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Aligning IT With Business Strategy

Align IT with business strategy – we all say we do it, so why is this the top ICT issue for CEOs in survey after survey? Read on to understand why alignment is hard to achieve and, more importantly, what you can do about it.

In the 21st century economy, businesses have to constantly adapt to meet the challenges of a global marketplace. Alignment of IT with business strategy, culture and management is key to corporate success. CIOs and IT Directors know this better than anyone else. So, why is this still the biggest ICT issue reported by CEOs?

Alignment is hard to define; therefore hard to do

The problem is that the whole idea of IT alignment is very nebulous. One can describe what it means to be aligned but it is much harder to articulate what that means in operational terms. Business and IT operate in two different worlds and making the connection between them is impeded by lack of a common framework or language connecting the two. Consequently, attempts at alignment are often overly theoretical with no implementation follow-through or are overly focused on a narrow definition of ROI and so miss the bigger picture. What is needed is a stepwise process to take us from a picture of our future business to decisions about technology architectures, budgets and support levels.

Step 1 – start with the business vision

It is hard to believe, but many attempts at IT alignment start without a clear vision of where business is headed and how it's meant to get there. This first step must establish a clear, documented understanding of the business direction, objectives and constraints. The future does not have to be set in stone – sensitivity analysis will tell us how our technology decisions are affected by the assumptions we make.

Step 2 – translate business vision into technology requirements

The outputs from step 1 are used to drive our future technology design and evaluate investment options. Overlaying a value map of the existing IT footprint onto the future business vision identifies the current miss-alignment. From this, options for future IT services can be explored and a business technology model created for the future. This is a non-technical description of what our future IT environment needs to do for us.

Step 3 – decide technology standards

We now turn our business centric view of our technology requirements into technology architecture. This is a plan for how we will use technology to deliver the business requirements identified in step 2 and ensure that the systems will work together when deployed.

Step 4a – select and implement technologies

Individual technologies can now be selected and implemented, confident that they will support the business vision. The implementation plan needs to take into account the speed at which the business is moving forward to ensure that the IT deployment is aligned with the business plan.

Step 4b – create IT management and support environment

The implementation plan also needs to take into account how the IT management and support structure will deliver the support levels required by the business. This is increasingly important as service level expectations are continually rising and opportunities for external-hosted on-demand IT services are changing the traditional picture of an internally focussed IT department.

What's next?

If you would like to know more about this topic and find out how you can get your IT aligned with your business, click on the Contact Us box.