

There's more to aligning IT to the business than matching IT initiatives to business strategies. In a Question and Answer session, discover how to overcome common conflicts to deliver end users real value and power your organization's actual technology needs.

In a recent article written about aligning IT with the business, a reader provided some great comments that deserved a follow-up article.

First, Rob_Pro's feedback and comments:

"Mr. Sisco, you write some great articles and obviously have a wealth of knowledge and experience to draw from. So, I have a bit of a challenge for you, and all members of the community. These are similar to what I often hear at my current company:

"The IT Department is out of sync with our company's needs."

"Our IT department is not responsive."

"We don't understand why we are spending so much in IT."

While this is common at many companies, what I have yet to see are any articles on how to resolve these issues from the other direction. The advice given is usually to align the IT plan to the business plan, or something similar. Here are a few questions I would like insight on:

What happens if your company doesn't have a business plan?

What happens when there are no strategic goals for you to try and align your support efforts with?

What happens when you sit down with the business unit managers and they claim they are getting all the support they need from IT, but tell a very different story to the CIO?

What do you do when the business units don't know what their needs are?

What are some strategies you can use to convince the CEO that you are a support department and need a direction to align yourself to?

What strategies can you use to persuade the business units to develop the business case for adding technology so you can show that IT is contributing to their success and the success of the company?

Almost every article I have read lately puts the task of correcting any misalignment squarely on the shoulders of IT management. What happens when the problem isn't necessarily the IT department? Here is the challenge: How do you address the alignment issue from the other direction? "

From: Rob_Pro

Question and answer

Excellent set of questions and insight that I'm sure many have interest in. Rob_Pro certainly captured my attention with the questions posed. Before we start, let's first discuss the issue in general, in order to set a framework on which to answer Rob_Pro's questions.

Every company is unique. Some do a much better job of developing business strategy and defining plans on how they expect to achieve their goals and objectives. If you sit down with most CEOs and CFOs and ask them "what can we do in technology to help the company," you may not get very much feedback. The reason is that they just don't know how to look at business issues and automatically translate them into opportunities that can be gained by using technology. That's where we as IT managers, CIOs, and CTOs come in.

When a company does not have a formal business strategy for you to "align" IT with, it doesn't make it any less your responsibility to identify IT initiatives and projects that will provide real value to the business. If you ask questions that help you better understand the business, its challenges and issues, and gain endorsement of technology solutions that address those issues, you'll be taking steps that will keep your efforts in sync with company needs.

"What happens if your company doesn't have a business plan?"

If there's no formal business plan, interview senior managers and department heads to learn about their operation, issues, and challenges. Aligning IT with the business is not necessarily adapting your IT initiatives plan to a formal company business plan. It's about doing things in IT that support business needs. That may be improving support responsiveness and follow-up to improve client satisfaction and productivity of your technology users, or it may mean implementing a major new technology to address a specific challenge in the company.

You will be able to help the business succeed by understanding the overall goals of the company—interview managers and learn what they need to get their job done effectively. "What happens when there are no strategic goals for you to try and align your support efforts with?"

The important thing to realize with all of these questions is that we can't simply look for a specific "target," which the business has clearly defined for us, to align our technology initiatives around. The key issue is to ask questions that allow the company manager to discuss the business. You can learn what makes it successful or not, the challenges it faces, and the issues that prevent it from being more successful.

As you understand these issues, you can start translating business issues into technology "opportunities" that can make a difference for a department manager or senior manager of the company. If you then target specific technology initiatives that are cost effective and that address issues or challenges that will truly help the business component become more successful, and then gain approval by the "stakeholders," you will be aligning your efforts closely with the business need.

It's more a matter of learning about your company's business needs, validating you are "on target", and gaining approval on recommendations rather than implementing an IT strategy that "you think" is what the company needs.

What happens when you sit down with the business unit managers and they claim they are getting all the support they need from IT, but tell a very different story to the CIO?"

If there is a disconnect with what your department managers are telling you versus those you report to, it's usually due to one of several things:

They don't want to hurt your feelings.

They are concerned that their support will decrease even further.

They don't want to confront you with their concerns.

You are not hearing what they are saying.

If a disconnect occurs, I try to sit down with the department head and open up the discussion with, "I need your help." Asking for help in understanding the nature of client service issues can often get you the insight you need. To do this, you should be reassuring, be very open to constructive criticism, and listen objectively. Getting defensive will only exacerbate the problem.

When you hear their story, quantify the specific issues and gain agreement that you have identified the areas of improvement needed. Once you have specifics, you can attack the problem or go about the task of resetting their expectations as appropriate.

"What do you do when the business units don't know what their needs are?"

Most business department managers have difficulty telling you exactly what their technology needs are. I've never been able to simply ask a department manager "what do you need from the IT department" and get the answer I need. It would be nice, but it is just not that straightforward.

Their core competency is in operating the business component they have responsibility for, not technology. That's why effective IT managers and CIOs have an ability to ask general questions about the business and to drill deeper in finding opportunities by which IT can help the department be more successful as they learn more about the department's business and challenges.

Once you have an idea, you can articulate your suggestions to the department head to gain his or her understanding and concurrence.

"What are some strategies you can use to convince the CEO that you are a support department and need a direction to align yourself to?"

As a CIO, I may have to help the CEO "carve out" a direction for the company or at least instigate enough conversation to help me understand what we are trying to accomplish as

a company. If the company is in a transitional state, it may be very difficult to even know what the specific objectives are.

The conversations may lead me to department managers where the real help is actually needed. Part of our job is to take general concepts and sometimes partial information and to develop a plan that makes sense in supporting the business.

Example

In one company, my general insight from the senior management team was that we needed IT to be prepared to support the acquisition of other companies.

To do that meant I needed to improve the level of our internal client's satisfaction with IT, move one of my technology offices to another city, improve the capabilities of our business applications, standardize IT services on the network, and to eliminate the external clients we had. My CEO and President didn't spell that out for me.

I looked at what we had, what we were going to need to support a business ten times the size we were at the time, and came up with my own conclusions, as the new CIO. However, before starting to implement any of these initiatives, I sat down with the senior management team to discuss my proposal, the reasons, the benefits, and to gain their insight and endorsement. As you might expect, the initial strategy was modified somewhat to better meet the needs of our company.

Because I approached the issues in this manner, my CEO and senior management team were not surprised by our IT actions and fully understood what the technology team was trying to accomplish to support the business.

"What strategies can you use to persuade the business units to develop the business case for adding technology so you can show that IT is contributing to their success and the success of the company?"

I don't necessarily try to persuade business units to add technology. It's always easier to "facilitate" developing a needs requirement than to push the department toward my technology proposal.

What this means is that, by asking questions about the business's needs and challenges, I will help the department manager arrive at the technology solution himself, even if I get to the answer much quicker. When the "business owner" drives the need, it's often more effective and easier to get the funding, plus you then have a real business partner working with you to make the project a success.

As soon as we agree on an "opportunity," I will work closely with the department manager to develop a business case for senior management approval, and later I will want him or her involved in developing the project to ensure it will be successful.

This approach builds "IT partners" and makes for healthy relationships. After all, my success as an IT manager lies in my ability to help others be successful in the company.

Summary

Aligning IT with the business requires you to learn about the business, validating the specific needs and challenges you are identifying, proposing technology initiatives that will help the business, and gaining full approval and commitment of the operational managers of the company in funding and implementing these initiatives.

The idea of taking a company strategy document and building your IT alignment strategy around it is a misleading concept. Our role as IT manager is to seek out what our client's business needs are and to interpret those needs into prudent IT initiatives that support the business