

IBM i Modernization Didn't Fail: We Just Kept Talking to the Wrong People

For years, IBM i modernization has been framed as a technology problem.

We talk about tools.

We talk about languages.

We talk about interfaces, DevOps pipelines, cloud strategies, and AI readiness.

And yet, a large portion of the IBM i community hasn't moved, not because they can't, but because the conversation has never really been about *them*.

Recently, I reviewed background material on the long-running **intERPrise** open-source ERP initiative. What struck me wasn't the architecture or the licensing model. It was how closely the *intent* of the initiative mirrors themes I've already written about.

This isn't a new modernization narrative. It's a correction.

Modernization Was Never a Technology Problem

In *Mark's Musings #29*, I wrote:

"We don't need to simplify IBM i. We need to teach it better."

That statement still holds true, but I'd add something to it now:

We also need to stop assuming who we're teaching.

The intERPrise discussions openly acknowledge something many of us quietly know, a majority of IBM i systems are run by **small, overworked teams**, often one to five people, on older releases, doing everything they can just to keep the business running.

These teams are not anti-modernization. They are **capacity-constrained**.

Modernization messaging that assumes spare time, budget, or opportunity simply does not land.

Involvement Beats Instruction (Every Time)

In *Mark's Musings #28*, I referenced the Xunzi quote:

"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I may remember. Involve me and I learn."

This is where intERPrise becomes interesting: not as software, but as a mechanism. It doesn't start by telling SMB teams what to replace. It doesn't start by teaching modernization theory.

It starts by **putting modern IBM i architecture in their hands**:

- Native DB2 for i schemas
- Real triggers and constraints
- Real error handling
- Real MVC-style separation
- No tooling paywalls

That's not instruction. That's involvement. And involvement is how confidence is built.

Modernization Without Alienation

If I were an SMB, I would be really disappointed with modernization narratives that shame the platform that I am doing my best to hold together:

- "Green screen equals legacy"
- "If you're not on the latest release, you've failed"
- "Rewrite or die"

Those narratives don't modernize systems. They alienate the people who run them.

One thing the intERPrise material does *right* is acknowledge reality without judgment. It doesn't mock unsupported releases. It doesn't pretend every shop can jump straight to cloud-native architectures.

It meets organizations **where they are**, not where consultants wish they were.

That's respectful modernization and it's the only kind that works.

Strengthening the Core Still Matters Most

Modernization starts with code and data.

Not UI first.
Not tools first.
Not AI first.

The intERPrise approach is unapologetically data-centric:

- DB2 for i at the center
- Business rules enforced in the database
- Clear, inspectable schemas, even for premium modules

That philosophy aligns perfectly with what many of us have been advocating: **Clean data structures outlive every interface you will ever build.**

The Silent Majority Is the Real IBM i Community

IBM i discourse often overrepresents the loudest voices:

- Large enterprises
- Well-funded modernization projects
- Edge-case success stories

Meanwhile, the **quiet majority** keeps shipping orders, paying employees, and running supply chains, often on systems older than the people criticizing them.

The intERPrise discussions estimate that this “lost but faithful” group may represent most of the installed base.

If that’s even partially true, then modernization strategies that don’t explicitly serve this group are incomplete by definition.

This Is About Stewardship, Not Disruption

One word that keeps coming to me is **stewardship**.

IBM i professionals are not just technologists. We’re custodians of business continuity, often across decades.

The custodianship model proposed around intERPrise reflected a deeply enterprise mindset: protect the architecture, prevent capture by any single interest, and favor long-term trust over short-term momentum. That mindset wasn't wrong, it was simply early.

The Takeaway

This initiative didn't introduce a new idea to me. It reminded me of an old one we keep forgetting:

IBM i modernization succeeds when it includes people, not when it replaces them.

Whether intERPrise itself succeeds or not is almost secondary.

What matters is that it reflects a modernization philosophy many of us have already been articulating:

- Learning over lecturing
- Involvement over abstraction
- Respect over replacement

And maybe, just maybe, that's the narrative IBM i needed all along.

Modernization isn't about how fast we move the platform forward. It's about how many people we bring with us.