



## I.T. group sees resurgence in members

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The newly reorganized western Michigan chapter of the **Information Technology Management Association** has turned the corner, according to Jerry Engle, president and founder of Grand Rapids-based **Computer Products and Resources Inc.**, who bought the group in December.

By last fall the 10-year-old professional association was drawing only seven or eight members to its monthly meetings, Engle said. But there was apparently much interest among I.T. managers in learning from national experts and peers the real stories on products, systems and best practices. When the reorganized association held its first formal meeting in March, 34 people attended.

A major value of ITMA for both information technology managers and their companies lies in the diversity of sources of information the association provides, Engle said.

"There are a lot of users groups around," Engle said. "They're application-specific

users groups, generally locked into one manufacturer. People need options.

"Sometimes you can recover money, but you can't recover time. People spending half a million to two million on a new system know there will be some bumps, but they want to know they're going to have a reasonable chance of success."

Members do not run *Consumer Reports* testing on systems or products, but they do talk about what worked and what they would have done differently. Peer discussions and guest experts help people plan better, he said.

When founder Bill Cassell decided last fall to close the statewide association after membership fell from 70 to eight, Engle bought the western Michigan component. He limited initial membership to I.T. managers in the area bounded by Lansing, Battle Creek, Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids.

ITMA was formed in the early 1990s by Cassell, a former executive with **Gartner Inc.** The Stamford, Conn.-based research organization specializing in technology was too costly for small businesses, Engle said, so Gartner formed



Engle: "People need options."

ITMA to reach them.

Engle chalked up the group's decline to a combination of the state's poor economy.

"The economy was bad, technology had been hammered and people scrutinized their spending," Engle said. "Also, ITMA wasn't being marketed aggressively because Bill lives on the east side of the state and didn't have access to west Michigan leaders."

Though vendors may give a presentation at a meeting, Engle said they must avoid making pitches.

"We're very careful about bringing vendors in who are just giving a sales pitch," he

said. "There has to be an educational component. Every meeting should be educational, a best-practices session."

Special interest subgroups were formed to deal with very specific topics. As an example, Engle said one of ITMA's sponsors, the law firm **Varnum, Riddering, Schmidt & Howlett** recently held a special interest discussion in their Grand Rapids office on software licensing.

In his role as CPR owner, Engle is a sponsor, too. Part of the association's protocol is a prohibition against competing sponsors. CPR is the infrastructure sponsor. Varnum Riddering is the law sponsor. **Crowe Chizek** is the consulting sponsor, and **Hendrick and Associates** fills the HVAC and computer flooring sponsorship.

In addition to the monthly meetings and special interest group discussions, Engle said the Leaders Club, composed of chief information officers and I.T. directors, meets three times each year with the eastern Michigan association.

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