



What is driving your IT digital strategy?

Jason Connolly at Next Generation IT looks at the evolving role of the in-house IT department

I recently attended two similar seminars run by the GTA University Centre and the Guernsey branch of the IoD promoting the need for increased focus on IT in the boardroom, and the need to incorporate technology into strategic planning.

The arguments made were that businesses are becoming increasingly digital and technology trends such as cloud computing, social media, big data and mobility are giving rise to new capabilities. There is no avoiding the fact that technology has become integral to the operation of every organisation, and businesses are critically dependent on a reliable and stable IT infrastructure. But more than that, failing to adapt to the emerging digital agenda can have a severe impact on a business' future competitiveness. They argued that technology is too critical to the organisation to leave to the IT function alone; it is now a matter for the boardroom.

Promoting technology awareness in the boardroom

The admirable aim of these two seminars was to promote awareness of technology within the boardroom, so that IT strategy can be 'baked into' the group strategy. Technology can then be more aligned with company direction and support the business aims, so that people, processes and technology can all work together towards the same goals.

In my experience, local businesses has a very good appreciation of IT at board level, and are quite prepared to engage with businesses such as ours to incorporate technology into their group strategy, embracing new technologies such as cloud computing and mobility to improve their current business performance and also to take advantage of new opportunities.

Agile businesses are open to change. There was acceptance at the seminars that smaller businesses are more flexible and accepting of change, which could be

why we see a faster acceptance of new technology with local businesses. This enables a shift from having to focus on day-to-day operational issues onto more value adding areas, such as client focus, new business applications and future business opportunities. This change in focus is accompanied by an evolution in roles for in-house technical staff, from IT 'plumbers' to business analysts. In today's competitive marketplace, this shift from larger traditional businesses to new agile businesses is critical to maintaining our collective place on the international stage.

In this new world order, the use of technology is driven by the business' needs, not the technical constraints of the IT team. The traditional role of the IT manager is changing from command and control to empowerment, monitoring and enablement. IT direction must be forward looking and not reactive, and be driven by a top down approach rather than by the technical staff. But this doesn't mean that we should allow technology to be the new wild west; there still needs to be checks and balances, monitoring and controls. IT is critical to businesses and so the benefit of getting technology right is typically quite large and the impact of bad decisions is equally damaging. For instance, the risk of cyber-attacks is a growing concern for businesses. It is an area that can impact on operations and is equally critical to the business' reputation. Data protection and security are the responsibility of both IT and business departments. It's as much to do with the human element as the technical aspects. For instance, educating staff how to spot and report security risks (e.g. phishing emails), keeping up-to-date procedures and ensuring regular maintenance, monitoring and auditing of systems are all critical to maintain security. Increased 'business-side' involvement

A comment made by an audience member at the IoD seminar sums this point

up nicely. In the course of their job, IT staff are expected to know a lot about all other departments, but business staff tend to refer all technical matters to IT. All executives must work hard to address critical gaps in IT knowledge across the business, not just in the IT department.

Address talent from the top

As IT continues to develop as an important strategic tool, the required skills are harder to find and retain. Companies need to work hard to attract the right talent across the organisation, but especially in the boardroom, with a mix of technical, business and organisational skills. The IT team should then become more integrated into the business, enabling organisations to better harness technology to achieve the aims of the business.

Balance competing demands

Steadily rising expectations for IT, combined with competing demands for management time are increasing pressure on business leaders. To alleviate these competing demands, organisations should change their approach to IT projects to make iterative changes and continuous improvements to spread the burden. Forward looking businesses are using outsourcing and cloud services to ensure that day-to-day basics are taken care of, freeing up their organisation's staff to drive the business forward.

Boards are beginning to take a strategic view of how technology trends are shaping their company's future. They are treading the fine line between delivering and shaping strategy. They appreciate that technology has two roles, keeping the business going and driving the business forward. Deeper board involvement is serving as a mechanism to cut through company politics and align IT and group strategy. Technology will then better support the business' aims, so that people, processes and technology can all work together towards the same goals.

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