IT-Business Alignment Revisited

Accommodating increased user influence

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Introduction

Business people often complain that the IT department is not keeping up with their needs. We hear this a lot in our research and consulting activity, and the perceived gap is increasing. This usually isn't because of any actual deterioration in the level of service and capability delivered. More often than not it's down to increasing user expectations.

Growing familiarity with advanced technology and internet services in our personal lives has naturally led people to compare the corporate experience with the consumer one. In relative terms, IT facilities at work sometimes seem inflexible, limited and constraining. This can ultimately lead to a general feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction.

Enabling a business through technology is not the same as using consumer tech to run your social life or access content for recreation or entertainment.

Meanwhile, IT professionals say that many users and business managers have lost sight of what's important. Enabling a business through technology is not the same as using consumer tech to run your social life or access content for recreation and entertainment. Things like security, compliance and fitness for purpose cannot be dismissed in a business context. Nor can existing investments, upgrade/replacement costs, and the ongoing need to spend time and effort managing and supporting the technology in use.

In some organisations, the tension between IT and business teams has come to a head around the topic of devices and the so called 'Bring Your Own Device' (BYOD) phenomenon.

Whatever the origin of the differences, they ultimately tend to manifest themselves in one or more of the following ways:

It might be time for IT and business managers to get together and start an objective dialogue about how best to deal with evolving requirements.

- A rift opening between IT and users, undermining mutual respect and cooperation

- Business units cutting IT out of the loop and making their own technology arrangements

- Individual users making unilateral decisions on the technology and services they use

If you are seeing any of these, or suspect that things might be heading in this direction, then it might be time for IT and business managers to get together and start an objective dialogue about how best to deal with evolving requirements and expectations.

In the remainder of this paper, we provide some insights to help work through some of the human, organisational and political challenges arising from the interplay between consumer and business technology. We then go on to provide some advice and guidance for those wishing to create more harmony.

A good place to start is by challenging some of the common misconceptions that can cloud thinking and judgment, e.g. the assumption that user requests always reflect genuine business needs.

Achieving the proper perspective

Before trying to tackle the problems of disharmony and misalignment, it's first necessary to form a clear sense of perspective. Understanding the factors that can distort perceptions is an important part of this. These include:

Needs and wants are not always the same

The additional time and distraction of working around limitations and constraints is often downplayed.

Modern technology is highly seductive, particularly gadgets such as smartphones, tablets and the latest notebooks. People simply want to use these, even though they may not work optimally with your IT systems and processes. Benefits such as flexibility and productivity are always emphasised by users, but the additional time and distraction of working around limitations and constraints is often downplayed. Over the years, it has never ceased to amaze us how much effort people will make, and how tolerant they are willing to be, in order to use the latest desirable tech in a corporate environment.

The solution most obvious to users is not always the most appropriate

Consumer equipment often comes out of the box ready to link to consumer services. Setting up your tablet or smartphone to access cloud storage services or popular social and communication networks is easy. You just download the relevant app, sign in or create an account, and you are up and running. This creates the impression that smart mobile devices and 'public cloud' services always go hand in hand, even though this may create security, privacy and compliance concerns in a business context. Rather than connecting their iPad to a personal SharePoint drive for convenient storage and sharing of data, users therefore continue to assert the need for Dropbox and the like.

Vested interests often misrepresent reality

IT vendors and service providers frequently exaggerate the degree to which new ideas and technology are being used in the mainstream.
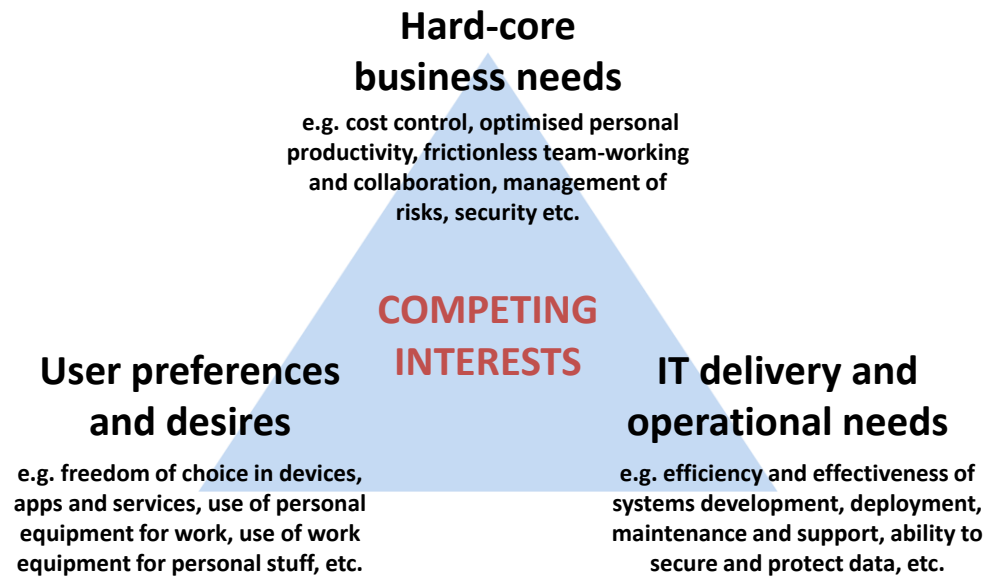
IT vendors and service providers, aided and abetted by analysts and journalists, frequently exaggerate the degree to which new ideas and technology are being used in the mainstream. The objective is to create a sense of urgency by playing on the customer's fear of falling behind competitors. The reality is that things seldom move that quickly, despite the impression created by questionable PR polls claiming 'everyone is doing it', and case studies that spin pilot projects as major commitments. The challenge is that senior execs and influential users read compelling articles in the business press. They then want to rush ahead with the latest transformational idea, regardless of whether the technology is mature and the business is ready to exploit it.

We could add to this last point the practice of solution sales reps increasingly bypassing the IT team and targeting business people directly. This is great if it's done responsibly, but when a business manager buys into an impressive demo, then is later told by IT that to enable the vision would require an expensive and time consuming integration project, this tends to aggravate the disharmony.

The trick is to take a balanced view

In order to work through some of the challenges and distortion factors it helps to think in terms of balancing the following triangle of competing interests (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The triangle of competing interests

Hard-core business needs

e.g. cost control, optimised personal productivity, frictionless team-working and collaboration, management of risks, security etc.

COMPETING INTERESTS

User preferences and desires

e.g. freedom of choice in devices, apps and services, use of personal equipment for work, use of work equipment for personal stuff, etc.

IT delivery and operational needs

e.g. efficiency and effectiveness of systems development, deployment, maintenance and support, ability to secure and protect data, etc.

This kind of view can help to distinguish between different types of demands and constraints so you can understand their true nature.

When you look at demands in this way it quickly becomes clear that user and business interests are not always the same – in fact they often directly conflict. The employee wishing to use their favourite cloud service to store and share sensitive information could be creating a compliance or security exposure. The person insisting on using an alternative word processor because it runs better on their Mac may be burdening their colleagues with the hassle of dealing with file conversions and formatting inconsistencies, leading to a negative productivity impact overall.

Working through the above triangle also highlights that user grumbles about IT being too restrictive usually reflect hard-core business interests. Security and compliance measures and policies are obvious examples. These are not imposed because IT people want control for control's sake, but because IT is relied upon to protect company assets on behalf of directors and shareholders. And when IT teams say they can't support a regime in which users have complete freedom, it's because diversity and unpredictability simply needs more manpower and budget to deal with from an operational and risk management perspective, which may not be available.

Having said all this, it's also important to bear in mind that the lines are shifting in terms of how technology can be used to create business value, and users are often quicker than IT at spotting the potential. Dismissing apparently misguided user activity because it doesn't conform to the current view of what's important or acceptable can lead to missed opportunities. Any apparent conflicts must therefore be worked through in an objective and dispassionate manner.

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Dealing with conflicts

When apparent conflicts arise between the three sets of interests, you need to separate 'real' requirements and issues from those rooted in personal preference, politics, posturing, protectionism and parochial thinking. You also need to identify where people are locked into out of date thinking and methods, when the world has since moved on. It's generally no longer necessary, for example, to totally lock down desktops, laptops and other end user devices to achieve adequate security. Neither is it necessary for IT to have complete control over managing user access to systems and information – modern solutions allow much of this to be delegated to non-technical administrators and managers within the business.

Once you have unravelled and understood the different interests and practicalities, you have options. Where tangible constraints are preventing better alignment, e.g. existing systems won't support what users are asking for or the business needs, then you can choose to invest in upgrade, modernisation or replacement initiatives. If funds are tight or the investment is not considered justified, then compromises and/or alternative approaches can be agreed to get as close to the desirable outcome as possible.

It should go without saying that when conflicts become apparent, hard-core business requirements must be prioritised over other needs, preferences and desires.

These principles may seem very obvious when you see them written down like this. But be honest - how much does such objective dialogue actually take place in your organisation? The chances are that people are not talking and listening to each other anywhere near enough, and/or the exchanges that do take place are too often dominated by ill-motivated power struggles, political agendas and just plain old griping and finger-pointing.

So how do you break some of these bad habits?

Putting it into practice

Some organisations achieve the kind of balance we have been discussing by putting processes in place to ensure adequate input from all parties on a case by case basis when reviewing specific requirements or making investment decisions. Some go as far as establishing a multi-disciplinary 'governance body' through which important decisions are routed, which considers all appropriate input and coordinates activity across the business. Another effective tactic, which can be used in conjunction with the others, is to nominate representatives to facilitate ongoing liaison between teams. This could involve a member of the IT staff being aligned with a particular department or division, and/or a user within a business unit being given an IT coordination role.

Something to take account of, which favours a more joined up and continuous approach to governance, is that business units can often appear to disagree among themselves on what's important. Some such differences may be genuine, but this isn't always the case. If you discuss and analyse requirements in the same general area across the business you'll often find that differences in vocabulary, along with a tendency to focus on exceptions, masks the fact that core needs are actually the same or very similar (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Core needs are actually the same or very similar
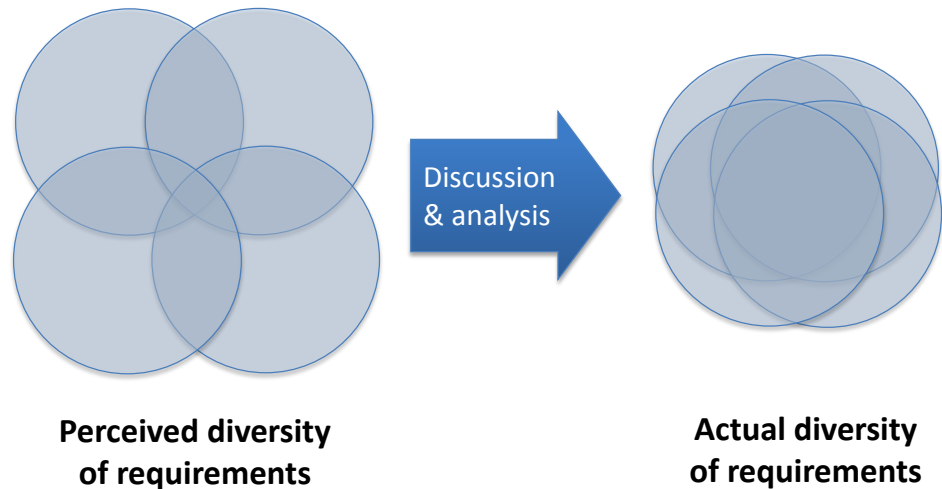
Discussion & analysis

Perceived diversity of requirements

Actual diversity of requirements

Allowing every department to solve the same problem in a different way might feel like it is enabling flexibility, but in reality it's usually the exact opposite.

This is one of the reasons why cutting the IT team out of the loop is generally not a good idea from a business perspective. With no one analysing and coordinating requirements in a structured and disciplined manner, you could easily end up with each department using a different collaboration solution, a different CRM system and a different mix of end user technology.

Such fragmentation creates disjoints that directly translate to increased costs, decreased operational visibility, and a reduced ability to exploit synergies between business units. Allowing every department to solve the same problem in a different way might feel like it is enabling flexibility, but in reality it's usually the exact opposite – the organisation overall becomes more rigid and fragile than ever.

Conclusion

It has become very fashionable for commentators to portray a big shift in power from the IT department to users, and even suggest that users should be driving all technology related activity. This is a dangerous and simplistic view. While it's true that user input has historically often not been given the weight it deserves, and this is now changing rapidly, it's important not to 'over-correct' for past deficiencies. The need is for balance across business, user and operational demands in the way we have described.

Achieving a balanced and coordinated approach is fundamentally a business issue.

As a final thought, it is tempting to regard the kind of disharmony we have highlighted as being an IT problem. This is a mistake. The truth is that achieving a balanced and coordinated approach is fundamentally a business issue that needs to be owned by business executives.

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