
Don't be fooled

IT is working

By Tony Lock, August 2011

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If one were to believe even a tenth of the marketing messages that are thrown out by IT vendors, the quality of IT services delivered inside organisations today are horribly expensive, poorly delivered and way too inflexible. They often follow up by stating that business people want IT to shape up or bring in the cloud, whatever that might be. Luckily for people generally inside IT and, more importantly the vast majority of their users, reality is somewhat different.

It is sad to note that for much of the past two or three years many IT vendors have put great efforts into marketing the message that IT isn't working or is a bottleneck on the development of the business. Such messaging is even more widespread at the moment as the IT industry tries to convince everyone that the entire IT infrastructure is deadweight around thrusting enterprises stopping them exploiting any number of business opportunities.

Vendors claim IT departments are the bad guys

It is even fair to say that in some campaigns, vendors are setting out to make internal IT the bad guys whilst some combination of virtualisation, better management solutions and external cloud solutions stand ready to make everything better for business people overnight. Some CEOs of large vendors have even stated that if you haven't started doing "cloud" already, you may be too late!

Few marketing campaigns win prizes for setting out how mainstream organisations work or how they change with time. This is usually at a fairly sedate pace, usually constrained by the pace at which the business is comfortable to change, rather than by IT. In real life, revolutions are very, very rare.

IT must be doing something right

Numerous surveys carried out by Freeform Dynamics over the last few years show that the answer to the question, "Is IT as poor as much marketing makes out?" is a resounding NO. On many occasions we have asked how customers inside the business perceive the quality of service they receive. The answers are not likely to be surprising to anyone who works in IT, but could shock the marketing managers of cloud solution vendors. By and large most users think that IT generally does a good job, but that there are usually areas where things could be better. Certainly there are organisations where IT is not well regarded; the numbers are comparatively small but noticeable.

Even a little thought indicates that IT must be doing something right. With many organisations heavily dependent on their IT systems running effectively, day in day out, it is clear that if there are serious issues with service delivery things will come to a head quickly. Either IT gets better or the business has major problems that could force it to shut down or rescale operations. The fact that most organisations continue to operate in fiercely competitive markets, even when IT investments are being tightly controlled highlights that IT is seen to be delivering.

As in all walks of life, there are areas that from time to time need attention and IT is no different. The capability to benchmark IT capabilities against peers etc. could be useful to show how well IT performs. However, it should be noted that few organisations have in place meaningful business

metrics by which to measure the quality of their internal service delivery, never mind getting useful equivalent data from their peers and competitors.

Outsourcing does not always make sense

The never ending quest to identify where to invest may focus on changing technology, updating processes and developing new skills, possibly all combined. It may also be the case that it does make sense to shift some services to be delivered by outside suppliers, be they managed service providers, outsourcers or simply temporary contract labour. The likelihood is that staff know of areas they need to address in the same way they know when things are working well, even if they have little in the way of performance evidence.

Why, then, have many vendors taken considerable effort to market the idea that IT is not functioning effectively? In particular it is clear that numerous promoters of so called “cloud” solutions have gone to great lengths to convince both IT professionals that they have to change as well as communicating business leaders that if their organisation is not adopting cloud it may be left behind.

Certainly “cloud”, be it if the private / internal, public / external or hybrid variety, has the potential to offer higher levels of flexibility for certain services. One day they may even be able to deliver services at a lower cost than is possible internally, at least for certain offerings. But our survey evidence, gathered over several years, shows that large swathes of the community feel “cloud” today to be suited only for specific workload types rather than being the answer to answer to life, the universe and everything.

Cloud will not take over the world overnight. Even the adoption of internal cloud delivery requires significant changes covering a variety of aspects of internal politics, IT and business budgeting as well as major alterations to operational processes and accounting. Compared to these, changes of a technical nature are fairly straightforward to adopt, even though investment is required.

Vendors should stop knocking IT

It's time for vendors to stop knocking IT and focus instead on what benefits their various solutions might deliver in terms with which both business and IT professionals can relate and make up their minds on solid evidence rather than fear and doubt. By claiming everything is broken, vendors are missing the opportunity to meet minds with buyers and users on some of the specifics that are causing pain. Everyone has these. It's the difference between offering medication to help with an upset stomach versus offering brain surgery as the answer to a hangover.

Even if vendor messaging changes overnight and there is little probability of that happening, now is a good time for IT managers and CIOs to look at ways of improving the reporting of their effectiveness to the business, using meaningful metrics that ordinary line managers can understand. Better communication with customers helps keep them “on board” and can also help fend off spurious vendor marketing. Ultimately it helps the business understand how effective IT is and maybe even makes it easier going forward to get hold of investment.

About Freeform Dynamics



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As part of this, we use an innovative research methodology to gather feedback directly from those involved in IT strategy, planning, procurement and implementation. Our output is therefore grounded in real-world practicality for use by mainstream business and IT professionals.

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