

Where Do You Turn in Tough Economic Times for Information Systems Help?

By Kevin Lee Elder

Biography: Kevin Lee Elder is an associate professor of information systems at Georgia Southern University. He may be reached by e-mail at kelder@georgiasouthern.edu.



Keeping up with information technology (IT) and information systems (IS) is tough during the best of times. IT and IS has changed more and quicker than anything else in our lifetime. Keeping up with it and making good decisions about the future has been difficult at best. What you are going to do with your IT and IS is made even tougher in down economic times. During these tough times planning and data collecting around your IS concerns is usually one of the first budget areas to be cut. So what are you to do for help in managing your IT and IS when the budget is tight? Turn to your local college or university with an IS and MBA program.

The first step is to determine where you need the help. You need to determine what is your most pressing need? When it comes to your IS needs they all follow a lifecycle. The most generic version I use to teach about the IS lifecycle contains five steps: Planning, Analysis, Design, Implementation, and Maintenance. The system is originally thought of and planned in the first phase of the lifecycle usually referred to as planning. If planning is the issue or point in the lifecycle you could use help with, a strategy or MBA class might be a good starting point. Looking through the current status of your organization and system is needed and these students are learning these concepts and could use a live case to practice their skills upon.

Once the planning phase is complete the IS will eventually (or hopefully) get some funding. When the funding comes they move into phase two where they are analyzed. In this phase the focus is on the existing system or systems. What are the current problems or bottlenecks are identified. We try to determine what the current process, data and user interfaces look like. A good undergraduate System Analysis and Design class would be appropriate to help you here. This is the main focus of the class and the students greatly benefit from applying the skills they are learning in the text to a real world problem or system.

The next phase is design. Once the bottleneck(s) or problem(s) in the current system is identified you can focus on a solution. Most System Analysis and Design classes go as far as designing a prototype solution to the problem they have identified so this class would be most appropriate if you issue is at this point in the lifecycle. If a solution to the problem has already been identified and a good web solution is desired than a web programming class might be appropriate. Most students learn to program with set cases or problems to program. They could benefit from a

problem to solve that is not from a textbook and no solution set is known ahead of time.

If the issue you are facing is in the next phase, implementation, a class is not appropriate for you. A directed study student, an honor's thesis, or a master's MBA project would be a good choice. You need someone to come into your IS and IT environment and implement the solution or design that has been completed. You might even consider hiring an intern or co-op student, since this is much cheaper than hiring a consultant or new fulltime employee to help implement the solution.

For maintenance of the system, if this is your most pressing issue, there are really two choices. Since most systems that have been in maintenance for years are past their prime they really need to be replaced. However, it is hard to find the time and budget to do the review and kick them out of maintenance back to planning to start the lifecycle again. A strategy or MBA class would once again be a good option since we need to get back to planning again. The second option here would be an intern if the maintenance of the system is large and the current staff does not have the time to keep it all running. This type of on the job training is good for the student and cheaper for the company.

In conclusion, if your IT and IS staff is understaffed, overworked, underfunded or all of the above in these tough economic times where can you turn for help? Facing these budget cuts and tough times makes managing your IT and IS tough. Turn to your local college or university with an IS and MBA program and they can often help you.