Chapter IX

Prescription to Remedy the IT-Business Relationship

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ABSTRACT

Even though organisations are highly dependent on information technology (IT), many organisations have reported an unhealthy relationship between business and IT professionals. Establishing an effective relationship between these two disparate groups is essential for organisational success in today's competitive global economy. Despite many attempts to improve the IT-business relationship, tensions still exist. The cultural differences between business and IT have recently been blamed for these tensions.

Through the application of relevant organisational behaviour theories, the cultural characteristics of the IT group that effect the IT-business relationship can be identified. Research shows that the IT culture is such that mutual benefits are not derived from the relationship, IT and business groups have a poor attitude towards cooperation, there is a lack of shared knowledge between business and IT, and there is a lack of organisational linkages between business and IT. As a starting point for reconciliation between business and IT, this chapter provides insights into how tensions in the IT-business relationship can be minimised through understanding and managing the IT culture.

INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of computers in the early 1960s, many organisations have reported a troubled relationship between business and information technology
(IT) professionals. Some 40 years on, and despite many attempts to resolve the troubled relationship, tensions still exist. These tensions have, in recent times, been attributed to the cultural differences between business people (those who use IT) and IT people (those who make IT work).

Establishing an effective relationship between these two disparate groups is essential for organisational success in today’s competitive global economy. In an effective relationship, IT and business professionals work together to understand business opportunities, determine needed functionality, choose among technology options and decide when urgent business needs demand sacrificing technical excellence for immediate, incomplete solutions (Rockart, Earl & Ross, 1996).

This chapter examines the troubled IT-business relationship from a cultural perspective. Firstly, six ingredients necessary for an effective IT-business relationship are explored. Secondly, some of the more typical characteristics of IT groups are identified. Then, the effects of each of these cultural characteristics on each of the six essential ingredients of an effective relationship are discussed. As a starting point for reconciliation between business and IT professionals, insights are provided as to how tensions in the IT-business relationship can be minimised through managing the IT culture.

**SIX ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE IT-BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP**

There have been many models developed by researchers and practitioners to explain the behaviour between groups in organisations. One of these models, developed by Henderson (1990), specifically describes the partnership between business and IT professionals in organisations. This model, illustrated in Figure 1, has two dimensions:

1. Partnership in context—key factors necessary for a long-term relationship;
2. Partnership in action—key factors that create an effective day-to-day working relationship.

*Figure 1: Six determinants of a partnership (Henderson, 1990, p.10)*
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