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What's Wrong With IT?

Issues Abound, But Companies Can Overcome Them, As Long As They Recognize The Problems



For years, it has been trying to keep up with shifts in technology, operations, and project management. But as many companies have found, today's challenges go beyond processing power and cooling systems, and even past setting project goals. As IT becomes more integral to companies of every size, many IT and data center managers will have to take a good hard look at their departments and figure out what works and what doesn't for their organizations.

Part of this process will involve recognizing the types of issues that have come to lessen the impact of IT, including lack of performance standards, user dissatisfaction, and a continuing "image problem" that distances IT from other departments.

According to reports from market research firm Gartner, the IT profession is changing significantly, and analysts predict that many organizations will have to do major overhauls within the next five years. The first step, though, is seeing the problems.

■ User Power

One of the largest issues plaguing IT, and due to get more important in the coming years, is the changing sophistication on the part of users. As employees become more comfortable with downloading software, uploading files, and buying their own PDAs and smartphones, IT will find itself increasingly challenged by having to share control of a company's technology strategy.

"End users have started deciding how to do their work," says Dennis Szerszen, vice president of corporate development for security firm SecureWave. He notes how, when he worked at IBM a decade ago, the thought of buying a memory stick would be absurd. Today, he regularly sees users buying their own memory devices, as well as a range of gadgets that get plugged in to the company network.

Although IT has tried to keep systems secure by forbidding personal devices or regulating their use, such tactics are going to cause more friction in the future, Szerszen believes.

"There's a growing expectation from users that they should be able to use whatever devices they want," he says. "If they want to listen to their MP3 player at work, they'll be appalled if [the company says] no."

Telecommuting is making the situation even more complex, blurring the lines between

personal and professional. Laptops owned by the company are used to store vacation photos or download software for employees' kids, and PDAs store both database information and grocery lists. As employees become more tech savvy and buy devices that fit both home and office, IT will find itself struggling to effectively tackle the problem.

■ Changing Business Needs

A challenge that might feel even more familiar to IT managers in small and midsized enterprises is the continual need to keep costs down while increasing efficiency, notes Kenneth Rau, a senior consultant at IT advisory firm Cutter Consortium.

"Large companies have a CIO to determine strategy, but SMEs usually just have a small staff, and they're often overwhelmed enough with technical issues," says Rau. "SMEs are caught in a conundrum because they're asked to compete with the big boys in terms of operations, but they aren't given the resources to do it."

Often, Rau adds, IT managers are hesitant to make changes in the type of employees that staff their departments. A decade or even five years ago, programmers and tech support were vital to make sure an IT organization ran properly. But increasingly, stocking the IT staff pool with only those skills will be detrimental to a data center's long-term health, Rau believes.

"Many people have IT departments that look the same as they did years ago, with the same type of in-house expertise," he says. "But that's not going to work for much longer."

■ Image Problem

As many IT organizations have found in the past decade, techies tend to be viewed in a certain way, according to many experts.

"Like an umpire at a baseball game, the job of IT is often only noticed when it is not well done," says Joe Bakan, senior technology advisor at IT consultancy Ekaru. "The ongoing successes are under the radar and taken for granted."

Success often breeds invisibility, Bakan adds. To make the situation even more frustrating, IT victories are not viewed in a historical sense—IT is only as good as its last job.

Compounding IT's image problem is the number of projects that are expected to be done. Balancing long-range plans with immediate support demands stretches resources to the breaking point and often beyond. The disparity between what's expected of IT and what it can reasonably achieve causes frustration within IT and negativity from users.

An additional difficulty can be the personalities within an IT department, compared to the organization's leadership. The roles of CIOs and IT managers have changed significantly over the past five years, shifting from super-tech-savvy types to those with a more balanced view of people, process, and technology. Sometimes, blending these leaders with more traditional, technology-based employees can make an IT department look splintered or rife with internal conflict.

Another factor in IT's negative image can be job churn. Functions in IT that require both social skills and technology smarts, such as technical support, tend to have a high amount of turnover because they combine seemingly conflicting personality types, says Adrian Furnham, a professor in the department of psychology at University College London and a researcher on personality issues.

"Really good technical support can be rare because someone has to be highly skilled technically but also extremely sociable," says Furnham. "That's not a combination you'll

find very often.”

Although issues such as negative perceptions, user frustration, and unrealistic expectations can be difficult, they are not impossible to address. (For more information, see the article [“Fix What Ails IT”](#).) And, as some comfort to IT managers, seeing the problems are at least a first step toward fixing them. ■

by Elizabeth Millard

Common IT Problems

- Seeing the user as the enemy
- Tolerating negative perceptions of IT
- Being reluctant to bring non-IT employees, such as contract negotiation experts, into the department
- Lack of understanding about the relationship between IT and business goals
- Poor communication regarding project goals

Road Ahead

According to market research firm Gartner, the IT field is likely to splinter into four distinct domains of expertise by 2010:

1. Technology infrastructure and services
2. Information design and management
3. Process design and management
4. Relationship and sourcing management

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