An Anonymous Interview

Due to the sensitivity of the items discussed, the individual "expert" wishes to keep his/her identity as well as the organization anonymous. — Editor-in-Chief —

Interview conducted by Ray Hackney
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JGIM: What are your IS strategic roles in the business?

CIO: I think there are a number. The first and most fundamental is participation in the development of effective business processes. Most IS departments would like to think that they not only participate, but actually initiate the development of most business processes. What we do is to often start the discussion, but at the end of the day the business decides the business processes, how it chooses to operate and who participates in it.

JGIM: So what comes first as you are on the technology side?

CIO: Certainly technology absolutely doesn't come first. Sometimes the business decides that it might choose to call a business process re-engineering although rarely is it quite as fundamental as that. A manager comes into an area of the business and decides or recognises that the business is changing and there are opportunities that are not being grasped. Sometimes, for whatever reason, and it can be technologically based, the opportunity is for IS to say why we think we could do this a lot differently and a lot better. Over the years I can think of a number of instances where it's happened that way, like our first MRP system and our complete review of our business processes and product development based around CAD and data management. We have also developed systems which reach out across an extranet to our dealers. Those are examples of the effect technology has had over our business.

JGIM: Do you think the business is often quite clear about its objectives?

CIO: I think the business sometimes is more clear than others about its objectives. Different generations of business managers have different levels of perception of what they really mean by business process objectives. These range from achieving profits to highly qualitative statements about long-term business evolution, and everything in between. From an IS point of view, any business that does not have senior business management with a high regard for the importance of business processes, as opposed to business achievements, is very difficult to work with. At the end of the day what IS does is actually support and evolve business processes. It doesn't actually deliver a product.

JGIM: What are your views on IS participation within business functions?

CIO: First, in the development of effective business processes, IS can either be prime movers in getting a project on the table in the first place or can participate in somebody else's project. It doesn't matter. It's still the same core activity. Second is looking after the existing business processes. Anybody who thinks that's not important has never worked in an organisation that has ceased to do it. Third is development of IT architectures, because a company that does not have a clear view of how it is going to operate is rapidly going to get to a point where the whole thing turns into a black hole. None of these systems is fixed over time, as every system is a micro-cosm of the business at the time it was implemented. Further, every system is a legacy system from the first day it's operated. The time span for replacement of major systems in most companies is between five and ten years. Therefore, you have a spectrum of technologies, business strategies, and power bases spread over ten years of operating. It amazes me it works as well as it does. The reason it does is because you've got a lot of effort going into interfacing and superficial integrating of a lot of things that are developed from fundamentally different points of views and often different cultures. The fourth item is the maintenance of the IT infrastructure from which it all operates. There is a distinction between the architecture (which is a statement of operations, network based and systems technologies) and the infrastructure which is the underlying set of networks, clients and services over which all systems actually operate. This has grown a great deal in ten years from something that hardly existed at all when all we had were mainframes joined together and a few points going outside to connect to other companies. Now it is something which is a vastly complex set of networks, which makes the difference between a company being responsive and open to the rest of the world and resilient to events of all
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