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The impact of an economic downturn on the infrastructure market

I heard a true story the other day regarding a company that required three levels of management authorisation for a simple travel expense but only one level for a new state-of-the-art portable PC (which my colleague obtained two days later). This may seem unconnected with the seemingly endless stories of doom and gloom reported by the media, who just love bad news, but it illustrates a very important point. Spending on IT equipment is not well controlled in many organisations - largely because non-technical managers do not understand it.

When business levels are good, spending on IT equipment and infrastructures is somewhat excessive and when the fear of recession (not necessarily recession itself) hits then the panic buttons are pressed and the excessive expenditure is drastically reduced.

This leads to a boom-then-bust style of business for many IT equipment suppliers. Add to this the Internet hype and it can be, and has been, an explosive cocktail.

However, there are many positive areas to report particularly in the field of infrastructure (i.e. cabling) design and installation. Lets look at cabling within buildings - Q3, 2002 will see the ratification of the new international and European standards for Category 5e, 6 and 7 cabling together with their optical fibre counterparts. These standards represent a final phase in a series of technology leaps that started in the early 1990's.

Stable standards also mean lower cost products (including installation and test equipment as well as components) which will encourage new types of clients to install professional infrastructures. This reflects the increasing use of high bit rate networks even within small to medium sized companies (even provincial solicitors are beginning to use Gigabit backbones).

However, it is important to recognize that stable standards do not equate to "dumbing-down". IT cabling is not plumbing or electricity which simply require the turn of tap or the flick of a switch to access the product once the infrastructure is in place. IT networks operating over the cabling are complex to administer and demand high levels of reliability (Quality of Service). Therefore, commercial success in infrastructure design and installation will depend upon "working smart" - providing not only the cabling but also long-term support for the customer (who, by the way, has no desire to become an expert). Companies that support their clients will survive - those that don't will perish.

The coming stabilisation of infrastructure design and installation will provide significant benefits to those undertaking relevant training courses since stable standards mean long-lived training. However, the opportunities for personnel who move on to network design and management have never been

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