

IT failure: Xmas on hold

Santa Claus makes a big mistake and goes for e-business and e-rp

by Peter Andrew

If you were amused by Peter's 'Scrooge' contribution this time last year, you will be equally amused by his latest traditional offering with its wry look at the role of the ERP consultant...



The old man looked up at the calendar, tugging fretfully at his white beard. It was December 24th. His once red, rosy cheeks had turned a watery pink. He hadn't had a decent 'Ho, ho, ho' since July. Even the elves sitting around the table with him had lost their chirpy good humour and sat perched on their stools in glum silence.

How had it come to this, he asked himself? Right on cue, the answer came into the room.

'Hi everyone,' said Earpee, hobbling into the room with as much panache as a shaggy troll with stubby legs could manage. 'How are we today?'

There was a quiet, shrill grumbling from the elves.

'And how is Santa himself?'

'Santa himself feels very old and very tired,' said the old man.

'Not for long,' Earpee said, flashing one of his gruesome grins. 'There are no such things as problems...' '... only opportunities,' chorused the well-schooled elves.

'Exactly!' cried Earpee. 'Is there something for me to write on?'

Earpee started to draw the now

familiar mess of circles and arrows on the whiteboard. 'Can you see what it is yet?' he asked, glancing over his shoulder. There was no reply. Santa was deep in thought, recalling their first meeting in January.

Christmas had gone well enough in the end, if not without difficulty. Every year, it was getting harder to satisfy the children. Once upon a time, two wooden soldiers and a Satsuma would have delighted any child. Nowadays, the only soldiers children were interested in were the square-jawed variety in computer games who stomped about massacring other soldiers in orgies of graphic gore.

Supply chain management

Earpee had phoned him in January while these concerns were still fresh in his mind. He said he represented a company called 'Magic Software'.

'What do you know about supply chain management?' Earpee asked him.

'Never heard of it,' said Santa.

'E-commerce?'

'E-what?'

'E-business?'

'Come again?'

'I'm not surprised you're having problems,' Earpee sighed. 'Yours is a depressingly typical situation. A traditional business with traditional processes that haven't changed for years and a customer whose tastes you no longer understand. This is an emergency. I need to see you as quickly as possible.'

He came the next day. In excited, evangelistic tones he told Santa about 'facilitating new channels to market to increase market share' and 'creating a partnership between business and IT to exploit business opportunities'.

Santa listened carefully. It was all gobbledegook to him, but spellbinding gobbledegook nonetheless. 'A mince pie and a glass of sherry once a year is not a satisfactory return on investment,' Earpee told him. 'I make the children happy, too,' said Santa. 'Mostly, anyway.'

'A child's happiness is nice but worthless,' said Earpee, putting a warty hand on Santa's arm. 'I won't put any pressure on you, but just think about what next Christmas will be like, and the one after that, and the one after that. Is change a threat or an opportunity? Think about it.'

I'll come back and see you in a couple of days.'

Santa did indeed do a lot of hard thinking, hard in the sense that thinking was always hard for him to do. He was a simple man. He knew nothing about IT. The closest he came to computers was loading them onto his sleigh. He knew that they were heavy and difficult to get down the chimney and that was it.

The pre-sales demo

When Earpee returned two days later, Santa was no less confused by it all. 'I can't think straight,' he admitted. Earpee smiled and scratched idly at a bulbous boil on his chin. 'Of course you can't. You can't visualise it, can you? Let me help. Why don't we show you exactly what Magic Software has to offer? My pre-sales team will put together a little demo. If you're still not interested after that then we'll shake hands and I'll simply walk away.'

'No obligation?'

'Of course not.'

'I won't be forced into doing something I don't want to do.'

'As if.'

The 'demo' was fun, if not as informative as Santa had hoped. The two pre-sales trolls approached it like a cabaret, littering their presentation with quips and jokes. There were only tantalising glimpses of the system itself. 'Any questions?' Asked one of the trolls.

'What's a run-time error?' asked Santa.

'You seem to have a lot of those.'

'Nothing to worry about,' the troll chuckled. 'It must be your network. Anyone not got a baseball cap?'

'We haven't got a network,' said Santa.

'Then that's the problem! Anyone want a pen? A stress ball? A mug?'

'Can the system schedule deliveries across different time zones?' Asked Santa.

The trolls glanced at each other and there was a flurry of frowns, shrugs and shakes of the head. 'In its sleep,' said one of them finally, while the other scribbled frantically in his notebook.

'After all, what does Magic Software do?'

'Anything you want!' cried the elves.

After the demo, Santa felt himself closer to being convinced he needed the system without knowing why. Maybe it was because he couldn't convince himself he didn't need it. 'It's your decision,' Earpee

reminded him. 'Yours alone. But don't forget that doing nothing is also a decision. Did I tell you about the 25% discount on licences which runs out in ten days' time?'

Guarantees are for cowards

Santa reached his decision late one evening. Earpee had taken him out for a particularly large meal. Santa was very relaxed, aglow with the warmth of many brandies. 'I don't know where you trolls put it,' said Santa, popping a piece of Stilton into his mouth.

'You'd be surprised,' said Earpee. 'Have you thought any more about the contract?' Earpee was smoking a thick cigar, whose pungent smoke hung heavy over the table. The contract rose mysteriously from out of the smoke, clutched in Earpee's warty hand.

'What about guarantees?' asked Santa.

'Guarantees are for cowards,' said Earpee.

Santa signed the contract that night over the last of many last brandies, too jolly to care about what was in it. 'When it comes down to it,' he told Earpee, in a slurry of syllables. 'It's about whether I trust you or not. And I do, I really, really do.'

Earpee smiled, licked his leathery lips and handed Santa the pen.

The project started in the middle of February, barely four weeks after Earpee's first visit. The project manager was a troll called Gantt. He brought with him a team of four consultants. At the rather perfunctory kick-off meeting, Gantt explained how the project would work.

'First, you tell us what you want and then we give it to you.'

'How do we know what we want?' asked Santa.

'We tell you, of course,' said Gantt. 'And here's the plan.'

The plan was very pretty and consisted of a number of coloured lines extending across the remaining months of the year like a flat rainbow. 'Are you sure it will be ready by October?' asked Santa.

'Well,' began Gantt, frowning. 'There's a lot to do and...'

'We'll have no difficulty in doing it,' growled Earpee, from the back of the room.

'And the sooner we start the better,' Gantt went on.

As it was all so new to Santa he decided

to do as he was told and assume it was going well until told otherwise. However, from the start, the consultants were difficult to work with. Everything was too much trouble for them. The local hotel 'wasn't fit for a goblin'; the coffee from the machine was 'rank'; the chairs were uncomfortable; the elves were 'dim'. It was as if they were serving a penance by doing the project. Even plain condescension was beyond them.

Santa heard the mutterings of discontent from the elves. 'Once a troll, always a troll.' 'Anybody got Big Billy Goat Gruff's number?'

It was not unexpected. His elves knew their jobs inside out. They were bound to resent someone telling them they would have to do the job differently in future, particularly someone who was being paid twice as much as them and was only half their age.

Gantt was more of a concern to Santa. 'Why do you always look so worried?' Santa asked him, one day. 'Because I am,' Gantt replied.

'Why do you worry so much, then?'

'It's my job.'

He was certainly good at it. Santa had never met anyone who worried quite as well as Gantt. It was just a shame that he wouldn't talk about what was worrying him, or at least not to Santa. He was, however, forever in the corridor talking in worried tones to Earpee on his mobile. The months passed and it was soon July. The consultants had progressed to grumbling about the midges, although it was equally possible the midges grumbled just as much about the consultants.

According to Gantt's plan, the 'requirements analysis' should now have been complete and the build should have started. If nothing else, the fact that the consultants had stopped asking questions and spent more time brooding over their keyboards seemed to suggest this transition had occurred.

'Don't we have to sign off the requirements first?' Santa asked Gantt.

'In principle,' Gantt replied.

'But at this rate the consultants will have finished everything before we get the chance.'

'That's often the best way,' said Gantt.

'It's not what you told us at the kick-off meeting.'

'Maybe not, but sometimes you have to

adapt to changing circumstances as you go along.'

'That's not what we asked for'

Santa was about to argue but then remembered his decision to do as he was told. The consultants were at least starting to show them the system. Santa made a point of sitting in on as many of the demonstrations as possible. It was both enlightening and frightening.

'That's not what we asked for,' said Santa.

'Your requirement was non-standard,' said the consultant with distaste.

'What's non-standard?'

'Anything the system can't do,' said the consultant.

This was not an isolated instance. It appeared that their simple requirements had either been ignored or translated into something that had as much in common with the original requirement as a Neanderthal man with Bill Gates. For example, the traditional 'letter to Santa' had been discarded. The new system was to be fronted by a website on which children would place their orders for presents. It would include a dynamic availability check, automatic product substitution and a musical credit check to warn children when the value of their order exceeded their parents' allowance. Orders could also be placed at any Santa's Grotto, all of which would be attached to a high-speed global network.

Production would be make-to-stock only with the volumes based on historical consumption and forecasts of demand for new products. Even Santa's sleigh would deliver against a schedule produced by the system. The system was supposed to be ready for use by the beginning of October, when the first orders usually came in. This date was missed due to a technical problem with the hardware, ie, it hadn't been delivered.

A new date was set for the beginning of November. This date was missed when, along with the discovery of numerous other faults, one of the brighter elves managed to bypass the website security, override the credit check, place 13 orders for himself and amend as many others as he liked.

Gantt, full of praise for the ingenuity of the testing, said the corrections would take

yet more time so the new target would be to implement the system before Christmas, albeit for picking and shipment purposes only. Santa's brow was as furrowed as Gantt's. He had no choice; the project had come too far to be abandoned. He had to gamble the last few pence of trust he had left in Earpee and Magic Software on the chance they were right.

He was wrong. There was a feeble attempt at a go-live on the 17th December when it took eight hours for the first picking list to stutter out of the printer and a further three hours to find the stock. 'It was a useful experience, though,' said Gantt. 'We've learned a lot from it.'

'Such as how little of the system works,' said Santa.

'At least we can still go live with the delivery schedule,' said Gantt, with a desperate optimism. Half dead might have been a more appropriate description; hence Santa's demand for a meeting with Earpee on Christmas Eve.

Christmas Eve review meeting

Earpee finished drawing whatever it was he was drawing.

'This explains everything,' said Earpee. 'The cycle of innovation is the vehicle for business success.'

'That's very interesting,' said Santa. 'However, the cycle you sold me has two flat tyres and the chain's come off.'

'I don't want this to be a negative meeting,' said Earpee.

'Nor me,' said Santa. 'Perhaps Gantt could give us some positive news.'

Gantt grimaced and swallowed hard.

'Generally speaking, the project has gone well here and there but overall I feel we need to review where we are and where we want to be.' Gantt paused, waiting for Santa to say something, but, as Santa hadn't understood what Gantt had said, he had nothing to say.

'What I mean is,' Gantt continued, 'there are a few teething problems with the delivery schedule and while some of them are unpleasant there's nothing we can't overcome.'

Santa looked at Earpee who had wisely taken the precaution of looking the other way first. 'The schedule shows that children on the eastern seaboard of the USA will not receive their presents until

the middle of February,' said Santa.

'It was July two days ago,' said Gantt. 'It's improving all the time.'

'Let's talk options,' said Earpee.

'Such as what?' exclaimed Santa. 'Postponing Christmas? That's easy. We'll have it in March instead, apart from the fact that that's the reindeer mating season and they'll be too tired to do anything except...'

'Look,' said Earpee. 'As a gesture of good will, I'll bring in all the consultants you want. I'll even discount their daily rate by 10%. What do you think?'

'Ho, ho, ho,' laughed Santa. 'That's good but not as good as this.'

He got up, stormed across the room to where Earpee was standing by the whiteboard, lifted the hapless troll off the ground and butted him in the face.

'Merry Christmas,' said Santa, letting him fall. 'I want you and all your pathetic consultants to leave Toyland now.'

'By dose, by dose...' Earpee groaned.

'But you will still use the delivery schedule, won't you?' asked Gantt. 'Only to start the workshop fires in the morning,' said Santa. 'That means I don't get my bonus,' whimpered Gantt, his head in his hands.

'What are we going to do? What are we going to do?' twittered the elves. 'Firstly,' said Santa. 'Fetch me two large Christmas trees and a mallet. I've just had a great idea. And secondly, we need a plan B.'

He looked at Earpee who was sitting up, dabbing his bright red nose with a handkerchief.

'I've got it!' He went to the window, opened it wide, took an enormous breath that strained at every stitch of his red jacket and bellowed 'RUIDOLPH!'



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