
Next generation systems management

Strategic enabler or survival tactic?

By Andrew Buss, January 2011

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The IT environment is complex, and undergoing continual upheaval. For many businesses, although the IT infrastructure is felt to be [modern and generally fit for purpose](#) [1], many challenges remain, especially around operational issues. One of the most common headaches we hear about in our surveys is just how difficult it is to keep up with the day-to-day operations, let alone [optimise IT to face new challenges](#) [2].

A big part of this is down to the lack of investment in management tools that are able to deliver joined up IT services to the business. Our research shows that most of you are probably sitting on management environment that is not really performing as well as you would like.

Historically, IT has evolved in a fragmented manner, resulting in an equally fragmented management environment. As you look to the future at where the business is going and how IT needs to support this change, you will need to take a more joined up view of systems management.

This doesn't mean that you need to go out and spend money straight away — if at all. Instead, the place to start is to have a good look at what you do, and how you do it. You may well find inefficiencies, overlaps and conflicts, as well as gaps and hidden costs.

Organisations of all types can benefit — from those where IT is a core part of the company and funded to enable innovation — to those where the least amount possible is spent to keep things ticking over.

Let's consider a couple of scenarios.

If you are working in one of those companies that invest heavily in IT, the challenge is not getting systems to work together. Management processes tend to be well defined with many formal processes and policies, and integrated tool sets enable joined-up IT services to be delivered to the business.

Instead, the issue is likely to be scalability and responsiveness. The big problem is that much of the management is still reliant on people to make changes. Unfortunately, repetitive tasks are limited by the productivity of individual staff, adding massive overhead. People also take time to prepare and travel, and to make and test changes. The end result is that change is slow and costly, although very well managed.

The reason this issue is being felt more keenly is that IT is becoming more dynamic. Virtualisation is taking hold, and dynamic IT is starting to have an impact. Doing things the manual way is not really viable in this new virtual world, and change needs to happen. This means that it is time to look at automation.

You may have looked at this in the past and felt it too risky to be practical. Time has moved on, and you may well find that to ignore automation is the risky option. Modern tools are able to integrate many more applications and automate much of the routine management activities while still allowing manual control where required for dealing with exceptions.

Implemented properly, it can also greatly aid the implementation side of change management once decisions have been made – although arguably the whole approach to change management will require significant changes too to deal with a more dynamic business.

Moving to automation will be a long arduous process. Politically, there may be fears of job losses, but the most likely outcome is that operations staff are freed from mundane, low impact tasks to dealing with much higher value and more interesting work.

Low investment

If you are having to manage an IT organisation that is not valued by the business, investment in management tools may not seem at first glance to be an obvious way to save money. Indeed, just making the case for investment in modern management tools will be a challenge all in its own right as we are told repeatedly that senior management do not recognise the link between better management and the services delivered to the business.

But consider the alternative — a patchwork of tools that have evolved as various systems and services have been put in place that add overhead and complexity to the on-going operations. Ask yourself how many different tools you use for troubleshooting problems or for day-to-day systems management.

Each additional tool adds time and cost, while also requiring investment in training and support.

It also makes it more difficult to implement any form of structure and process around systems management, as difficulties in working with different management systems is often cited as a problem. This is important because end-user satisfaction then also tends to be low, resulting in a chicken and egg situation where expectations of IT are low, and therefore the willingness to spend more on IT remains low.

In this situation, the most pressing problem is to consolidate and simplify the management environment. The feedback we've had is that moving to a lightly structured management process works well in combination with a single main management suite. The reality is that the management processes are likely to be attempted initially, with difficulties in implementation prompting investment in the tools a little later on.

You don't have to go all out for completely integrated IT systems management. Starting small and implementing changes a step at a time can go a long way towards increasing the value of IT to the business. Identify which issues are having the greatest impact on management, and tackle these with investment in updated or new tools where possible, rather than slapping structure on areas that have a minor role to play but that are easy boxes to tick.

Whichever situation you find yourself in, investment in improving your systems management capabilities is likely to generate big results. The problem is that it is often realised too late in the cycle to have the most impact.

If we can leave you with an opening thought for the New Year, it's to put management at the heart of all new projects.

[1] x86 Server virtualisation check point - <http://www.freeformdynamics.com/fullarticle.asp?aid=1241>

[2] IT Services and Systems Management - <http://www.freeformdynamics.com/fullarticle.asp?aid=1245>

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