

THE SUCCESSFUL NATIVE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE; AND THE SUCCESSFUL TECHNOLOGY LEADER



Tribes are diversifying from gaming into multiple business lines, and technology leaders are stepping up to the challenge of supporting the growth.

Mainstream gaming technology leaders manage diverse systems and information needs as a result of the myriad of business lines that make up a resort gaming operation. The business lines likely include, at a minimum, gaming lodging, food and beverage, retail, entertainment, and convention. This necessitates researching, acquiring, implementing and supporting a multiplicity of diverse applications; all needing to share data and run on real-time, high availability platforms.

Now consider tribal gaming and tribal nation enterprises, which push the definition of diversity and multiplicity to its limits!

- The Choctaw Nation, according to their website, generates hundreds of millions of dollars annually and provides more than 7,600 jobs for tribal and non-tribal Oklahomans. In addition to seven casinos, the Choctaw Nation has a manufacturing business, a management services company, 13 travel plazas, 12 smoke shops, a printing company, and a document archiving company.
- The Cherokee Nation, the second largest Native American tribe, has a business presence in gaming and hospitality, personnel



services, distribution, manufacturing, telecommunications and environmental services industries, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue. The gaming and hospitality division of the Cherokee Nation, Cherokee Nation Enterprises, owns and operates six casinos, three hotels, two golf courses and many other retail operations, according to their website.

- The Oneida Indian Nation of New York has Turning Stone Resort and Casino offering gaming, world-class golf, entertainment, and lodging, which includes 4 distinct hotels and The Villages at Turning Stone RV Park. Other enterprises listed on their

website include Indian Country Today Media Network, Four Directions Productions, SavOn Gas and Convenience stores, Car Care, Salmon Acres, and Marion Manor Marina.

You likely now get my point about the magnitude of responsibilities for technology leaders in tribal gaming! And we are not done with identifying factors that add to the complexity of managing technology initiatives within a sovereign Nation:

According to the Council for Tribal Employment Rights (CTER) the primary purpose of the Tribal Employment Rights Ordinance (T.E.R.O.) is to enforce tribally enacted Indian Preference law to insure that Indian/Alaska Native people gain their rightful share to employment, training, contracting, subcontracting, and business opportunities on and near reservations and native villages. T.E.R.O. is a wonderful way to enrich the lives of tribal members and provide opportunities for Native American business but, depending on how T.E.R.O. is implemented by the particular tribe, it can complicate the vendor selection process for the technology leader.

Every technology leader has to work effectively with executive stakeholders to present a compelling business case and solid implementation plan for new concepts. In Native American gaming, the approval process for a large technology project may include the executive team, the Board of Directors, and finally the Tribal Council, which can be an interesting challenge if the vendor is offering attractive pricing with a concrete deadline.

Now add to the mix that the proliferation of gaming over the past 20 years means that the demand for experienced people has outgrown the supply. In both mainstream and tribal gaming, you often have staff with less than optimum experience in critical positions without mentors, sufficient training, or sufficient procedures in place. Although most organizations eventually rise to success, it takes much longer to overcome these hurdles especially in a 24 hour a day, seven day a week, 365 day a year gaming environment. Organizations such as TribalNet, by enabling the tribes to share ideas, experiences, and knowledge, continue to be a source of critical information to many tribal technology leaders.

Managing A Diverse Portfolio

The revenues from Native American gaming are used to fund social services for the tribal members. And so we introduce yet more complexity because the technology leader may also support the tribal government and deploy technical services for tracking tribal membership, delivering health care, providing housing, implementing language programs and cultural centers, just to name a few.

Many tribes utilize one IT group to support both tribal government and tribal gaming needs. On the positive side, there are economies to be realized in areas such as network resources, help desk resources, desktop solutions, financial and human resource solutions, and disaster recovery. On the negative side, this can create competing priorities for budget dollars, project staff and support staff where in many cases the project staff and support staff are one and the same. It can have negative impacts on the ability to deliver projects on time and on budget as well as the perception that IT is not responsive to the needs of their clients. It is, at best, a difficult juggling act.

Just imagine the implications of managing a diverse portfolio of technology initiatives that include the high-volume real-time casino floor, a growing collection of geographically distributed retail outlets, and sensitive data on Tribal membership and social services!

When the tribal technology leader is responsible for both gaming and tribal government, it is important that they have access to executives from both sides to ensure each entity is informed and on board with the technology plan. The message delivered by the technology leader must come from a business versus technology perspective, true whether mainstream or tribal organizations. Always remember that your audience may not have a technical back-

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ground, and should not need one to understand the message. We need to remind ourselves that we are there to support the Nation, and “technology for the sake of technology” is never the answer. There truly are no IT projects, but business initiatives with technology solutions.

Where Should the CIO Report?

Another aspect that adds to the complexity is whether the technology leader reports to the Tribal Government or to the gaming entity and the sometimes resulting tug of war for priority of scarce resources, both staffing and financial. A recent article titled “Should the CIO Report to the CEO?” written by Susan Kelly cites data from a global, industry agnostic survey from Gartner (Gartner’s EXP Global CIO Survey, Source: Gartner January 2011) indicating that approximately 38 % of CIO’s report directly to the CEO. This reporting structure has long been a source of conversation centered on where the technology leader reports as an indicator of the perceived value of IT. It was also reported that a recent trend indicates that more CIO’s are being drawn from non-technical backgrounds which may be an indicator that business experience is of more value to the organization than technical experience, or more realistically, that we continue to be our own worst enemies when we present technology solutions for business instead of business solutions that use technology. It may seem like a subtle difference but if the above trend of drawing CIO’s from non-technical backgrounds continue it won’t seem subtle for long. From my own experience I have been chosen for a role, on numerous occasions, for my marketing and operations experience and knowledge. I have known great technologists that have not been selected for the top role because, in my opinion, they speak to technology, not business. I posed the question “Do you consider yourself to be a technology leader with business expertise or a business leader with technology expertise?” to sev-

eral technology leaders within tribal gaming. Robert “Bobby” Bird, IT Supervisor, / Business Department Liaison for the Ho-Chunk Nation stated “I consider myself to be a business leader with technology expertise simply because I am a formally trained IT person who takes a step back to view our businesses from a customer’s standpoint. Every businesses success comes from the customer’s appreciation for the product or services provided.” Another gaming industry veteran responded “I consider myself a technology leader with business expertise.”

When asked if there is a benefit to being a technology leader with business expertise or a business leader with technology expertise, Bobby stated “A technology leader may sometimes lose sight of what the customer desires and get lost in what technology does. It is sometimes out of the scope of what the customer is capable of understanding or maneuvering through. A business leader may look at what the customer base is able to operate through without becoming frustrated with the system.” Another responded “I don’t think one has an upper hand or advantage over the other. Both are capable of effectively leading an organization as long as one applies the knowledge from one area of focus to the other.” While another stated “You need both technology and business expertise.”

At the end of the day there are a large number of leaders, whether technology leaders, business leaders or a combination of the two, who are part of very successful organizations. The Native Indian Gaming Council (NIGC) reports that there are approximately 200 federally-recognized tribes offering Class I, Class II and Class III gaming and, in 2009, the 419 tribal gaming operations generated an estimated \$26.5 billion in revenues. This is 86.3% of the \$30.7 billion generated in 2009 by mainstream gaming, as reported by the AGA. Those are impressive numbers for a segment of the gaming and hospitality industry that, in the whole scheme of things, has only been around for a short period of time.

Susan Kesel has spent the past 20 years in the gaming industry working across mainstream and tribal gaming. An Alumnus of the Board of Advisors for TribalNet and for Gaming and Leisure Magazine, Susan is an innovative and open-minded business technologist. Susan was instrumental in the development and implementation of Turning Stone Resort and Casino’s patented Account Based Wagering System. She is currently the interim CEO for Harvest Trends, Inc. offering hosted business intelligence.