

MIS Operations: Fun or Frenzy?

Paper #: 5001

Lincoln Brill
MIS Manager
Wood-Mizer Products, Inc.
8180 W. 10th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46214
317.271.1542
ltb@woodmizer.com

Introduction

Has the wear and tear of managing the MIS operations, worn you down? Is it no longer fun, but a frenzied environment of survival? During my stint as Wood-Mizer's MIS Manager, I have implemented several ideas which have brought much more fun and direction to my team's work environment. Here is what I have done:

- developed and began implementing an MIS Vision and Leadership statement
- created formal hiring criteria
- started continuous improvement sessions with MIS team members
- developed MIS and Business unit measurements
- focused on company-wide and departmental teamwork

The Vision and Leadership statement provides the direction for managing the MIS operations. The formal hiring criteria enables a consistent quality process for hiring MIS personnel (focus is on integrity, teachability, and technical skills). The team member meetings create opportunities for continuous development with the goal of motivated employees which leads to higher productivity. The MIS and Business unit measurements provide accountability for and direction to business unit managers in justifying their MIS spending as well as making sure their spending is in line with Corporate Strategic goals. Lastly focusing on teamwork has created an environment where MIS pitches in and, as necessary, changes, so the company is more prosperous, and the environment more fun.

Vision and Leadership

Dr. Warren Bennis, Distinguished Professor of Business Admin. @ USC made the following statement regarding leaders and the importance of establishing and communication vision, "Leaders must communicate clearly, compellingly, forcibly, simply, and ceaselessly in memos, meetings, newsletters, videos, satellite broadcasts, and, most of all, eyeball to eyeball. Their vision must be anchored in organization realities. Anchoring the vision means taking it into account in everything that they do - recruiting, rewarding, decision-making, policy-making, and empowering."

I have attempted to follow this advice by formally creating an "MIS Mission/Vision" statement. It is listed here:

Information at Your Fingertips

- easy access to Information
- access to Information at any time
- access to Information from anywhere
- satisfy the customer
 - determine the needs
 - respond in timely fashion

communicate status reports
follow-up

I have also created an "MIS Leadership Role" statement, and it is noted here:

Where MIS leads:

Understanding Information Technology
Managing Corporate Information Technology
Satisfying the Customer
Developing Unity and Positive Relationships with Users & Business Units
Proactive in Solving Business Issues
Educating our Customers
Leading MIS Corporate Solutions

Where MIS is Led:

Corporate Strategic Plans
Corporate Business Priorities

Not only have these statements assisted my department in raising the standard of excellence within our company, it keeps us focused on the strategic aims of the company. In fact as a result, MIS has establish two key processes: one, every 3-4 months I meet with Wood-Mizer's Executive team to discuss the priorities and strategic projects that MIS should be focusing on, and, two, I survey our internal customer base regarding MIS's customer service rating (see Appendix 1).

Anyone who attempts to complete a mission, vision, and leadership statement must take into consideration a few items: one, don't frame it until you have made significant inroads to implementing it; two, you must communicate it at all times (especially "eyeball to eyeball"); and, three, don't develop it from a committee, you are the leader and it must be your vision, your mission, your leadership statement.

Hiring

Hiring in itself is not that difficult. Hiring great people is a very difficult. Without getting into the theory of personnel selection, I will say this: to accomplish your vision for your department, you have to have good people. If you don't hire them, then, you need to develop them (the next section discusses the development process).

To hire good to great people, I suggest you complete the following regarding the position you are hiring for. It should be done before the interviewing process begins:

Develop a clear job description.
Develop performance expectations.
Develop individual measurements.

Create specific interviewing question (see Appendix 2).

During interview take notes and rate the individual in each area directly after the interview for later comparison to other interviewees.

As I have completed this process, I have focused on integrity, customer service, teachability, technical skills, and tenacity/initiative. Other areas are discussed (leadership, listening, career ambition) but I emphasize these five because I believe I am hiring someone for the long haul and the areas I noted are the keys for successful employment.

Staff Continuous Improvement

Whether you have hired or inherited your current staff, there always needs to be ongoing personnel development. Since people are unique they are motivated by different things, so a wise supervisor will adapt their approaches for motivation. For example a hard working individual who hates interruptions is much more likely to be motivated by giving him freedom to "take a day off" and hide away to get some extra work done versus the customer service orientated person who would be more motivated by maintaining the help desk for an afternoon to get away from the project work.

To accomplish the continuous improvement, I meet continually with my staff members and have made specific performance expectations for them to attain to. I have developed a 4 quadrant chart (see Appendix 3) with Leadership, Customer Service, Interpersonal, and Technical skills being the four areas of evaluation. I conduct annual reviews and then coach them during the rest of the year in the areas we have agreed to work on.

For example, one of my Systems Analysts understands that for him to receive a pay increase he must drastically improve in the area of personal leadership. Since our review last October, we have had numerous coaching sessions regarding situations in which he handled well as well as poorly. As a result he is must less involved in gossip and slander and much more of a team player. He also has the courage to say "no" to users when

appropriate (these were areas for improvement that we discussed in our annual review). For comparison purposes he had consistently been perceived as the black sheep of the MIS department, but now his reputation is turning more positive.

MIS & Business Unit Measurements

The MIS and Business unit measurements reflect another form of accountability that is put in the control of the responsible party. The MIS measurements revolve around the infrastructure of running servers, corporate databases, PCs, networks, and

Telecommunications equipment. In fact several articles continue to press upon me the incredible importance and value of MIS maintaining the corporate information technology infrastructure. In the 2/12/96 Information Week article entitled "Numbering Success", the number one item business units targeted for MIS is "the reliability of the installed computer systems."

In another article published by CIO entitled "Manager's Tolerance for Server Downtime", the following statistics were stated. The downtime length is the time a server was down for maintenance or system problems; the percent is the percent of managers which agreed with the "downtime length". For example, 19% of the managers surveyed said that a server being down for up to an hour is acceptable.

<u>Percent</u>	<u>Downtime Length</u>
35%	Any interruption is a significant problem
19%	Up to an hour
17%	Up to a day
13%	Up to 30 minutes
9%	Up to 15 minutes
5%	Half a day
2%	Up to 5 minutes

Another summary of this data looks like this:

<u>Percent</u>	<u>Downtime Length</u>
77%	Less than or equal to an hour
23%	Greater than an hour

What does this data tell us as MIS professionals? I make three observations from this data:

3 out of every 4 managers tolerate less than 1 hour of downtime.

Quality is crucial to effective system design, development, and integration. With quality comes less downtime. MIS systems should run and run and run.

Managers in particular are not very tolerant of downtime. There are probably many reasons why, but I suggest two reasons: one, they don't like to be interrupted or hinder personally during the day in accomplishing their work, and, two, they don't like their staffs' productivity being hindered, especially when it is due to circumstances out of their control.

In reference to the vital importance of internal systems uptime, our MIS department tracks the downtime of every server (both software and hardware), network line, database system, phone system, and workstation to track how well we are doing. This data is trended and used to determine how are we doing and how can we get better.

One example. We hired a systems analyst to support our internal phone system last fall. After a few months of tracking the phone system performance, he noticed an interesting and random trend of downtime on Saturdays. He didn't know what the problem was, but he narrowed it down to one of two things. He reconfigured the system so neither of these items could occur, and the phone system has not had a problem since.

As for the business unit measurements, I manage my MIS department as a consulting company in that all of our time is billed out. It is charged out based on completing requests via a Notes database system. The business units are then held accountable for my transferred charges which include individual labor, computer, and phone charges which are detailed into smaller categories like workstations, SPC software, and T1 lines. The business unit managers are then held accountable to the CFO and President regarding these charges.

Teamwork

Teamwork is probably the most important issue when you refer to having fun at work. Relationships and the people you work with are very important and should lead to a more enjoyable work environment resulting in higher productivity. Remember people don't just come to work for money (they come for a variety of other reasons like being appreciated for their work, being included on the new news, and job security).

To nurture an environment of teamwork, I include them in the decisions affecting the MIS department, especially decisions which directly affect them as individuals. I eat lunch with them and play cards at lunch. I also make sure they have an "open door" to talk about work and other issues that might be affecting them. Many might not agree with this approach, but I share this quote from the Seven Habits material by Dr. Steven Covey for them to think about:

"You simply can't think efficiency with people. You think effectiveness with people and efficiency with things. I've tried to be "efficient" with a disagreeing or disagreeable person and it simply doesn't work. I've tried to give ten minutes of "quality time" to a child or an employee to solve a problem, only to discover such "efficiency" creates new problems and seldom resolves the deepest concern."

To keep unity with business unit managers, MIS has had to be very proactive. If there are issues which have caused disunity between MIS and another business unit, I have taken the initiative to build a synergized relationship (this is very difficult at times, but the long-term benefits far outweigh the short term difficulties). The more united MIS is with the rest of the company, the more effective MIS will be as well as the rest of the company.

For example, I spent about 6 months working through some huge problems with our R&D department. As difficult as it was (and believe me it got very difficult), we worked through our difficulties and now have a great working relationship. In fact I have one of my staff members working in their area part-time which has allowed them to gain back over 20 hours of a Senior Electrical engineer's time, plus, my guy is much better in terms of service and following up on their MIS type requests.

Conclusion

There will always be days of "frenziness", but if your typical day is characterized by a hectic and harassed pace, it is time you did some things different. With integrity and fortitude, you must create a more enjoyable "typical day". Creating and implementing a clear vision for your department, hiring and developing a team orientated staff who serves the customer by being faithful and providing high quality systems, and uniting with other business areas are all keys to creating a "fun" atmosphere where you work. Start now! Don't wait. It is well worth all the energy and struggles it might take to create this type of environment.

Appendix 1

MIS Support Survey

June 1996

*** Fill out & place in Lincoln Brill's mailbox or respond via electronic mail by 6/6//96 ***

Please circle the number in the left column below that reflects how **IMPORTANT** each of the following factors are to you. Then circle the number in the right column that best reflects your **SATISFACTION** with each factor.

<u>MIS Function</u>	<u>IMPORTANT</u>										<u>SATISFACTION</u>									
	Not					Extremely					Not					Extremely				
	At All					Important					At All					Satisfied				
MIS Skill Level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
PC Support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Phone Support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Symix Support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Brock Support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Providing Computer Training	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Determining Your Needs Accurately	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Making a Commitment to Your Success	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Responding in Timely Fashion	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Providing Resources to Solve Your Problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Communicating Requests/Project Status Information	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completing Requests/Projects in a Timely Fashion	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Completing Requests/Projects that Meet Your Needs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Establishing Positive and Cordial Work Relationships	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
_____	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
_____	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
_____	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
OVERALL Customer Satisfaction Rating											1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Comments*:

* if any item has a satisfaction rating less than 6, please make sure to leave specific practical steps that the MIS department can implement to improve the service to you, our customers.

Appendix 2

Interview Questions for MIS Position

Candidate:

As of 3/8/95, here are the priority on topics for interview questions:

1. Integrity
2. Teachability/Practical learning
3. Customer Service/Technical Translation/Oral Fact Finding
4. Tenacity/Job Motivation/Initiative/Independence/Energy/Self Development
5. Technical/Analysis
6. Listening
7. Judgment/Decision Making
8. Planning/Organizing/Self-organizing
9. Leadership
10. Career Ambition

To use this guide, add and take away for the questions as needed.

Integrity:

Everyone has to bend or break the rules sometimes, can you give me some examples of when you have had to do this?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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In order to make out in the world, people have to bend a little bit. What is the farthest you have had to bend your standards in order to succeed?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Teachability/Practical Learning:

Can you give me some examples of skills, behaviors that you have learned during your professional career via direct feedback your supervisor, co-workers, or customers?

From supervisor? customers?

How about interpersonal skills?

Skill/Behaviour	action	result	from?
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Can you give me an example of something new you learned at your previous employment? How long did it take you and how difficult was it?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Customer Satisfaction/Technical Translation/Oral Fact Finding:

In your perspective, how would you define customer satisfaction?

Give specific examples of how you have exemplified this behavior?

Bad examples.

Situation/Task (their role) Their Action Results

Have you ever had to write technical material for lay people? Can you give me an example?

Situation/Task (their role) Their Action Results

Walk me through a situation in which you had to get information by asking a lot of questions of a number of people. What were their reactions to the questions? When did you have to go back and rephrase your questions?

Situation/Task (their role) Their Action Results

Tenacity/Job Motivation/Initiative/Independence/Energy/Self Development:

What are some big obstacles you had to overcome to get where you are today? How did you overcome them?

Situation/Task (their role) Their Action Results

What gave you the greatest feelings of achievement in your jobs/education?

What have you like least about your jobs/education?

Discuss issues on resume & note them here:

Give me some examples of your doing more than required in your jobs?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Have you ever submitted good ideas to your superior and he/she did not take action on them? What did you do?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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How many hours a week do you normally work?

In your job experiences, describe the most tiring duties or circumstances in which you were involved?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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What have you done in your job that isn't covered in your job description?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Describe an incident in which you disagreed with your superior. How was it settled?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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What skill development courses have you taken recently to improve your performance?

Why did you decide to take them?

Course (their role)	Their Action	Results
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How do you keep informed about important changes in your field?

Info Method (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Professional/Technical Interest:

How do you keep informed on what's going on in the field of information technology?

Means (their role)	Their Action	Results
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What important changes are taking place in the field of databases, PCs, networks, etc.?

Trend	Why?
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Give me specific examples of your involvement with PC databases, Notes, 4GL/Progress/Symix, UNIX, and C-programming?

Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Have you found any ways to make your job easier or more rewarding?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Give me some examples of the most complex assignments/projects/etc. you have had. What was your role? How did it work out?

Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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What function of the software life cycle do you enjoy the most: design, development, testing, documentation and why? Which one do you enjoy the least?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Have you ever recognized a problem before your boss or others in the organization? Explain.

Problem (their role)	Their Action	Results
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What problems are you currently working on that came as a surprise to you?

Surprise (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Listening:

Give me some examples from your past jobs when you had to rely on information given to you orally to get the job done. Did you have any problems?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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We've all had occasions when we misinterpreted something that someone told us, like a due date, complicated instructions, etc. Give me some examples of when this happened to you and why you think it happened.

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Judgment/Decision making:

What were the toughest decisions you had to make during your professional life?

Decision (their role)	Their Action	Results
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How have you gone about making important decisions affecting your career?

Decision (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Planning/Organization:

How often is your time schedule upset by unforeseen circumstances? What do you do then? Give me a recent example?

Situation (their role)	Their Action	Results
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What kind of project planning and administration have you done?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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How do you schedule your time and set priorities?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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What is your procedure for keeping track of matters requiring your attention?

Method (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Leadership:

Tell me about some of the toughest groups you have had to get cooperation from. Did you have any formal authority? What did you do?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Tell me about a new policy or new idea you recently implemented which was considerably different from the standard procedure. What approach did you take to get the affected parties to go along with it?

Situation/Task (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Career Ambition:

What are your career goals in the next five years?

What have you done to accomplish them?

What would be your normal career path to reach that goal?

Goal (their role)	Their Action	Results
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Evaluation Form:

Rating Scale:

Rating	Description
5.00	Much more than acceptable (significantly above criteria required for successful performance)
4.00	More than acceptable (generally exceeds criteria relative to quality and quantity of behavior required)
3.00	Acceptable (meets criteria relative to quality and quantity of behavior required)
2.00	Less than acceptable (generally does not meet criteria relative to quality and quantity of behavior required)
1.00	Much less than acceptable (significantly below criteria required for successful performance)

Ratings:

Dimensions/Definitions	Comments on specific examples, evidence, and demonstrated activities which support the rating	Rating: 1-5
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Integrity
Teachability
Customer Service
Tenacity
Technical Ability
Listening
Judgment/Decision Making
Planning/Organization
Leadership
Career Ambition
Total

Appendix 3

MIS Personnel Development

(10/10/95)

With the goal of helping each MIS team member becoming as successful as possible, I have created a MIS Personnel Development Plan. This is a tool for me to better coach and develop the MIS staff members as well keep me aware of their performance. This process should result in me more effectively rewarding the staff members based on their performance and value to Wood-Mizer.

Beginning With the End in Mind

Here are my goals for each MIS staff member:

- To understand their professional desires and goals and help them develop a plan to attain them.

- To clarify Wood-Mizer's compensation policy (e.g., base pay versus profit sharing).

- To develop performance expectations based on MIS's Strategic goals (which are based on Wood-Mizer's Corporate Strategic goals).

- To develop individual measurements based on Wood-Mizer's Strategic plan.

Putting First Things First

To achieve the above goals, the following items need to be completed:

- Wood-Mizer Corporate Strategic goals

- MIS Strategic goals

- MIS Staff member meetings

The MIS Staff member meetings will require three meetings: one, initial pre-discussion about how the development planning will be completed, two, meet to discuss specifics regarding member's performance based on the Wood-Mizer's performance evaluation & my Performance Expectations Planning Guide, and, three, meet regarding final agreements on performance expectations and measurements. At the end of the third meeting, the team member should have clear, written, and agreed upon expectations and measurements which impact Wood-Mizer's Corporate Strategic goals.

Performance Expectations Planning Guide

Technical Skills

- programming
- software/hardware knowledge
- system integration
- documentation
- training
- quality
- productivity
- capacity & ability to learn
- problem solving
- resourceful
- innovative

Leadership Skills (Individual & Group)

- project management
- planning & organization
- initiative/proactive
- faithfulness
- business redesign
- leading meetings (informal & formal)
- supervision
- dependable
- judgment
- integrity
- tenacious
- learner/teachable

Customer Service Skills

- listening
- determine needs
- timely response
- communicate status reports
- follow-up
- positive relationships
- approachability

Interpersonal Skills

- listening
- win-win attitude
- seeking to understand
- team player
- communication
- verbiage
- courage vs. consideration
- flexible

The four skill areas listed above represent the core of an effective MIS team. Each member may bring more maturity and experience from an individual area, but from an individual basis, a member needs to strive towards excellence in each area to attain to a higher level of responsibility and productivity at Wood-Mizer. As a MIS staff member reaches the next level, they are more likely to receive the financial rewards which come with that level of performance.

The above areas require each MIS member to continuously improve, not only in the technical area, but also in the interpersonal, customer service, and leadership areas of their job function. As those skills are developed and demonstrated over a period of time, the appropriate skill level will be compensated, minimally with profit sharing, and possibly with a base pay increase.

Performance Expectations & Measurements will be developed from these key skill areas and line up directly with the Corporate Strategic objectives.

Performance Expecations

Name:

Position:

Supervisor:

Date:

Technical

Strengths:

Improvement Areas:

Interpersonal

Strengths:

Improvement Areas:

Customer Service

Strengths:

Improvement Areas:

Leadership

Strengths:

Improvement Areas:

Performance Expectations:

Expectation	Corporate Strategic Goal	Comments
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Individual Measurements

Measurement	Corporate Strategic Goal	Comments
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