

Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor – a partnership of vision and reality

Anyone who has travelled in the north of England might well have visited Castle Howard in Yorkshire, one of the most impressive historic houses in the country. When it was constructed in the early years of the eighteenth century, it broke new ground in architectural design, a spectacle of baroque magnificence that included a huge masonry dome and external facades bristling with detailed decoration.

The house was commissioned by the 3rd Earl of Carlisle, who envisaged a spectacular monument that would reflect his wealth and power and distinguish his family from England's other leading aristocrats. He needed an architect with imagination. Preconceived designs would not suffice: Castle Howard needed to be a true differentiator.

Carlisle initially approached William Talman, a logical decision as he was the leading architect of the day. Talman duly came up with some plans for the new house, but Carlisle rejected them. They were simply not impressive enough. A little despondent, the Earl turned to his friend John Vanbrugh, a playwright and a fellow member of the Kit Kat Club, a well-known gentlemen's establishment in the heart of London. It was here that Vanbrugh somehow persuaded Carlisle that he should be allowed to design the new house, despite the fact that he had never designed anything in his life other than some lavish sets for his drama productions.

We don't know why Carlisle decided to let Vanbrugh loose on such a huge project. Clearly the two friends shared a vision and, despite his inexperience, the dramatist knew how to turn his patron's dream into reality in a way that more established architects couldn't. One thing we do know about Vanbrugh, though, is that he immediately brought Nicholas Hawksmoor on board. Hawksmoor had been Clerk of Works to Sir Christopher Wren, who rebuilt most of London following the Great Fire, so there was nobody better qualified to assist in the practical aspects of design and construction. What Hawksmoor didn't know about building regulations, materials and techniques just wasn't worth knowing.

The rest, as they say, is history. Vanbrugh proved to be a fine architect and, in partnership with Hawksmoor, subsequently went on to even more famous projects such as Blenheim Palace.

I love this story, and I think we have a lot to learn from it in the IT industry. At a time when businesses increasingly rely on IT innovation to differentiate themselves from their competitors, there is no place for the Talmans who serve up 'more of the same', however successful that recipe has been in the past. The most successful CIOs are those who can see the complete picture and understand what the business's IT systems need to achieve, even if, like Vanbrugh, these inspired individuals lack the technical knowledge to put the pieces together.

Every Vanbrugh needs a Hawksmoor, a data center manager who can work with that vision and ensure that the necessary power, resources, data management capability, security and system scalability are available to make it all happen. I have a feeling that Hawksmoor knew all about best practices and service management; if Sarbanes-Oxley had been around at the time, Hawksmoor would have been quick to read the small print

and make sure that his designs were fully compliant. He was a practical implementor and a good communicator. However fanciful or impractical the grand plan seemed to be, he found a way to make it happen.

Today's data centers are being pulled in many directions; while the business needs more innovation and imagination to grow and prosper, regulation demands a higher degree of conformance and tighter governance. In such an environment, it is all too easy for progress to be stifled by conflicting priorities or unclear objectives. The successful companies are those that find a way for visionary IT architects and practical data center managers to work together, benefiting from the breadth of one another's expertise rather than battling to make their respective points of view heard. Research suggests, though, that this is rarely achieved, owing to poor communication and inflexible relationships between the business, the IT planners, and operational staff. IT departments continue to suffer from numerous internal conflicts, with technical specialists claiming that architects make unreasonable demands, and corporate strategists arguing that the data center is too inflexible.

Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor, playwright and builder, had very little in common. Even at the time, they would have appeared to be a most unlikely partnership. Their phenomenal success, it seems, was due to a complete respect for the other's area of expertise, and their ability to work together without suspicion or conflict of interests. Let's hope that, from time to time, history repeats itself.