Why Large Trunked Radio Systems Are Like Mainframe Computers

Do you remember how mainframe computers were managed in the early 1980's? These water-cooled behemoths were the bane of county and large city government. Centralized IT departments ruled the mainframe with iron fists, focusing more on keeping the users expectations low than truly delivering good service to the city and county departments they served. Most mainframe-centric government IT departments were dysfunctional organizations known for inefficient operation, habitual cost overruns, and a rigid, inflexible way of doing business that angered their customers. The user departments were captive customers with no recourse but to rely on the centrally managed mainframe computer, despite exorbitant costs, chronic cost overruns and staggering inefficiencies.

Mini and micro computers changed the dynamics of information management by empowering department executives to economically control their own information management destiny and break loose from the stranglehold of the bureaucrats who managed the centralized mainframe computer. Distributed (decentralized) computing became the norm, and information management efficiency skyrocketed. The new technology allowed the business units that directly benefit from the systems to prudently and efficiently control their own destiny, without the overhead of the inefficient IT department. Systems could be enhanced, modified and replaced without the need to consider unrelated business units, or deal with the IT department bureaucracy.

I see many large, centralized radio systems being constructed today that are analogous to the mainframe computers of the 1980's. Some systems are managed by IT departments that are handicapped by the bureaucracy of their own weight. Their only customers are captive internal customers who have no alternative but to use the highly centralized radio system. Management and administration costs are unreasonably high, change and enhancement is slow because of multiple levels of bureaucracy, and the end users are dissatisfied with the service.

Had large centralized radio systems been invented before decentralized alternatives, we would be sitting around here, right now in 2008, dismantling our old, less glamorous monolithic mainframe radio systems and replacing them with decentralized, distributed systems that could be procured and administered directly by the business units that use them. Decentralized, non-trunked radio systems offer numerous technical and business advantages over highly centralized "mainframe" radio systems.

By Daryl Jones (http://blog.tcomeng.com)   January 2008

I recommend that every agency executive who may be considering a large trunked radio system seriously consider the business structure and recurring costs for long-term management of the system. Do you want to be a captive customer of an IT department that manages the mainframe, or do you want to retain control of costs and performance of your mission-critical business systems?