



Net-Centric Virtuosity

If you traveled through the L'Enfant Plaza Metrorail Station in Washington D.C, on January 12, 2007 between 7:51 and 8:32 a.m., you may – or may not – have witnessed a rare treat. A street musician – not an ordinary musician – Joshua Bell; recognized as the nation's best classical musician. He stood next to a garbage can in jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt and a Nat's baseball cap and performed six pre-eminent classical pieces on a \$3 million violin handcrafted in 1713 by Antonio Stradivari.

What many pay thousands of dollars to hear was free. *The Washington Post* arranged the performance as an experiment on context, perception, and priorities.

In 43 minutes, 1,097 people passed by the artist. Seven stopped for at least a minute, 27 gave money totaling \$32.17, and 1,070 dashed by in oblivion. Gene Weingarten covered the event in a copious *Washington Post* article [1] including video clips on the *Post's* Web site [2].

The scene conjures up Churchill's observation, "Men occasionally stumble on the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened."

L'Enfant Plaza's coffee-toting, iPod-packing, serenity-scorning, deadline-chasing commuters resemble Net-centric's cell phone-toting, PowerPoint-packing, stovepipe-scorning, technology-chasing bureaucrats. Chances are they are one in the same: both justifiably busy, yet void of context, perspective, and priority. Still, within the crowds we find insight.

On his daily commute from Reston, John David Mortensen got off the escalator, located the violinist, checked the time, settled against a wall, and listened for three minutes.

"Whatever it was," he said, "it made me feel peace."

For the first time in his life, sensing something special, Mortensen gave money to a street musician. Net-centric stakeholders can learn from him. Amid the hustle, hype, and technical jargon take time to listen, dig below the surface, and confirm results before spending your money.

Sheron Parker and her son, Evan, walked past Joshua.

"There was a musician," Parker said, "and my son was intrigued. He wanted to pull over and listen, but I was rushed for time."

Stepping between her son and the musician, she exited. In fact, Weingarten reports, "Every single time a child walked past the musician, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, a parent scooted the kid away."

Net-centric managers would be wise to listen and cultivate young engineers. Members of the first digital generation offer unsullied ears for technologies that work. Don't scoot them away.

A hundred feet away, J.T Tillman bought lottery tickets. He remembered every number he played but doesn't recall what the violinist played. When told he was one of the best musicians in the world, he laughed.

"Is he ever going to play around here again?"

Yes, J.T., but the price will be high to be within a hundred feet of Joshua Bell again. Despite what you hear on the trade show floor, there are no net-centric lotteries. Information

technology history teaches us that those who don't exploit technology will pay a high price to the next Apple, Microsoft, or Oracle.

Calvin Myint passed four feet away from Bell but heard nothing over his iPod's pulsating ear-buds. Fixation on a technology can limit our exposure to new possibilities, experiences and insights. Even horse blinders were state-of-the-art once.

George Tindley was bussing tables at a coffee shop across from the station. He listened to Bell's playing at the edge of the shop.

"You could tell in one second that this guy was good," Tindley said, "Most people, they play music; they don't feel it ... that man was feeling it."

Remember your net-centric client – the warrior. They need the right information at the right time, but more importantly, they need to feel the context of the information.

Bell, the virtuoso himself, was actually nervous.

"When you play for ticket-holders," Bell explains, "you are already validated. Here, what if they don't like me? What if they resent my presence...?"

Joshua's musical talent is best appreciated in the optimal conditions of the world's best concert halls. His music could have lost context within the chaos of the metro station. Likewise, information can lose context in the fog of war. Net-centric focus should be more than interoperability, ready access, and massive data. The tip of the net-centric spear is a warrior with optimal viewing conditions.

Louis Pasteur lamented, "In the field of observation, chance favors the prepared mind."

— Gary A. Petersen

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References

1. Weingarten, Gene. "Pearls Before Breakfast." *Washington Post* 8 Apr. 2007: W10.
2. *Washington Post* <www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721.html>.

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