

Asking the Right Questions

Visibility into Risk

COMPUTER AID, INC

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We face risk in almost everything that we do. Driving a car on a public highway can present danger at every turn. *“Will the other guy stop or run that red light? Will oncoming traffic stay on their side or swerve into me?”* While putting on my makeup each morning I deliberately steady my hand so I won't poke my eye out. Life's experiences have taught us that risk is always a possibility, no matter how remote. Because we recognize the potential, we take extra care to understand the situation, control what we can and hopefully mitigate the danger.

One afternoon about two weeks into my tenure as CIO, a water pipe burst three floors above our server room. The facilities manager reported that the water flow had been directed to the outside walls of the building – *“You should have nothing to worry about.”* Since our server room was located about 25 feet from that outside wall, I thought the risk of water damage to the server room was minimal – well, non-existent really.

The next morning our DBA came running into my office. *“You gotta come look at this! There's water in the server room!”*

WHAT?? How can that be? I hurried to the room and saw the unthinkable. Yes, the water had run down the outside wall, but the raised floor in our server room had become the collection point for all that water. We had almost three inches of water UNDER the raised floor and within ½ inch of the power outlets. I gave the order to shut down power. All network services were immediately interrupted. No one was electrocuted, no one was physically injured – but I had several hundred VERY unhappy customers – no email, no Internet, no nothing.

Later, I asked Scott how he had discovered the water. *“It was stuffy. I wanted to plug in the fan – so I lifted the floor panel to get to the electrical outlet . . . “*

Every day we face potential risk of all shapes and sizes. In the Technology arena, that risk, if not identified and mitigated, can take us down – literally. In the water pipe incident, I relied on the facilities manager's assessment of the situation. Based on what I believed to be an expert assessment, I decided that the cascading water posed little threat to my technical operations. What I didn't consider were the 'hidden' factors; those variables and the situation dynamics that I didn't even know about.

I had no idea that the entire 13th floor was raised to house electrical and communications wiring. I had no idea that the floor segments and baffles ran perpendicular to the culprit outside wall. I had no idea that the 13th floor was the only raised floor in the building and that gravity would cause the water to stop and collect there. And I obviously did not know which questions to ask that would have

provided visibility into these factors and uncovered the potential risk. I needed to uncover the underlying factors that turned this seemingly innocuous risk into a real threat to my staff and technical operations.

This need to ask “*What’s under the floor panel?*” spurred Computer Aid to develop a tool that provides visibility under the floor panel and into those hidden dynamics. CAI’s Automated Project Office software offers both pre-defined and customizable Risk Questionnaires that open up understanding into potential project and business activity risk.

APO’s Risk Assessment Questionnaires were developed to uncover potential hazards within your project – hazards that could derail you if not identified and addressed. Based on industry best practices and the risk thought leaders’ experiences, the assessment questions provide visibility into and identification of the potentially dangerous dynamics that can side-track even the best planned effort.

Based on your answer to each question, a comprehensive risk assessment is automatically generated and presented back. This immediate view provides real-time, actionable steps that can save your project’s life.

APO takes risk assessment and risk management to the next level by addressing not only project-based risk, but business risk as well. Based on your selections, risk assessment questionnaires can identify hidden risk in other business areas such as contract management, maintenance support, and operations. The APO tool provides visibility into the many facets of risk throughout the business lifecycle. And because APO Risk Management is based on established industry risk values, implementation can be tailored to your specific situation.

I didn’t know the right questions to ask so I didn’t comprehend the severity of the danger. But with the APO risk assessment tool, I could have “lifted the floor panel” early on and saved myself a lot of grief and my customer-base days of non-productivity.

About the Author:

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