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Time to Prune Your Grapevines

*Free up time and energy
for activities that will bear fruit*

By: Ward Kever, CTG HealthCare Solutions Executive Director of Executive Services

At the risk of being politically incorrect, I wish you merry Christmas, happy Chanukah, and a prosperous new year.

As we approach year-end, many of us will take a vacation and spend additional time during the holiday season with our family and friends. Perhaps some of us will take a vacation to an exotic island with warm water and lots of sunshine. But for most of us, we will stay on the job and keep the operation moving forward, albeit at a slower pace, for a week or two. However you plan to spend this holiday season, I have a suggestion for you. It deals with grapevines.

First, a Small Botany Lesson

Grapevines are interesting plants. Once they start growing in the spring, grapevines grow very fast. Some of the slower-growing branches bear fruit, while the more rapidly growing branches, called 'runners,' do not. Although runners look healthy, with the same large green leaves as the fruit-bearing branches, they don't contribute to the main purpose of a grapevine—growing grapes.

Over the course of the growing season, a rather modest plant with only four or five main branches can quickly become mostly runners and produce very few grapes. During the winter months, before the next growing season begins, the grapevine is pruned back to its four or five basic fruit-bearing branches, and the process is repeated.

During pruning, it is important to eliminate all the runners or they will keep growing when spring arrives. This means it's critical not to mistake a runner for a fruit-bearing branch, as it will never bear fruit—just continue to grow and consume the plant's energy and resources. And the fruit-bearing branches will be overwhelmed.

There's a wonderful object lesson for you to consider in this example of grapevines—especially at the end of the year. I urge you to take some time during this holiday season, whether on vacation or still at work, to assess your own grapevine of activities:

- How do you spend your time?
- Which activities bear fruit?
- Which activities spring up and grow rapidly, but have no significant value?



CIOs cannot do everything. Focus on what delivers the most robust harvest for your IT organization and your enterprise. The upcoming year will require us to vigorously prioritize our time and energy as well as our resources and money.

But What Should I Prune?

During the year, we can create runners without even trying. In fact, it's easy to get involved in activities that we may not have fully understood in the beginning. We get involved in activities or meetings that do not contribute to core goals. In many instances, the process can take on a life of its own without regard to a timely conclusion. Or worse yet, we don't set a goal or due date, we just proceed. It's time to prune your grapevine of activities!

But first, it's important to know where you spend your time, i.e. to identify all of your branches.

- One approach is to keep a log of your activities for a few days or weeks. Then analyze this list to identify which activities are bearing fruit and which are runners that keep growing but are not productive.
- Another approach is to sit down with your administrative assistant and get his or her input—which may be more insightful than your own. Solicit a few insights for corrective pruning and focusing on the basic fruit-bearing branches.

Put on the Gardening Gloves

Once you have a good handle on where you spend your time and what activities are bearing real fruit, wield the shears effectively to prepare for a more productive new year.

- **Identify activities that may have merit but don't necessarily require your attention.** Can they be delegated to your assistant or management team? The benefit of this is that you conserve your precious time and provide your subordinates opportunity for growth.
- **Identify activities that you need to just (graciously) stop participating in.** Many initiatives are worthwhile, but all must be put into the context of the larger picture. CIOs cannot do everything. Focus on what delivers the most robust harvest for your IT organization and your enterprise. The upcoming year will require us to vigorously prioritize our time and energy as well as our resources and money. No doubt you'll be asked to be more effective and cost efficient in 2009, if you haven't been asked already. So why not start now?

What Are the Benefits?

Everyone has initiatives that would really pay off but require some up-front investment of your personal time and leadership to get started. 'Out of the box' ideas often need your personal attention to break through traditional barriers of thinking. These activities, which have the potential to be significantly fruitful, are often put off because there's just never enough time. Prune some of your time-consuming runners to free up the time and energy you need to really make a difference.



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As you're identifying the fruit-bearing branches in your life, don't forget about the ones that involve your family. It's easy to let these get overrun by long workdays and ever-growing professional activities and commitments. One of the most challenging aspects of working in an executive position and being committed to the success of your organization and IT staff is not doing so at the expense of your family. Finding an optimal balance is a continuous challenge, so whenever possible, prune unnecessary professional runners that impinge on quality family time.

Regular Maintenance Required

In keeping with the grapevine analogy, remember that pruning is an annual event. Otherwise the runners will just keep growing and consume the vine, i.e. your career. You can also be more rigorous throughout the year in your scrutiny of what to take on, what to delegate, and when to say 'no.' Don't let yourself be sucked into activities that won't bear fruit.

During this holiday season, whatever your plans, I urge you to give some careful consideration to how you spend your time. Which activities are meaningful and add value to your role as CIO? Which are important to your family life? Position yourself to focus on what is truly important to your organization, your career, and your family life. I can attest from personal experience that it's an exercise worthy of your time and attention.

Have a blessed holiday!