

Why business leaders need to ask their IT organisations about process

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The IT organisation is a black box to many business leaders. It consumes budget and resources and produces services that generally make the business more efficient and competitive.

But ask a question about how the money is being spent and you will likely hear a fuzzy collection of jargon and buzzwords – fuzzwords – that are at best, confusing and at worst, an attempt to conceal.

In my time in IT operations, admittedly, obfuscation was my friend. Questions that I did not have a good answer for could usually be dismissed by throwing in a few fuzzwords.

This is an understandable survival technique used by many in IT, as the pressure both to complete projects and keep the existing services running with limited resources can make improvement efforts all but impossible. Improvement efforts become a casualty when the urgent gets in the way of the important.

Yet, efficiency improvements are what IT organisations desperately need. And business leaders have experience they can share with their peers in IT leadership, as businesses have used process, automation and metrics to enforce consistent quality and identify improvements for decades.

Surprisingly most IT organisations have implemented process, with associated automation and metric-based improvements, only sparingly. But they have slowly been awakening to the need for better defined and executed process, as standards such as the IT Infrastructure Library (Itil) and Control Objectives for IT (Cobit) are more widely accepted.

A discussion of how process is being implemented in IT and the sharing of experiences from a business perspective can provide a bridge for information exchange that acts as a catalyst for better alignment of IT initiatives and expenditures with the priorities of the business.

Some specific questions to spark this conversation may include:

1. What standards are being adopted for process within IT? Hopefully, the answer is something like Itil or Cobit.

But this conversation starter can at least reveal if there is a process initiative at all. Without a baseline of process in place, there is little foundation to be improved upon. If an

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IT organisation is in the minority and has not embraced process disciplines, the business may need first to find out why.

Itil is a way of organising IT disciplines to focus on the services that are delivered to business users, rather than the traditional focus on specific technology silos. Itil accomplishes this by driving the implementation of specific, repeatable processes.

The result should be a greater alignment of goals and objectives between the business and the IT organisation. Effective communication will be a critical enabler and outcome of an Itil program, and business leaders should find that IT leaders involved in Itil will welcome their participation.

Cobit, on the other hand, is driven by compliance initiatives, usually to Sarbanes-Oxley. While it is less detailed from a process prescription perspective, it does require the adoption of processes specific to the security of financial information.

2. What is driving the choices made in implementing process?

This is where business leaders can provide meaningful support. Many in IT are aware of a need for process but do not understand it well. So they rush into standard-driven or vendor-driven initiatives to create process documentation and adopt tools without understanding the goals and objectives.

This can lead to process backlash within IT, as the technical teams come to see process as bureaucracy or an inhibitor to getting things done.

Indeed, as helpful as standards such as Itil and Cobit are, a blind adherence to their “best practices” can waste a lot of time and resources.

The business must share its practical experiences of implementing and improving process at a business level with your peers in IT – especially experiences in the development and measurement of goals to guide the prioritisation of improvement efforts.

3. What information is needed from the business to assist in process adoption?

A good response would be the BIA (Business Impact Analysis) documents that are usually the responsibility of the board of directors and are used for business continuity management.

These documents can help IT set availability targets, prioritise their services and assist with disaster recovery planning.

The biggest need for information from the business is consistent updates on priorities. IT cannot shift projects on a dime, but keeping pace with changing priorities through a process can help IT leaders make better decisions on where to focus resources.

Even better – organisations should integrate IT leaders into business decisions such as acquisitions, expansions, downsizing, and so on. With earlier involvement, unforeseen integration costs or potential IT cost savings can become visible sooner.

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After all, the business is expected to do exactly the same and the IT department should not be exempt from continuous improvement. Process can be the bridge that helps connect a business to an efficient and responsive IT organisation.