

RTE means drive faster with an eye on the clock

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DAVID WILSON

Sit back and listen to a freeware MP3 which pipes the sound of rain and waves, then take a hit of your favourite sedative. Otherwise, especially if you are already suffering from stress and duress, you may find that the jargon on trial this week triggers palpitations.

The jargon in question is the "just-in-time" or real-time enterprise (RTE). It probably merits a moment of your attention because, well, it is the future, according to the esteemed crystal ball-gazing enterprise Gartner.

It predicts that by 2007 the leaders in every business discipline "will have achieved leadership or fortified their lead through real-time capabilities".

Sam Sliman, a bigwig at the tech consultancy Optimal Solutions, explained how the hot trend arose. Traditionally, businesses have limped along, performing a laborious routine: "plan [figure out what you're going to do, how much you will spend, and so on], execute [do it and spend the money], review [track plan versus actual performance] and optimise [make adjustments before starting the cycle over again]".

Before computers emerged, it took many man hours (and a high boredom threshold) to produce the information needed for this process. As a result, it could only occur about once a year.

Mr Sliman said RTE practice could make a firm instantly responsive to changes in the business climate.

He portrayed RTE as the son of ERP (enterprise resource planning): the management system which brings to mind the tip given by the American backwoods philosopher Henry Thoreau: "Simplify, simplify".

In theory, ERP integrates all facets of a business from manufacturing to marketing. RTE also poses as a total solution. Only in its case the refrain is: "Accelerate, accelerate".

Mr Sliman said RTE eliminated the inefficiencies which dragged down a business.

The question is how. The program which RTE cheerleaders invariably recommend is the digital

dashboard. Take the model offered by NetSuite, a private company which pitches itself as "committed to helping entrepreneurs achieve their dreams".

The NetSuite dashboard purports to let companies manage all their business processes in real-time. That means it displays information concerning all aspects of business, ranging from accounting to sales force automation.

The information supposedly updates instantly and so, in theory, you continually stay abreast of events. If that is true and this flickering embodiment of urgency really does represent such a welcome prospect, you might assume the Web would be awash with alternative instant gratification business software. In fact, aside from the odd accountancy tool, hardly any is in evidence.

This suggests that RTE is just another vapid and crass office trend designed to make drones, grunts and slaves sweat harder. Or maybe the average business really is living in the dark, which means a mere panel alone can illuminate and, thus, invigorate its performance.

NetSuite chief executive Zach Nelson said: "Most CEOs know more about the details of Ben and JLo's life than they do about their daily business metrics. Our new dashboards provide a `My Yahoo!' like view into every aspect of a business - sales, marketing, distribution and finance."

Todd Walter, a chief technology officer at data warehousing firm Teradata, insisted that RTE was the only way ahead. "If I were the CIO of a company that hasn't begun to make the leap to a real-time enterprise paradigm, I'd be scared to death right now," he said.

The message is clear: speed up or disappear. Let us hope that this "now economy" emphasis on immediacy is able to produce more than just added stress and frustration. The cautionary saying: "The faster I go, the behinder I get" comes to mind.