
IT is not broken

But it still needs fixing

By Martin Atherton, August 2007

Although most would agree the corporate world is largely free from crisis, this sentiment is not reflected throughout the entire breadth of the business ecosystem - especially in IT.

Anyone working in the IT industry learns to live with hyperbolae, whether aspirational - 'technology will change the world' - or pessimistic - 'slaying the dragons of poorly implemented past technology'.

Those responsible for running IT are in this line of fire and one hears often enough that IT departments are generally shambolic and staffed and run by incompetents.

This belief persists, in spite of the fact that most organisations are doing quite well in the grand scheme of things. It is against this less glamorous backdrop that most companies in the real world seek to benchmark themselves in terms of improvement, rather than executing Indiana Jones' style escapes from corporate doom. When it comes to managing IT, it's time to acknowledge that the mainstream baseline is 'OK' - not 'on fire'.

Freeform Dynamics talks to around 3,000 user organisations each month and from our research we find little evidence to support the idea that IT is currently in crisis. Naturally there are pockets of inadequacy and excellence. But if we treat all IT departments as falling into one camp or the other, we are not only doing the majority a disservice, we are also making it harder to advise them on how to move forward from where they are today.

Questioning senior IT managers about their current situation proves interesting. When asked 'how well does IT help your business achieve strategic and operational goals?' in areas including measuring/reporting business performance, efficient business operations, customer satisfaction, supporting growth and innovation, and risk management, they give relatively high ratings on average.

Similarly high scores are given to questions such as 'how clear is the opportunity to positively impact business through better IT management?' This suggests that in the real world, IT shops do an OK job, though their leadership knows things could be better.

The real question is: how can organisations improve from where they are now? The advice that could be levied at this seemingly benign status quo is the same as that given when confronted by a dangerous animal: move slowly but deliberately, make no sudden moves.

There is both irony and truth here. Previous research has shown strong correlation between isolated IT projects (shops operating without a 'bigger plan') and their local benefit, and the simultaneous weakening of operational and management capabilities. Don't move at all, and figuratively, you might indeed get eaten.

Two areas are worth further thought: corporate mindset and best practice. An element of the former is adopting the concept of services. Strong correlation exists between organisations that use service as a common language between their IT shop and the business, and the reduction in burden that IT shops find themselves under.

It's not necessarily an easy state to get to, especially if one's own organisation does not see itself as a service provider but it's very clear from Freeform Dynamics' research that while not burden-free, these organisations' IT shops deal with the right issues.

When it comes to best practice, opinion is mixed on its impact on IT management. Do process standards such as Itil enable competitive advantage because they help do the obvious things well and allow focus on more value-added IT capabilities? Most likely yes, given the obvious nullifying effect if everyone does things the same way. Organisations embracing best practice still need to know why - it will still let you do stupid things, just in a consistent manner.

As long as our businesses are not caving in around our heads, it is worth taking the time to plan and implement IT carefully against a more holistic vision than is traditionally afforded. Improving IT management is not about doing things right, it's about doing the right things.

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