

Perception versus reality in IT

Regular dialogue between IT and business essential to ensure good service alignment

By Tony Lock, July 2009

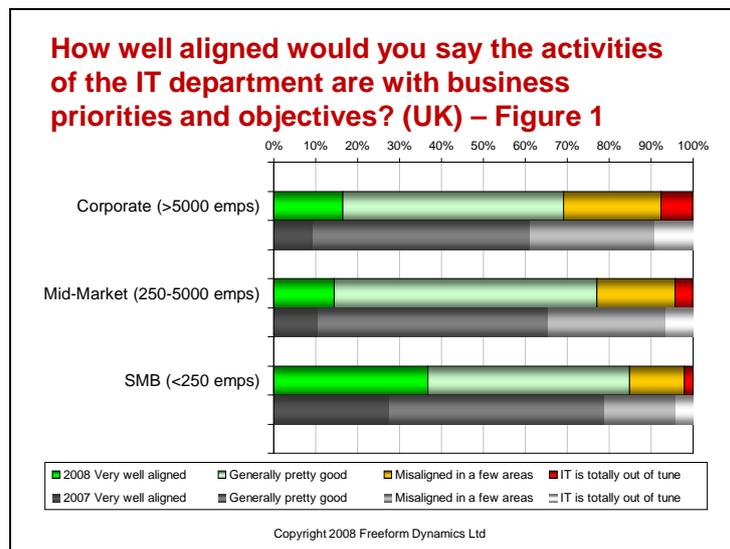
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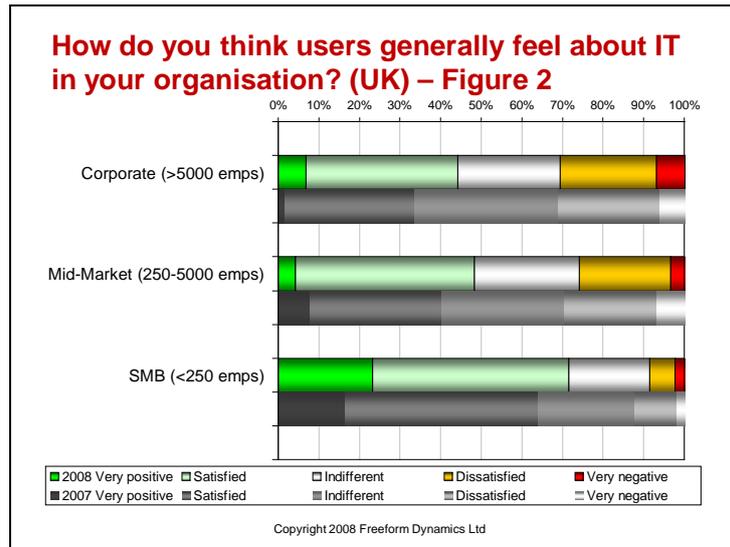
In the world of information technology there is the impression that everything is logical and ordered. This impression even stretches to the point whereby acquisition strategy is believed to follow carefully structured processes designed to ensure that “good” selection decisions are made or, at least, the IT solutions procured are cost effective and in some tangible way “fit for purpose”. But is this what happens in the real world and what role does the human “perception” factor play when IT services are under consideration?

Freeform Dynamics is an analyst house that specialises in finding out what is happening in real organisations in their daily use of IT solutions. Figure 1 below illustrates some research we undertook in October of last year, looking at how well IT professionals think the services they deliver match the needs of their “customers”. Figure 2 shows how those customers feel about IT in their organisation. Both the trends on display and an interpretation of the underlying perceptions provide significant food for thought.



As can be seen from the figure above there is substantial evidence that overall IT is doing a pretty good job of delivering the services that organisations need to undertake their business. The results show that for large organisations nearly 70 percent of respondents consider that the activities of the IT department are either very well aligned with business objectives or generally pretty well balanced. For mid-sized enterprises the figure is even higher whilst in SMBs the number reaches above 80 percent. Comparing the survey results from 2007 with those of 2008 indicates that such alignment appears to be getting better as time goes by, something for which those charged with the delivery of IT services are not always given credit.

Which brings us nicely to the question of how well does this apparent alignment of IT service with business need match up with the perceptions of business customers?



An initial glance at the figure above could be interpreted to mean that IT staff believe their users do not entirely agree that IT is doing a great job meeting their business needs, or at least their expectations. A close look at the figures illustrates that in large enterprises, just over 40 percent of respondents think that their customers are either very positive or at least satisfied with IT service delivery. Within small businesses this number jumps to over 70 percent. This difference clearly highlights one of the major challenges faced by IT staff in large enterprises, namely that the formal separation between IT staff and customers appears to be an inhibiting factor in setting service delivery perceptions. There is clearly a need for IT staff and customers need to talk to each other more.

The existence of formal support processes may inhibit the ability of IT staff to both ensure customers feel good about IT service delivery and, perhaps far more importantly, help shape expectations early in the service delivery process. In small businesses IT is naturally much closer to their customers and this ensures that expectations are much easier to mould as well as making it more straightforward to meet changing business requirements as soon as they become apparent. One point to make here is that once again the trend between 2007 and 2008 results does show that again things are going in the right direction.

The important point to be taken on board here is the value of communication between IT and the business customers particularly when it comes to managing expectations and hence the perception of IT in the minds of its customers. As the saying goes perception can be more important than reality in very many areas, never mind IT. Interestingly, other results from our survey show that, in organisations of all sizes, a significantly higher proportion of senior managers feel very positive or satisfied with IT than the general staff at large. This result perhaps illustrates that senior business managers today have a growing appreciation of the IT services they use but that the user base as whole does not have such a good image of IT.

One result though stands out, and it is not the proportion of people who are “dissatisfied” with IT. The survey results show that both communities report at least 20 percent are “indifferent” to IT, a

result that is perhaps not so hard to understand given that IT is often only really visible when something goes wrong. It is my contention that improving the routine communications between IT and customers when things are going well, not just when there are issues to be addressed, will help improve the perception of IT. In addition, improved communications should also help align service delivery with business requirements to even higher levels. Of course, people being people, there is also the chance that even as service quality rises and IT / business communications improve that users will simply become accustomed to the improved service quality. Under these circumstances any interruption to service delivery will stand out. Thus improving communications is essential to continue the acceptance of IT quality, setting perceptions and controlling expectations.

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