



What IT Managers Say About Weathering Turbulent Times

Local IT Managers tell us how they manage their staff and cope with the impact of the economic downturn. Here are their tips for keeping yourself and your team focused and productive.

Have you been thinking about your career and what lies ahead for you and your company? Perhaps you've already experienced staff reductions or budget cutbacks. Or maybe you're fortunate enough to work for an organization that has remained – at least so far – relatively unscathed by the recession.

We spoke with IT leaders at Massachusetts-based healthcare, biotechnology, financial services and educational institutions to learn how diverse organizations are coping with today's turbulent times. Unsurprisingly, the feedback varied by industry, company and each individual's responsibilities.

- One educational institution suffered major layoffs, leaving an overextended development team to manage the workload.
- A biotechnology firm is taking "pre-emptive measures" to control costs and save jobs, despite a strong market position and positive projections. "In a field where we never thought we'd be talking about layoffs, we are talking about it now", the biotech manager reports.
- One financial services institution is looking for productivity improvements to preserve jobs and maintain funding and another is grateful for zero job loss even though "people are still afraid for their jobs and cuts in benefits".
- A healthcare IT team that powers the billing and registration system for a major hospital feels secure because of the critical nature of their application, yet they are sensitive to the overall business environment.

Whether your company has been hard hit by the economic crisis or is operating in business-as-usual mode, the global economic downturn hovers like a cloud over management and employees alike. Even in companies that have not experienced cutbacks, it's impossible to avoid the anxiety that filters in from the outside world. Since you can't shield yourself or your colleagues from the stress and confusion that comes with uncertain times, here are some tips from the IT Managers we interviewed on how to deal with today's realities and position yourself for challenges that may lie ahead.

See the big picture and pinpoint where you fit

Tighter budgets mean difficult choices and greater scrutiny so be sure your work priorities and personal goals are closely aligned with your company's strategic objectives and your manager's priorities. "Know what's going on in your area, in your company and in the market, and be able to articulate your contribution in a way that others can understand", says one biotechnology manager. Position yourself to



work on projects that are company-critical and remember there's less flexibility to invest in projects – or people – that don't contribute to the bottom line or tie to major initiatives. The more you can demonstrate that you are being responsible and strategic, the better off you'll be. As one healthcare IT executive tells us, "The amount of work has not changed, but the projects being funded now are more critical and are being watched more closely. There's more of a focus on ROI and plenty of measurement criteria in place to insure that goals will be realized".

Know your strengths, and spread the word

This is not the time to slack off on skill development or to be modest about your abilities. In fact, it is an ideal time to take inventory of your strengths and make sure your organization is aware of *all* of your skills – not just those you use day-to-day. In the event of cutbacks, you may have a distinct advantage if management perceives that you are flexible and can be deployed in a number of areas. One manager commented that technical people in particular need to be more communicative about their strengths – this is not the time to be quiet. And if you're looking for new opportunities, make sure that you present an honest and accurate assessment of your skills. More than ever before, companies can't afford to waste time or hire someone who is not productive.

Tune out negativity, focus on productivity

Do your best to stay focused on your job and don't get caught up with negativity or distractions coming from within your company or in the media. Sure, it might take a little tunnel vision to insulate yourself but do what you must to remain stable in a destabilizing environment. As one financial services IT manager pointed out, "a 5% increase in productivity is the same as a 5% cost reduction, which could be enough to salvage a project, or person". All of the managers we spoke with agreed that certain basic principles make good business sense no matter what the economic environment: take ownership, focus on results, and demonstrate the value you bring to the business.

Recognize that we're all facing challenges

No matter how well you do your job it is reasonable to conclude that if your industry is getting hit hard, there will be cost cutting in IT as in other parts of the company. Nevertheless, don't be a malcontent. "We're all making decisions we don't want to make and we are uncomfortable about it", one technology manager says. "Don't make it any more difficult than it already is". This is the time to be a team player, show leadership, maintain positive rapport with colleagues and acknowledge that we're all in this together.

Participate

"I rely on my staff to think outside the box and come up with new ways they can contribute individually and as a team - especially when it comes to cost reduction", says one biotech manager. "I challenge them to come up with workable cost savings and use innovation to help bring down operational costs".



Consider your manager

Managing internal teams can be stressful and confusing even in the best of times, but it is particularly challenging when you're on the downside of a business cycle. The managers we talked with strive to be honest and transparent with their staff and communicate as much information as quickly as possible. "No matter what happens, I can feel good about the fact that I am up front and honest about the business climate and I share what I know", says one IT Manager.

Despite the turbulence it is important to help your company stay on track while you position yourself for the long term. When the economic climate shifts, there will be renewed demand for IT professionals. Those with razor sharp skills, who have cultivated their abilities in spite of a suppressed business climate, will have a distinct advantage. Focus on your own career goals, stay on top of your skills and don't think too much about the things you can't control. Doing so will serve you, your manager and your company.