

## Out of the Shadows

in Issue 001

### Rogue IT departments are on the rise, but they are the symptom of a larger problem: the ego of old guard IT leaders. Claudé Zamboni offers a new approach that meets customers on their terms.

By Matt Alderton



**Claudé Zamboni**  
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As the saying goes, if knowledge is power, then those with secrets are kings. Consider, for instance, America’s most famous secret society: Skull and Bones, an elite group whose secret rituals have made it the subject of infinite rumors, but also infinite influence.

As the Bonesmen would likely attest, the less people know about what you do, the more power they give you to do it. However, thanks to the Internet, social media, and mobile devices, it’s harder than ever to keep secrets. Which begs the question: are secret societies passé?

Claudé Zamboni thinks so. According to Zamboni, who serves as vice president of IT at **QSC Audio Products**—a manufacturer of commercial audio equipment for public facilities including movie theaters, concert venues, and stadiums—the democratization of technology means secret societies aren’t powerful, they’re peripheral. At least that’s how he feels about one secret society: the corporate IT department. If they don’t replace secrecy with transparency, and elitism with humility, IT departments won’t just lose their influence, he argues; they will also lose their relevance.

Though they’re not exactly Skull and Bones, IT departments have nonetheless spent the last several decades operating in the shadows. “In the eighties and nineties, IT was a ‘black box’ to many people,” says Zamboni, who began his IT career more than twenty years ago, when IT was still in adolescence. “There were huge buildings full of humming machines that no one was allowed to go into. It was an indistinguishable function. There was a cloak of darkness and secrecy around it.”

For a long time, the result was an inflated IT ego—what Zamboni calls “IT arrogance.” “IT used to be a very arrogant group because no one else understood their language,” he continues. “Now, however, IT has become commoditized. People today are brought up with PCs, Macs, smartphones, tablets, and so forth, so everybody understands at least some aspect of technology. Because of that, the veil of secrecy has been pulled off of IT. The man behind the curtain has been exposed.”

Unfortunately, many IT leaders still operate as if the veil were intact. When the departments they support have IT needs, they respond by asking them to submit a formal service request that gets placed in a queue to be addressed by the IT department at its leisure. “It’s sort of like a Dilbert comic strip, where IT are the devils behind a secret door, laughing and taking pleasure in your trying to get something done,” Zamboni says.

IT customers used to grin and bear the treatment. Now, because technology is so accessible, they no longer have to endure it and are increasingly circumventing IT departments in order to build their own IT functions consisting of tech-savvy employees and third-party vendors. “If they don’t feel camaraderie with IT, engineering, marketing, sales, and manufacturing departments can all go off and become their own IT department.”

Zamboni calls these ad-hoc IT departments “rogue” IT departments. The problem with them isn’t simply territorial; it’s also strategic. “All of a sudden you have a lot of disconnected IT information out there that doesn’t talk to each other, and it becomes very evident that the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing,” he explains. “Eventually, you begin to realize that it would be very, very beneficial if you had the ability to connect disparate systems and leverage what is learned in marketing, for instance, in manufacturing, or in engineering. That’s what IT is supposed to do. IT gives you information, and information is power—but not if you only have information in a vacuum.”

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When Zamboni joined QSC in 2012, the company had its fair share of rogue IT departments. At the outset, his mission was to reclaim the IT function from his IT customers. “We had to understand how we could assist the business, and how we could become a better partner,” he says. “If not, we would go the way of the dinosaurs.”

Extinction wasn’t an option. So, Zamboni initiated a shift in the way his IT department worked. “We had to become much more humble,” he says. “Before it was, ‘Hey, you don’t know what you’re doing; let us do it.’ Now it’s, ‘What do you, the customer, need, and how can we assist you?’ We had to build confidence within the organization that IT is there to make our colleagues’ lives easier so they can concentrate on engineering, designing, marketing, selling, and shipping our products.”

Zamboni had to tear down walls and, in their place, build bridges. He started by creating a common language and shared tools. Replacing the disparate systems adopted by rogue IT departments with company-wide standards demonstrated the value of having a single, centralized IT department providing services across the organization.

Equally important was executive buy-in. “You have to have a seat at the table,” Zamboni says. “I want to be on the executive team so I can meet with all our senior leaders—including the CEO—and make sure they understand our IT strategy. Because if they don’t, you’re still going to have disparities and power struggles where everyone’s communicating within their group, but not across the organization.”

How one speaks to executives is just as critical as having the opportunity to do so, according to Zamboni, who stresses the importance of effective communication. “You can’t be a propeller head,” he says. “What I mean by that is: You can’t go in talking about bits and bytes. You have to speak to your IT customers in their language.”

That language uses layman’s terms, and the conversation is benefits-focused. For example, if an IT leader wants to implement a videoconferencing platform, he or she might ask fellow senior leaders whether on-demand conversations with customers and employees in remote locations, delivered at the click of a mouse, would be beneficial. “If you can get them to say yes, then you’re in,” Zamboni says. “Human beings always want to know, ‘What’s in it for me?’ If you can demonstrate how you’re going to make their life easier, they’re going to embrace you in their business.”

IT might have had more control when it functioned like a secret society, but now that the secret’s out, it has something better to offer: value. At QSC, that value has translated into cost savings, productivity gains, and IT innovation, all of which benefit the broader business—so much so that an internal survey of QSC employees ranks IT as the company’s top department for customer satisfaction.

“In the past, IT always had a very low score,” explains Zamboni, who says IT customers consistently chided IT for being hard to work with and slow to deliver benefits. “Now, IT customers are more satisfied than customers of any other group.” At QSC Audio, IT isn’t rogue; it’s relevant. And as Zamboni says, “Once you have relevance, you have it all.”

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