Revitalizing IT's Worth

By By Dave Ramsden, chief intelligence officer at Atrion Networking

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If you consider IT value only in terms of technical precision, you're overlooking half your value. Such focus often relegates IT to a mere cost center rather than a critical participant in the organization. By resting on technical prowess, IT stifles the greater mission of helping users drive business and limits its worth to the business. "Always on" e-mail and phone service, even when it serves as the backbone of an organization, is considered a given. *Our* goal is to better propel the organization towards *its* goals. We are by our very nature a service organization.
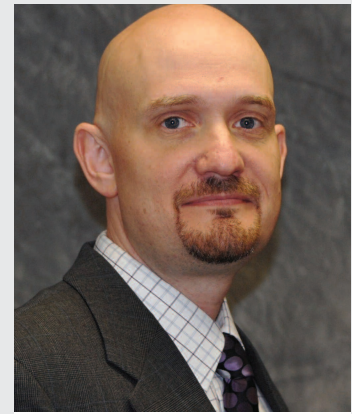
When challenged with the idea that service is a higher calling than technology, some CIOs are skeptical, as are many engineers. Who can blame us when our driving passion is technology? Nevertheless, our role is clear and the means of achieving our goals requires a change in attitude. Here are three key ways to accelerate this change:

- **Executive buy-in:** Start by convincing yourself. You need to establish a clear vision of what you are trying to create. Understand what sacrifices you may have to make in some areas to be strong in others. Make sure that other stakeholders in the organization understand the change and give you feedback as things progress.

- **Redefine how staff measure success:** As part of the vision you set, your team needs to understand how you measure success. It may not be a matter of uptime or ticket closure rates, but rather a gauge of the user's experience. Closing a ticket within a reasonable SLA isn't enough; if the IT department is perceived as clueless and unhelpful, you've lost.

- **Build the right team:** If your focus is on service, then service must be the primary strength of your team. IT staff interact with any number of personality styles within an organization, and they need to be skilled at navigating those interactions. Some of the most brilliant engineers have little or no soft skills, and they are just not the right fit for this type of role.

If you are able to paint a compelling vision of IT as a champion of service, if you have the right people on board to drive that change, and if you are all measuring your success in ways that are clear and significant, you will have already accomplished quite a lot. The fruits of your labor will be found in the feedback of your users and other leadership team members. But this is only the foundation of the value we can create. Our next example builds upon this foundation, to look at the value that can be created by IT's unique vantage point within an organization.

Proactively Leverage Your Connections

Even when help desk and service desk functions adhere to the strictest of ITIL best practices, a primarily reactive relationship will still cause two major problems. First, IT only has control of the situation once there is a fire to douse, because that is the only time it is engaged. Second, we are fools if we think we are engaged whenever there is a problem. The act of engaging IT to fix something takes

work. Some staff are happy to highlight issues (sometimes too happy?). But many people are too busy with their own workload to take on the small but real task of reporting the issues.

How many times have we run into the sporadic problem that has been going on for weeks and never been reported? Or an issue is reported with absolutely no valuable information to aid in troubleshooting and resolving it quickly? Some clients would rather assume that a certain amount of problems are unavoidable (and still retain the right to complain about them) than take on an active role, however small, in resolving it. And it's not their fault, they're busy too. As Plato said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." So how do we proactively aid our brothers and sisters in arms?

IT, like finance and HR, touches just about every part of an organization. If you want to show value, what better place to be positioned than at the hub of all that matters? Every function within a company flows through the applications and infrastructure we host, and for this reason IT has a relationship with both users and leadership in every division. What's more, because IT often has to design, troubleshoot and improve the way applications support cross-functional processes, IT becomes more aware of the inter-dependencies between groups than some of the isolated group members themselves. This gives us an excellent opportunity to add value when it comes to objective consulting on process improvement.

In our organization, IT meets bi-weekly with key departments to proactively find sources of friction and lubricate them. We actively look for bottlenecks and recurring headaches. This process reveals festering issues and uncovers great suggestions for improvements. It also helps the various department staff feel more empowered to make changes that have a direct impact on their jobs.

These discussions provide IT leadership a broader perspective on the business operations. This, in turn, enables them to participate at a higher level in tactical and strategic conversations. But IT holds even more strategic potential that is often untapped. That potential sits idle in our SANs, terabytes of information waiting to be transformed into something with a higher purpose.

Transform Information to Intelligence and Strategy

Strategy requires a vantage point that allows one to see the big picture. Focusing on technology does not give one that vantage point, but focusing on business processes does. The more one broadens one's perspective the more one begins to see the greater patterns at work within an organization. There are many paths towards this end, but one that deserves more attention is the shifting focus from information to intelligence.

When federal officials recently apprehended Times Square terror suspect Faisal Shahzad, he was aboard a plane at New York's JFK Airport, moments away securing travel to Pakistan via Dubai. Though information provided the raw materials necessary for the apprehension, that information would have been useless without filtering, analysis and timely delivery of the intelligence to people who could act quickly on it. As it was, the authorities barely caught the flight in time.

This is a sobering example of the way in which information can be useless, even detrimental, without an efficient means of converting it into intelligence and putting it into the hands of those who are best positioned to act upon it. Poorly done, the results can be disastrous. But when unity of thought and action is achieved, a business can truly become a high-performance organization.

In our company, key metrics are gathered and posted monthly for reference by decision makers. But that information is also analyzed and summarized into intelligence reports, which are pushed out to those decision makers proactively. At a glance those decision makers can get insight into meaningful trends that are affecting our strategic initiatives that very minute.

IT has long been a steward of information. But, if IT is to add value to an organization, it needs to leverage the information it possesses in new ways. It must provide intelligence to senior leadership for timely decision support. Intelligence strengthens the crafting of corporate strategy and induces effective execution of it. The fusion of business strategy and technology ultimately connects IT to executive level decision-making at its highest levels.