

Improving Information Technology's Contribution

- Some Strategic Imperatives

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Improving IT (which most enlightened organizations are now referring to as "Information Management" or IM) doesn't just mean fixing whatever problems exist in the backroom, in the operational processes, or in the specific technologies deployed. It means rethinking what IM means, what services are delivered under the auspices of IM, and how those services need to be delivered to meet the emerging needs of the enterprise. It means determining and valuing what contribution technology makes to the success of the organization today, how this is likely to evolve in the future, and what impact this will have. It means rethinking the relationship between IM and the enterprise in order to increase IM's contribution and success from an enterprise perspective. And it means repositioning IM to be an integral part of the enterprise, as well as being a key purveyor to it. Most importantly, it means thinking like a member of the Executive Team, and being recognized and valued for this.

The key question is, what will be the role of technology going forward? Will it be an enabler, or will it impose new limits or constraints that obviate the benefits? For that matter, why does anyone care what the role will be? We should care because technology is changing the world at an accelerating pace (on the one hand), yet we wrestle with management and operational problems that we knew many of the answers to in the 1960s. In some respects, we can't seem to get out of our own way. How will technology change the world in the future? What will the impact be of new technologies that are just beginning to emerge?

There are a number of challenges here. IM has to develop leadership and management capabilities which include a broad global perspective on the issues and challenges facing the enterprise in the foreseeable future, as well as a view which transcends the specific enterprise or industry. This is essential to ensure that IM helps its enterprise to remain, or become, globally competitive, and to respond to the challenges and issues that will emerge going forward. In order to do this, IM and the technocrats need to step out from behind their insular, technology-oriented thinking and contribute directly to realizing the enterprise's opportunities and resolving its problems.

Practitioners need to spend more time reflecting on the impact of technology going forward: Is it the right thing to do? How will it contribute to the overall success of the enterprise? Are we doing it because we can, or will it produce real value? Will it make us more environmentally responsible? Will it improve overall enterprise performance and service delivery? Will it keep jobs at home? People recognize that the Internet has had a phenomenal impact on what we do and how we do it, but they may not realize how fundamental this impact has been on the way we live our daily lives and how we conduct our affairs. This technology (in many forms) is altering the way people around the world live their lives. And it clearly has the potential to accelerate the evolution of day-to-day living on a world-wide basis. What future impact will this have on the way we do our jobs and on the jobs we do? Will we still be able to compete in the future?

Technology is becoming increasingly integrated into the operations of our organizations and into our daily lives. We stepped out of the backroom (in most cases), where they used to slide us pizza under the door and had no idea what we were working on, many years ago. Our task now is to work within our enterprises and organizations to help them use technology profitably to support the delivery of goods and services to customers, to help streamline operations, to enable increased business competitiveness in an increasingly competitive global marketplace, and to inform and support management decision-making.

We need to better address the way we manage the introduction and application of technology. We need to get fundamentally and exponentially better at the way we deliver our services to our IM clients and customers. We need to develop a whole new paradigm for IM that puts the client and customer squarely in the centre of our thinking. And we need to do it quickly while most of us still have customers. This is part of a service-oriented mentality that is built around delivering services the client really wants, and in ways the client needs them delivered. Ultimately, we need to create a positive customer experience re IM.

While I said earlier that IM needs to establish itself as an integral part of the enterprise, there is another dynamic in play here. In many ways, IM represents a business within a business. IM has unique characteristics that don't accrue to any other function within the enterprise. It's a service (but not a servant) function; it provides leadership to the enterprise in the effective use of technology; it is an enabler, helping the other aspects of the enterprise do what they do better; it is an organization-wide resource, a source of innovative ideas, and the deliverer of capabilities to its clients; and it is largely misunderstood and under-appreciated internally. So, how does IM need to address these varied (and sometimes conflicting) roles?

I believe IM needs to be run as a business. This means that having just a technological perspective is no longer valid or viable. We need to think like executive management. We need to understand their issues, challenges and opportunities. We need to feel their pain. We need to have performance measures and performance management across IM that reflects meaningful performance in the eyes of the executive management team. The CIO should be the CEO of IM and should think of himself/herself that way. Business and financial measures and reporting should be employed to help shape the thinking within IM and its direction. IM investment decisions need to be examined in the way that investment in a new plant would be examined - although IM investments often have a shorter shelf-life. Staff retention and recruiting strategies to support the needs within IM are becoming increasingly essential to ensuring the workforce is motivated, rewarded and productive. Communications across IM, and with clients, customers and executive management, is becoming an increasingly important item in many IM organizations. And effective membership and participation at the executive table is becoming essential if IM and technology are to truly be an integral part of business planning and opportunity development. Bridges to executive management will need to be built if they haven't been already.

And we have to stop spending so much time and effort figuring out how to manage yesterday. We need to imagine what the foreseeable future will hold for us in the way that new technology is developed, delivered and utilized, and develop processes, measurements and practices that will enable us to manage and deploy this technology effectively for the benefit of our organizations.

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