

Whatever Happened to the 'I' in IT?

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Chair

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Business decisions are made with information. If that information is brought to executives in a clear and concise way decisions can be easier to make. However, IT, the function which is supposed to provide information to decision makers, is failing at that. So what has happened to the 'I' in IT? Members and guests met at this Criticaleye Discussion Group to explore the tension that arises between executives and IT.

Often seen as the 'whipping boy' of the organisation, the IT function is usually only called upon when something goes wrong. Many forget that the 'I' in IT stands for information not infrastructure and, in fact, it is hard to convince companies of that.

There is a constant struggle between management team and IT. Although this is not a new problem, one participant was astounded that it still exists. She asserted that even though her IT department assures her that they have the best systems possible, she can't get the figures needed for the monthly board meetings, when she wants them to understand them sufficiently to make accurate business decisions. It is not just the information - it is what you do with that information and how you make decisions more effectively with that information.

The chair started with the question - Business users tell us they can't get the information they need, but do they know what they need?

Executives' IT literacy

Many IT executives believe that executives don't know what information is available to them and, therefore, have a difficult time verbalising what information they need to make relevant decisions. Does the problem lie with executives' technological 'illiteracy' or the fact that the required information is not available?

The type of data we are talking about is about supporting decisions. Much of the key data is missing in pages of figures that are unusable - what executives want is insight. It was felt that IT doesn't help executives ask the right questions.

The first problem, according to IT professionals, is the lack of technological savvy held by executives. This can be a major stumbling point for organisations. Indeed, it is claimed that executives don't know how to communicate with IT and don't know what to ask to get the information they want.

Another problem is that IT execs are not involved in producing the key performance indicators (KPIs) because, according to executives, they 'don't understand the business'. IT executives are not expected to know, for example, what a lead indicator, bell weather or lag indicators are.

IT also believes that some organisations are not prepared to spend the money from the outset to get the data right. However, non-IT leaders believe that the IT function cannot be flexible when changes are needed.

Usability

Organisations are not looking at user interface with the technology and usability is the critical matter. Only 25 per cent of technology's usability is employed every day - this is because it not sufficiently user-friendly.

One delegate questioned whether corporate IT should perform like a consumer web platform. The process of developing for the web should be brought through the organisation. Consumers on the web know what they want and what they need, whereas executives perhaps do not.

It was recommended that the way IT changes the way decisions are being made should be investigated. It is also important to expose people to the skills required to use technology and information efficiently.

Future of IT

It is time to have highly competent IT people in senior executive roles. Organisations should think about taking an IT person and putting him/her into a strategic planning function. The IT person can then see how the technology and information is used and how it works.

The IT function is an island – there is not much crossover. Should CEOs in the future come from IT? The 'I' has been largely ignored because it bridges the entire organisation. IT should be given some power.