

Not Just Play Acting

By **Chris Penttila**

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When Frank Chisholm wants to strategize with his employees, they take on different roles. Chisholm, founder and CEO of enterprise software firm AptSoft, Burlington, Mass., becomes the customer. The employee sells him on AptSoft's solution. The role reversal lets Chisholm see how employees interact with customers.

Chisholm brings role playing into department meetings a few times a month, and he thinks it's helping the bottom line. "We try to replicate the entire [client] situation," he said. "Our execution is so much better with role playing."

Many employers could be doing more role playing with their employees, said **J. Scott Armstrong**, a professor and forecasting expert at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business.

"There's been sporadic use of [role playing] by business," Armstrong said. "I don't think [companies] know about it."

But role playing, or "simulated interactions," as Armstrong calls it, has several advantages for growing IT businesses. First, it can tell you how employees handle various situations, ranging from sales calls and damage control to customer service and support, while also helping you forecast the outcome. Second, role playing comes in handy during mergers, management shake-ups and other major changes that can muddy a company's strategy. In fact, the more that's riding on the line, the more important role playing becomes.

"Put it on your agenda whenever you run into large negotiations or conflicts with companies you're working with," Armstrong said.

Chisholm discovered that technology workers tend to strategize differently from other employees. For example, when a customer asks if a product can perform specialized functions, IT employees might be inclined to simply answer no. Chisholm uses role playing to help them figure out what the customer is trying to do, instead of focusing on what the product can't do.

"Salespeople live in a gray world, and technical people live in a black-and-white world," Chisholm said. "If their first inclination is to say, 'No,' I want them to ask, 'Why?' We're role-playing that constantly."

To get started in role playing, prepare a one-page summary of an impending situation, such as a sales call or client conflict, and recruit employees to portray the key players. Have the employees review the summary and then practice a simulated situation several times so everyone works out the bugs in their approach (go online to www.kestengreen.com and www.jscottarmstrong.com for help with role-playing strategy).

Role playing could make the difference between a deal and deal-breaker. Said Chisholm: "Assuming the execution [of a client interaction] is what you want it to be is a very risky thing to do."

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