdict: “I’m impressed.” Of course, coming from Dave, I was flattered. However, I couldn’t resist asking him *why* he liked it.

I suppose I hoped that Dave might comment on the visionary nature of the product. Perhaps he would tell me that it was a groundbreaking solution to a critical industry-wide problem. His answer, however, was nothing like that. Instead, he said: “*Russ, I like A-Net because it ‘rides the swing.’*”

At this point I thought to myself: “Ride the swing! What sort of answer is *that*? What about the significance of a product that extends the useful life of SNA networks? What about peace and good will (i.e., interoperability) among all systems, networks and applications?” No doubt, the perplexed look on my face communicated to Dave that I had no idea what he was talking about.

Fortunately, Dave was kind enough to give me an impromptu history lesson on the computing and communications industry. He began by saying “*The computing and communications industry is in constant motion. Think of it as a pendulum that never comes to rest.*” By the end of my history lesson, I was a believer: the industry *did* seem to move with a certain rhythm, swinging like a pendulum from one technology or paradigm of computing and communications to another.

Dave’s analysis was remarkably simple, yet has proven to be quite timeless. And, for me, the truth behind Dave’s simple observation has become the foundation for many others.

The speed of the pendulum is often greater than the organization’s ability to react and respond. Stated differently, the time required to capitalize on a new technology is often greater than the life of the technology itself. This may explain the large number of partially implemented systems, networks and applications (and frustrated users).

The pendulum spends more time *between* end points than it does *at* an end point. Furthermore, the pendulum never comes to rest. Thus, there are no 'ultimate solutions'-there are only a series of end points that will be visited briefly over time. The lesson here is very simple: don't become needlessly vested (organizationally or personally) in any particular end point.

Whenever the pendulum completes its swing, a 'legacy' is left behind. And quite often it's a *living* legacy: a collection of mission-critical systems, networks and applications that have *not* been migrated to the new technology (and may never be). Unfortunately, during the late-1980s and most of the 1990s, the word 'legacy' came to have a negative connotation. Now, we appear to be entering a period when organizations are once again rediscovering the value of their legacy systems.

In Dave's view, my company (at that time Teubner & Associates) would be successful if we developed and delivered products that helped organization get from 'where they are to where to want to be.' Unfortunately, Dave passed away before I had the opportunity to tell him how much I appreciated our conversation in 1985. Perhaps, the degree to which it shaped my perspective -- and the products that resulted -- would have been thanks enough.