

## So, who needs an IT strategy anyway....?

Over the years, the term “information technology” (IT) has come to mean many things to many people. In fact, there’s almost as much confusion about what everyone means by IT as there is about what we all mean by ‘strategy’. Adding all that together, it’s hardly surprising that so few people agree about what an IT strategy is!

Five minutes on the internet will tell you there are plenty of technical definitions for what counts as an IT strategy. As with most things, it usually works better to forget about what the words may or may not mean and to think instead about what you might use an IT strategy for - if you had one. When you do that, you realise the only point is to help you make good decisions about IT *in your organisation*.

### Here are some examples of the questions a good IT strategy will help you answer:

- Should we buy standard packaged software or should we build our own systems?
- What levels of IT service and support do we really need? Do any of those services need to be provided 24 hours a day, seven days a week? What, if anything, should we outsource?
- If we do outsource some of our services and support, then what resources and skills do we need to make sure we keep in-house?
- What standards do we need for equipment and software; what should our approach be for replacing or upgrading?
- Are there areas where we think we should take risks with new technology (for example to gain competitive or other advantage)? Are there areas where it is important that our IT is ‘safe’?
- How will we measure the potential and actual benefit of any investment in IT? Does it matter if we don’t think we can?
- How should we manage our IT projects? Do we want IT people do lead every time? Or never? Who else might or should?
- How formal or demanding do we want to be about the business case for IT investment? What are the key things we want to insist on before any IT project gets underway?

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Of course it's completely possible for an organisation to operate without an IT strategy - and many do - but the absence of a good strategic framework inevitably means that decisions and choices about IT have to be made on their own merits (and that usually means because someone has shouted loudest...). In the end, ad hoc decision-making can be an expensive luxury; inconsistency leads to inefficiency, frustration and waste. More importantly, even if your organisation can afford to make decisions that way, the wrong IT investment can quickly become an obstacle to achieving your aims, rather than one of the most valuable assets at the organisation's disposal.

But imagine you had clear answers to that list of questions there.... How much easier would it be to make long-term decisions about IT? How much easier would it be to manage requests and queries day to day?

And it really isn't as difficult as you might think to put an IT strategy together. The trick is to remember that the strategy is *for your organisation and for you* – not a general purpose thing or an idea that has worked quite well for someone else. Your IT strategy needs to be unique to you, so start with the aims and priorities of your organisation. What are they and what are key things people are trying to do to achieve them? Where can IT help best with that? What should your organisation look like when it has the right IT and what are the projects that are going to get you there?

Developing an IT strategy can seem like an impossible task. Many organisations give up. But it needn't be that hard – and, on the other side, the benefits are huge.

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