



it news

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IT: DRIVING FORCE OR MERE SUPPORT CENTER?

'Play-it-Safe' IT Cultures Become the Norm

By Rick Ludolph, President, Productive Solutions LLC

Early each year, we are treated to a host of surveys designed to provide insight into IT spending trends and priorities for the coming year. Like any good technology advocate, I carefully digest every finding and conclusion that I can glean from these informative studies. I realize that admission may qualify me as a geek, but please allow me to make a broader point.

Among all the data and percentages in these surveys, one thing that stands out to me is the contrast of the answers provided by business leaders with those given by technologists. In one survey, for example, nearly all corporate management respondents said that they view IT as a strategic enabler to achieving their operational goals. Yet in a separate study, three-quarters of tech leaders described their IT strategies and investment levels as only moderate or downright conservative. Given the fact that IT spending historically lags in our industry, the later actually appears to align closer to reality.

Although not based on formal surveys or research, I believe that many fashion companies have become overly cautious with regards to experimenting and innovating with technology. Recent years of do-more-with-less corporate mandates have resulted in 'play-it-safe' IT cultures that ask, "Why innovate when we can let someone else be on the bleeding edge?"

Supported by improving business conditions and global opportunities, today's business and tech leaders are advised to move beyond the years of cost-cutting and into a new IT strategy that focuses more on innovative technologies that can help the company make money. If you doubt the need for change, just consider the velocity at which our industry operates today as compared to five or ten years ago. Technology is a key enabler to embracing this change.

But how can your company become more innovative without significantly increasing costs and risk? The good news is that becoming more innovative does not necessarily mean significant IT budget increases. Today's software is much more standardized, plug-and-play, and stable; thus requiring less monitoring and support. Options such as software-as-a-service solutions and outsourced support can free-up time and money for experimentation and innovation. Thanks to these and other factors, the old rule of thumb which allocated 80% for ongoing costs and 20% for new investment is giving way to a new reality of at least 40% discretionary IT spending.

Of course, I do not advocate a reckless approach to innovation. The goal is to try more new ideas and technologies with the discipline to get it right the first time, or at minimum to recognize when to pull the plug on the inevitable failure. Risk can be also be reduced by leveraging out-of-the-box functionality vs. customizing, and subscribing vs. buying software. This balance can be accomplished by closely tracking the progress of each project, setting and meeting strict benchmarks, and learning from mistakes.

But beware, just as the pace of industry change has accelerated, adopting a more aggressive IT culture may mean snapping some managers and staff out of their comfort zones. But given the growing need for innovation, traditional approaches must change. Some executives may need to give their IT teams some rope to try new ideas. Likewise, IT teams need to look for ways to take more chances to make a real difference in their companies. And all must realize that making no mistakes means only that we are not making the effort.

Productive Solutions, LLC is an Atlanta-based consulting firm providing actionable advice and measurable results through business strategy, enterprise consulting, and technology guidance services. Contact Rick Ludolph at r.ludolph@productivesol.com or visit the website at www.productivesol.com.