

THE TOP 14 PRIORITIES OF TODAY'S IT LEADERS



Introduction

Companies have come to rely on technology in ways like never before, a byproduct of a pandemic that forced staff apart and left leaders scrambling to pick up the pieces. As organizations get ready for 2022 and beyond, it is a good time to evaluate services, organize IT departments, and make plans for the future hybrid workforce.

In this whitepaper we will explore where hidden risks lie across Information & Technology (I&T) and how to strategically overcome these challenges through business alignment, modern data strategies, user experience, and outsourcing strategies.

01 Achieving IT and Business Alignment

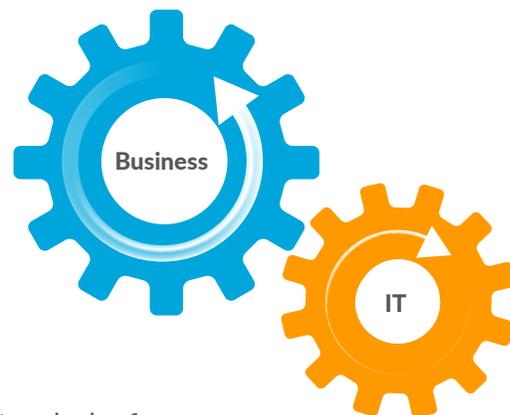
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Achieving IT and Business Alignment

Aligning an IT strategy and long-term business goals is a stumbling block for nearly all organizations. To a certain degree, it includes making serious sacrifices along the way for the greater good of the organization. The problem is deciding how and where to compromise. Balancing priorities for better alignment starts with evaluating individual risks based on where the business is heading.



The Impact of Misalignment

Every IT department has some experience with cutting corners due to a lack of resources. A program might be good enough for the business today, but entirely unsuitable if there are new demands tomorrow. A CIO might reasonably delay updating equipment to stretch the life of an asset, creating infrastructure or security gaps that will eventually come back to haunt them.

So because there is no question of whether a business will feel the effects of poor misalignment, the real question becomes how will end-users consume the technology and what will happen if it breaks down in a day (a month, a year)? If a company doesn't have the bandwidth to fix the problem, the consequences can be staggering for the business.

Bleeding Edge Vs. Leading Edge

Alignment can't be achieved without first having a fundamental strategy for upgrading. It can be tempting to select the latest technology available, but there is a cost to this. While the newest generation might be better than the previous iteration, it is also untested. There is no shame in being one generation behind when the trade-off is knowing that it's had time to prove itself on the market.

How Standardization Works

Standardization can help a company by bringing everyone on the same page, but it is important to both define what this means and understand that it's just one element of proper alignment.

Standardization does not mean picking one brand and sticking with it (e.g., everything in the company is VENDOR X and that is the end of discussion). While picking one brand certainly would cut down on how many vendors a company must work with, effective standardization does not necessarily mean uniformity at this level.



IT staff need to focus on setting the right standards for functionality and building an architecture that can support each component – regardless of the manufacturer or vendor.

Setting the Right Timeline

The deadlines for IT must align with what other departments will need, while considering future business goals. For instance, a company that is growing may need to keep its IT standards ahead of the curve, effectively building out capabilities that they will not technically need for a while. Decision-makers also must look at how outside factors will interfere with their plans during this critical period. For instance, an unexpected chip shortage can delay a project for weeks, which could ultimately throw the whole business out of sync.

Aligning a business with IT can only work if everyone is working from the same premise. A business that is consolidating is going to have different technology needs than one that's doubling in size. To limit the number of snags in the process, IT cannot discount how their decisions impact the larger organization's plans.

Defining Data Protection Around Today's Risks

A recent study highlighted that half of all organizations do not feel confident regarding their disaster recovery plans, and it's easy to see why. Data protection today is so much more than natural disasters. From pandemics to cybercrimes to political turmoil, disaster recovery must account for the many threats of today's modern world.

Complacency Risks

It is common for businesses to implement disaster recovery plans and then largely forget about them. This kind of complacency can lead to severe breakdowns in the business in the event of a disaster, particularly if the methodologies have not been tested for several years. Updating protocol does not mean overcompensating though – it means right sizing to your businesses risk tolerance.

Wipe the Slate

The best way to understand the company's disaster recovery strategy is often to approach it as if no one has ever seen the components before and then to run simulations based on different events.

- So, if the building disappeared that day, how would employees access data and how long would it take to access it?
- If the circuit was cut and the whole company lost internet connection, what is the protocol to get back online?

The primary objective is to first define what is needed from a business perspective before determining how to react in any given situation. If a CIO acts as though they've never seen the infrastructure (data sets, application stack, etc.), they can get a sense of what needs to be prioritized and nail down measurable timeframes to get the data back.

This is how leaders can see which core functionality is needed to actually sustain different kinds of disasters. So maybe a company only uses a component of their disaster recovery plan once every quarter, but it is a critical piece the company will lean on in the event of a ransomware, cyberattack, hurricane, or another pandemic.

Structuring Data: What and Where Is It?

To protect data, companies need to know what that data is and where to find it. Thoroughly answering this question is time-consuming, particularly when hidden pockets of data sets are likely floating around without anyone's knowledge. Setting the time aside to sort through this is the best way to create a more complex and robust backup plan. It helps a company structure data so it can be located without hassle.

The biggest risk, in this case, is to have a single-point solution, as managed service providers often see with companies who depend on the cloud. While there are data retention policies by providers like Microsoft, a program like Microsoft 365 is not secure by default – security and backup layers must be designed. If a CIO combs through the fine print in agreements with these cloud providers, it often spells out the need for third-party backup.

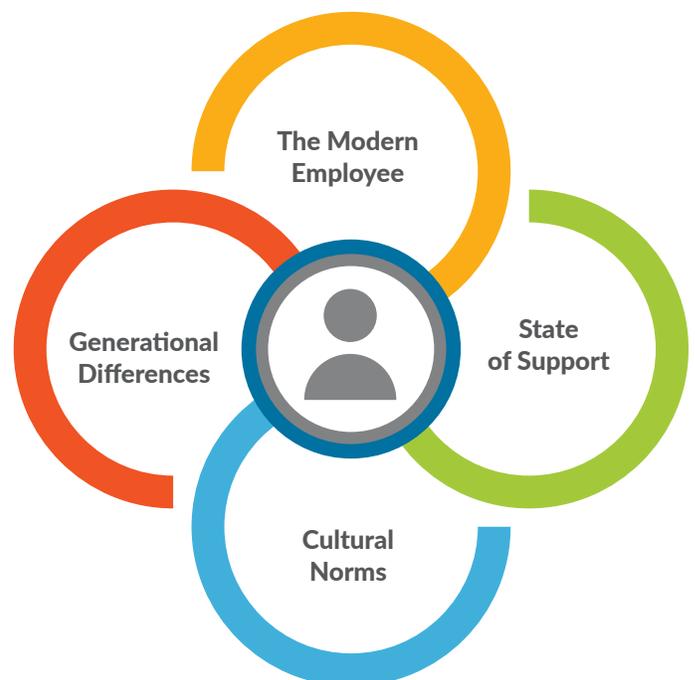


IT It is impossible to prepare for every disaster, but IT departments can update their recovery plans based on emerging threats and structural changes. If the 'fire drills' are running smoothly (while still accounting for common mitigating factors), companies can feel reasonably confident that they can handle man-made and natural catastrophes with aplomb.

Putting the End-User Experience at the Heart of Support

The first principle of improving the end-user experience is to remove the word 'user'. Thinking about people solely as an 'entity that consumes technology' will only serve to muffle the communication with them, leading to poor customer service and reduced morale.

Every person using the technology is coming from a different background, and their individual perspectives can have a cascade effect on a business that ignores their opinions.



The Modern Employee

There is a tendency to forget that the person who is frantically contacting IT support isn't doing so because they want to hassle another department. If a CMO cannot print what they need for a board meeting in 30 minutes, the meeting isn't going to run smoothly. They are going to have to fill in the blanks with numbers and projections that they can only reference in one format. As people become more dependent on the equipment and programs, they need to do their jobs, they need the technology to work more than ever before.

State of Support

From chat to emails to phone calls, businesses have to know both how people are getting into touch with IT and what that means to them. Stating that 70% of IT support is via email and 30% is via phone call does not actually tell a story about whether these metrics are working for the company. Do people feel satisfied when they call and confused when they email? The answers can affect a company's bottom line.

Short surveys that dig into the responsiveness and functional utility of a help desk can go a much longer way to understanding how people actually interact with support staff and whether the results are contributing to the well-being of the company. Full explanations of network parameters to a CEO are likely less helpful than sketching out the facts of a problem and what needs to be done to solve it.

Cultural Norms

Every workforce has its own way of talking to one another, and this is true for both inter- and intradepartmental communication. In some companies, it is an informal lunchroom discussion about how the work is going and what should be done in the future. For others, it is daily meetings in a boardroom or Zoom teleconferences every Thursday. IT staff may disagree with the communication strategy, but they will need to acknowledge workplace customs if they hope to work with people.

This is particularly important as we see hybrid workforces springing up across the country. When the dust of the pandemic settles, employees might be working remotely for part or all week. They will be doing so without the benefit of a corporate network and may be logging in anywhere from their home to a hotel in another country. IT support needs to set policies that account for this, so the staff can define expectations from the beginning.

Generational Differences

Finally, IT staff need to factor in generational expectations, which may lead to subgroups within the company. For instance, a younger employee is likely to prefer connecting with a help desk via instant message rather than a phone call. They want the interaction to be fast and efficient, cutting through the pleasantries and driving to the root cause of the problem. An older employee may prefer to connect over a phone call so they can better describe the issue and clarify the necessary steps to correct it.

Just because people in the organization may resist changes, does not mean that they can't or shouldn't occur.

The goal is not to sustain inefficiency simply because it's easier, only to introduce new protocols and processes based on the perceptions in the company. This can ultimately improve how people use the technology and receive the help they need.

Evolving Your IT Outsourcing Strategy in 2021 & Beyond

During the pandemic, it was common for companies with robust solutions and strong 3 – 5 year outsourcing strategies to face serious challenges when their workforce scattered. It was another lesson in just how important it is to be adaptable.

A company's outsourcing strategy is dependent on its staff, growth trajectory, and budget, but the common risk here is to miscalculate the relative importance of each element. For instance, overestimating the importance of direct costs can obscure how indirect costs are affecting the business. This is how companies end up outsourcing services they should keep in-house and vice-versa.



Malleable Support

Reviewing an outsourcing plan in detail can tell decision-makers more about the flexibility of their strategy and what (if any) contingencies are currently built into the solutions. There needs to be some degree of immediacy in the outsourcing strategy, which can then be applied to different scenarios. So, if the economy collapsed or interest rates spiked, how quickly could the outsourcing strategy pivot?

For instance, when the pandemic hit, medical researchers across the nation had to decide to either continue their original work or switch to COVID-19 research. Any outsourced solutions would have needed to keep up with that transition, a tall order for underprepared vendors. Companies that do not build these situations into the equation are more likely to end up with services and contracts they can't actually use.

Cost of Service

The portion of a budget that goes toward outsourcing should be well defined. This means breaking down each element of outsourcing services (e.g., cybersecurity, infrastructure, help desk, etc.) and then further defining how the individual services work within the organization.

The most oft-asked question is always going to be: is it more affordable to insource? The most obvious answer to this question is yes. At face value, it will usually be cheaper to avoid outsourcing. Yet face value is not the real cost measured against the value of outsourcing. From electricity to workers compensation, the true price tag of insourcing can be much higher than surface numbers would suggest.

This is also a good time to evaluate any gaps insourcing might leave. Most notably, companies will see skill gaps if they do not have people in the organization with the knowledge and experience needed to solve complex issues. If you do not need a full-time engineer, hiring a part-time engineer isn't a sustainable solution. It leaves outsourcing as the best alternative.

There is also a matter of emotional and mental demands to think about. For a company that's on a fast-tracked growth cycle, it's difficult for any IT department to both stay on schedule and provide support at the same time. No matter how many employees are on the case, one component is going to suffer. In this case, a company might choose to outsource just to save their staff's sanity.

Should a Company Multisource?

There is a lot to be said for multisourcing services. Using multiple vendors not only spreads risk around, it provides more access to a more diverse team of people that are all working on the company's behalf. The downside of this option is that someone will need to manage it all. From SLAs to performance metrics, it will translate to labor-intensive monitoring, which can ultimately defeat the purpose of multisourcing altogether.

Effectively building out an outsourcing strategy over the next few years is a complex exercise, one that has to look at everything from contract terms to governance to predicted price increases. It may require a consultant to look at the organization and determine how to reduce overhead without impacting the quality of the services offered.

Some companies will need several modes of outsourcing because they'll have enough work to justify the partnerships with multiple vendors. Others will spend far more resources trying to manage outsourcing than the resources they receive in return. In this case, the company may need to insource or hire a single vendor.

While undoubtedly a serious undertaking, the good news is that once the company has the foundation for a dynamic outsourcing strategy, the easier it is to evolve that strategy as the objectives of the organization change over time. This can help companies decide how to prioritize everything from new projects to budgets to equipment upgrades.

Final Thoughts

The recommendations and insights outlined in this whitepaper all boil down to viewing everything through a lens of risk and then determining what those risks mean for the company. No successful organization can forego risk entirely, but all of them need to protect the core business by mitigating risk however they can. Even as technology rapidly evolves, this will be the best way to keep IT departments moving forward at a pace that works for the rest of the departments.

In practice, this may mean having to rethink disaster recovery, rewrite help desk policies, or just build more flexibility into the business model. It also may mean having to outsource certain services. Dataprise provides clients with necessary support to preserve bottom lines during tough times and maximize them in times of opportunity. It's a truly unique experience that manages to give companies a competitive edge when they need it most.

About Dataprise

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