



# TALKING BRINGS YOU UP TO DATE. DOING TAKES YOU INTO THE FUTURE.

Jeff Lucas, Chief Information Officer at The All England Lawn Tennis Club, talks about the challenges of preparing a small private members' club to host an annual, internationally renowned Grand Slam tennis tournament, balancing the blend of technology with tradition and the common challenges he shares with many other CIOs.





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**Q.** In your experience, how has the role of the CIO evolved?

**A.** When I joined the Club as CIO 12 years ago, I was very lucky that it was an executive position. At that time, many people heading up IT departments were still reporting to the Board through the Finance function. This was extremely inhibiting, because to make the most of the opportunities presented by technology, CIOs need to participate fully in the business. I certainly feel I spend around 50% of my time working on business strategy and I’ve become very involved in the running of The Championships.

**Q.** What are the particular challenges you face as CIO at the Club?

**A.** Despite staging a globally recognised sporting event, we are actually a very small organisation that has to scale up dramatically for the Wimbledon Championships. I joke that we only work for 2 weeks a year but, of course, that isn’t true. What is true is that from 1st August through to the 1st of June I have a small team that suddenly multiplies ten-fold as we go into The Championships. That’s probably the biggest difference between the Club and other organisations. It’s a challenge but I’ve got used to it. I have to trust people to take care of their own areas of responsibility because there is no way I can be involved in them all.

Everything has to work perfectly when play starts on the first Monday of The Championships so that’s always a tough time for us. It’s the culmination of a year’s work for us so, even if the weather isn’t kind and we get the almost inevitable rain, I can still raise a smile when the systems are ready to go as planned. On the plus side, there’s a huge buzz generated as the Club blossoms into the site it’s going to be for The Championships. You can’t fail to be excited by that.

Wimbledon is a very public event – the eyes of the world are literally on us for two weeks of the year so we take a cautious approach. We always try to prove the concept of new ideas and technology in a fairly small way

to begin with. WiFi is a good example. We installed an early version of it at our gates about six or seven years ago. We were fairly low key about what we did with it but it gave us the confidence when the next generation of WiFi came along to put it in Centre Court for our photographers. That really moved things forward because they can now transmit photos straight to their onsite agency offices for onward transmission and publication.

**Q.** Do you think there are common challenges that most CIOs face?

**A.** Certainly balancing the cost of new technology against the benefits is challenging. There is a cost justification but often it’s a long-term one. And, of course, the more technology you implement, the more it costs to run, maintain and keep up to date. I have to bear in mind that the surplus the Club makes goes to the Lawn Tennis Association and is used to coach young players of the future. We always have an eye on making sure we get value for money.

The fact that technology develops so quickly these days is another challenge. You have to be careful you don’t invest heavily only to see things move on. Getting the timing right is critical. When mobile phones first became popular, for example, we provided a facility that enabled people to download the latest information on players taking part in the Wimbledon Championships from our web site. It was lucky we didn’t spend a lot of money as people now use WAP enabled phones. That’s just a small example of how you could invest and end up getting caught out.

I think most CIOs will recognise the fact that IT as a function is rarely a direct revenue earner and, in some organisations, this can put you at a disadvantage. When people began subscribing to live video content on our web site I made a tongue in cheek remark that it is the first time that IT at the Club has actually made money rather than spending it. We facilitate other revenue generating areas and people here recognise that, but it is true we rarely earn money directly.

**Q.** How do you communicate the needs and abilities of IT to other C-level executives and line-of-business managers?

**A.** Frankly most of the organisation is not interested in understanding the technical details of what IT does. We've moved our servers onto a virtual platform recently, for example, but people simply want to know that our systems are working and delivering benefits. I need to communicate what I'm aiming to achieve for the business to the management team without alienating them with too much technical detail. I try to look at it from their point of view.

At the Club it's really been a case of building trust and that inevitably takes time. If I recommend we do something and it's successful my colleagues are more likely to accept what I say in the future.

**Q.** How do you create a business case for major new investments and then get them funded?

**A.** Again, it's important to present the benefits, especially as some investments such as upgrading the network or putting in IP telephony are building a platform for long-term benefits that may not be immediately obvious. The Club has always been cost conscious which makes it difficult to find huge savings when creating a business case. We are, however, always very aware that we are competing against the other tennis Grand Slams, where our aim is always to be the premier tennis event, as well as being judged alongside some of the world's top sporting events. We want to continue to be ranked alongside the very best and you have to invest to do that.

**Q.** How would you define innovation?

**A.** You can only claim something is innovative if it really adds value. To me innovation is putting in a new process, system or product that actually delivers real business benefits. It's no good implementing the latest technology if it doesn't actually move the business forward. I've always thought that technology should be unobtrusive, it should ease and enhance processes or events but it shouldn't drive them. That's certainly the approach we've taken at Wimbledon.

**Q.** In your opinion, what have been the greatest innovations at Wimbledon in recent years?

**A.** I don't think you can underestimate the contribution of the Internet. The introduction of our web site began a huge increase in the flow of information. It's enabled us to reach out to people all around the world. A big innovation last year, which we're building on this year, is the ability to watch live play on the Internet.

It's not just our spectators who benefit from the Internet though. We use it to ease the preparations for The Championships, which involve the input of teams from all over the world. Many people travel to Wimbledon for a large systems test before the event. Thanks to the Internet they can now run technical tests in advance of the main test from their home countries. Internet solutions have been of fantastic benefit to us in lots of different ways but it's easily overlooked as using it has become so commonplace.

Installing WiFi in Centre Court, as I described in an earlier example, caused a lot of excitement. The year it was installed a photograph of Andy Roddick took less than 5 minutes to reach The Sun's sports desk after being snapped.



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Another innovation, which doesn't sound very exciting but has revolutionised what we can offer, is an improvement to the way our internal systems interact.

As is often the case, these systems operated in silos. We now have a solution that enables them to share data, which means we can offer far better services and care to people who come to The Championships, whether as players, broadcasters, the media or spectators. This is a great example of how IT has helped support the business.

**Q.** What advances do you think we might see in the near future?

**A.** That's difficult to predict with any certainty but my guess would be that the next big innovation will be connected to TV. We are planning to distribute TV images across our IP network at Wimbledon. It will make a huge difference to how TV is used onsite. What I don't know yet, but we're future proofing our network by assuming it may happen, is whether TV pictures will be distributed not only within the Wimbledon site but also straight to the broadcasting centres. We know the broadcasters will be doing that at the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and, as Wimbledon will be participating in the 2012 Olympics in Britain, it's a distinct possibility here.

**Q.** Wimbledon is a unique sporting event with a worldwide reputation, how do you successfully blend tradition with innovation?

**A.** The Club never loses sight of the fact that the players and the tennis must remain the main focus. I aim to provide solutions that help everyone who visits Wimbledon to have a thoroughly enjoyable time, appreciating both the tennis and the unique ambience. If they only recognise the contribution that technology has made to their experience when they reflect on what contributed to their day, then I've achieved my aim.



### **IBM United Kingdom Limited**

PO Box 41  
North Harbour  
Portsmouth  
Hampshire  
PO6 3AU

Tel: 0870 010 2503  
[ibm.com/services/uk](http://ibm.com/services/uk)

### **IBM Ireland Limited**

Oldbrook House  
24-32 Pembroke Road  
Dublin 4

Tel: 1890 200 392  
[ibm.com/services/ie](http://ibm.com/services/ie)

### **IBM South Africa Limited**

Private Bag X9907  
Sandhurst  
2146  
South Africa

Tel: 0860 700 777  
[ibm.com/servicessolutions/za](http://ibm.com/servicessolutions/za)

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