Chapter XII

The Importance of the IT-End User Relationship Paradigm in Obtaining Alignment Between IT and the Business

A.C. Leonard
University of Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Sound relationships between IT professionals and their business counterparts (end users) could be regarded as one of many important factors playing a role during the alignment process between IT and the business. Research has, for example, shown that aligning with anything other than the customer leads to only momentary success. The chapter describes IT-end user relationships as intriguing and complex. These relationships should be seen and managed as multidimensional entities. Two such dimensions, the physical and abstract dimensions, form the basis of IT-end user relationships. These two dimensions enable one to fully describe the holistic nature of such relationships and to encapsulate the important elements of a support-oriented organization, namely mutuality, belonging and connection. The chapter describes how sound relationships can enhance alignment between the business and IT. A conceptual model for maintaining alignment is also introduced.

INTRODUCTION

International Data Corporation (CIO, 1997) surveyed 283 top executives across three vertical industries: finance, manufacturing and retail/wholesale. They found “a strong correlation between the effectiveness of the IT department [IS
organization] and the relationship between the CIO and the CEO.” “We suspect that this relationship, if it is close, permits the CIO to develop the IT department [IS organization] into a service that delivers competitive advantage for the company, thus enhancing the careers of every IT professional in the organization.” In other words, “a certain amount of mutual esteem will help IT [IS] function as a business partner.”

In terms of alignment, sound relationships between IT and the business become even more important. Boar (1994) states that aligning with anything other than the customer leads to only momentary success. For the IT function to achieve a state of alignment with the business, it must align with the business scope, and through that business scope enable all business functions and processes to serve the customers in a superior manner.

In their research Reich & Benbasit (1999, referring to the work of Horovitz, 1984), point out that there were two dimensions to strategy creation: the intellectual dimension and the social dimension. Research into the intellectual dimension is more likely to concentrate on the contents of plans and on planning methodologies. Research into the social dimension is more likely to focus on the people involved in the creation of alignment. The social dimension of alignment is defined as “the state in which business and IT executives within an organizational unit understand and are committed to the business and IT mission, objectives, and plans”.

Another theoretical perspective supporting the concept of the social dimension of alignment is the social construction of reality. This view would suggest that, in addition to studying artifacts (such as plans and structures) to predict the presence or absence of alignment, one should investigate the contents of the players’ minds: their beliefs, attitudes and understanding of these artifacts (Reich & Benbasit, 1999).

This chapter focuses on the social dimension in terms of the construction and nature of sound IT-end user relationships and the role such relationships play in aligning IT with the business.

Research in this field has shown that relationships between IT professionals and their end users are intriguing and complex, and should be seen and managed as a multidimensional environment. The objectives of the research were, among other things, to identify and describe the most important elements involved in relationships between the IT department and the end user (referred to in the rest of the chapter as IT-end user relationships) which will enhance a supportive culture. Furthermore the research focused on the role and effects transacting has in the forming of IT-end user relationships. Lastly, the research was aimed at creating a better understanding of the social nature and characteristics of the different relationships between IT and its end users while IT is performing its duty as service and support agent.

Theories of how relationships between an IT department and its end users should be managed, or how it can improve alignment between IT and the business, are scarce. Those that do address issues in this regard (Wike et al., 1984; CSC research foundation, 1994; Beard & Peterson, 1988) do not look into soft issues, or give substance to the contents of such relationships. The effects such relationships have on alignment are not addressed at all.
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