Re-Thinking the Information Technology (IT) Function

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When I decided to leave the relative comfort of the corporate IT world some years ago and start an IT management consulting practice, I wasn't interested in beginning the discussion with customers about their specific technology needs.

Imagine that, a technology-related consultant not wanting to talk about technology!

Let me explain…

Rather than discuss technology issues, I was infinitely more interested in discussing my customers' business problems just as I had done when working in the corporate world. I wanted them to think about their technology issues as being business problems to solve: each technology function, service and product are a means to a specific business end.

For many IT leaders, the resistance to that approach was clear: they were hired to be technologists, not business experts. On the surface, that seems like a reasonable slant, doesn't it? After all, business leaders expect their bright, high-paying technology professionals that run their IT organizations to be technology experts: "you fill that role and we'll trust you have our best interests in mind'.

That is, until they don't…

Many business leaders just don't pay attention to what goes on in their IT organizations unless they are expressing their frustrations about cost, risk, how IT speaks a different language, how IT can't deliver on time, or how IT is not responsive enough. The business might be vague in its direction to IT but expects IT to deliver services and products that make their lives easier, more productive and less costly.

Ask business leaders about their latest sales projections or what the earnings forecast for next quarter will be, and they are Johnny-on-the-spot. However, ask them IT questions such as "what cyber-security risks exist?" or "when was the last time your company data was backed up?", or even "what company data is considered critical to your business?". More than likely they will respond with "we have our IT leader that we're paying good money to handle those things", or "these IT headaches are for companies bigger than ours to worry about", or even "I

don't have time to get involved in IT, I have other areas like Sales and Finance to contend with". I am sure some have a good handle on this IT stuff, but the reality is that most don't.

What about IT leaders? Many of them rose through the ranks being the best at whatever technical discipline they mastered earlier in their careers: application development, infrastructure, operations, etc. How well do they really know the business? How adept are they at running IT as a critical business function like Sales, Finance and other key components of the enterprise? Many of them may not feel they are expected to get involved at that level, or don't know how to inject themselves into the business discussion. Many can dictate to the business what technologies will and will not be put in place, and many are told specifically by the business what they will implement. The reasons for these scenarios are plotted on a large spectrum that ranges from inexperience to lack of accountability, with maybe a little ego mixed in for good measure.

Technology Business Management

The business world is embracing the need for IT to become a more trusted part of the enterprise. As a result, the concept of Technology Business Management (TBM) was born. However, like most IT trends, the TBM methodology has become more of a commodity than a philosophical shift. I see the topic of TBM focus more on implementing tools to address the challenging problem.

Software manufacturers are tapping into this organizational gap by convincing IT and business leaders to make an investment: "buy our TBM tool and you will be a more strategic partner with the business!". That's like buying a CRM product with the hope of making your sales people better sales people. There may be a hint of truth to that - managing and presenting information in the right way is always helpful - but if you are not good at sale, CRM probably won't help you meet your revenue goals.

Don't Wait for The Crisis

Both business and IT leaders must not wait for a crisis – a security breach, a server crash, a missed project deadline – to step back, take stock and re-think the current IT function. You don't need to hire an expensive consultant to ask some basic questions about how IT operates, which business goals IT is helping to reach, what IT standards are in place and how IT currently stacks up. Business stakeholders should ask IT leadership to help them better understand the IT function, but they also should not take their word for it: ask for specifics! You do it for other company departments. Don't you think IT deserves the same attention?

For IT leaders, you must find a way to get your IT organization to the same level of business consideration and interaction as Sales, Marketing, Finance, Operations and other critical functions. It's easier said than done, but you can start by making strides to be more transparent, and to remove the cloak of secrecy and complexity of the IT function for the rest of the business. You must be able to translate what IT does into terms that the business can understand. You also must be able to show the value that IT lends and have everything that happens within IT – and I mean everything – somehow align with the business's stated goals and objectives. If you can't illustrate that alignment, you either have a problem with the real value of that IT function, service or product, or there is something wrong with the way you are measuring or communicating that business value.

In today's increasingly complex business world, the reliance on technology is greater than it has ever been and will continue to increase at mind-numbing speeds. Business and IT leaders need to re-think how technology can help their businesses compete and grow in the ultra-competitive world of global commerce.