The Expert's Opinion

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Retooling Information Technology at Sprint.

Sprint is in one of the most competitive businesses in the world today, the telecommunications industry. In the early 1990s we found ourselves discussing where we were then and where we needed to be to be a leader.

We discovered we have had a traditional evolution of information technology in our organization, from accounting automation to customer service automation, personal computers and the knowledge worker. We knew it was time to establish competitive differentiation by focusing on our product line. The implications for all of this was that software quality really had to become our product quality.

In a telecommunication company your software is a central component of the product that you bring to market. If our product market quality is not at the highest standard then we have problems with the software quality also. Like everyone else, we had a productivity issue on how to improve our speed to market and we really had to look at how we were going to reinvent IT at Sprint. Our focus was divided into several process areas – alignment, architecture, human resources and our quality control.

Alignment
First, Sprint adopted a much closer alignment between IT and business areas. Sprint organized into three distinct and very autonomous business units. Business Service Groups, that markets and services corporate customers, Consumer Services Groups, and Sprint International that services the international business – long distance to other countries and long distance back via the Sprint network. Each of the business units has different characteristics, they are going after different segments of the market, they have different cycle times. In the last few years we made a concerted effort to change out image with the business and to partner with it. In addition to developing the units, we devised three year marketing and service strategies and plans, and we saw that executives actively participated on these strategy teams. We took those strategies that the teams developed and developed a set of IS strategies complimentary to that, for each of the business units. We then had them reviewed in detail with the senior officers of the corporation. For the 1993–95 strategies we have the corporate strategies: Solidify business markets, expand offshore, increase marketing impact, sell our services, strengthen the Sprint culture and increase activity. The matching IS strategies include: Developing customer-responsive product and service platforms, business profit improvement, service and product analysis reporting, and strengthen the Sprint culture. Movement was realized when we actually made an alignment and advocacy program for each or our marketing business units. When you grow as fast as Sprint has grown, and you have the kind of competitive environment that we have, the rush to the market place causes you to cut a lot of corners. So here we were, 6 years old and facing a tremendous system problem, with single set of core systems but 3 very strong segments to support. As a result of that and looking at what we could do to increase our partnering role, we decided that the best approach would be to dedicate development resources, i.e. marketing business units. We also appointed an officer level advocate from IS to represent that marketing business unit between the business unit and the IS community.

Architecture
Sprint really delivers three component services to all of its customers. The one which most people know about is the network, the first fiber optic network in the world, the pin drops and you can hear it. The second, sales and services components including the marketing units who go out and continue to service the products as we deliver them. Third, invoicing, which actually accumulates the information so we can produce the bill.

People Component
The most important part of Sprint’s business plan is the people component. Most of the time we fail is because we don’t do the human things right. Seventy-five percent of the time organizations involved in business process reengineering efforts fail. If you peel the onion back a little bit, you’ll find that we understand a lot about theory and not much about how to deal with people in dealing with a large magnitude of change. We do know at Sprint that if we want to be a world class company, we need world-class people. We have put in some innovative programs to address that component. Campus recruiting four times a year enables us to choose the best new people for the job. The retaining portion is for excellent employees that we already have. We retain these people through extensive retraining programs.
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