

Hitting the Moving Technology Target

Aligning IT plans with organizational goals is easier said than done.

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Rapid changes in both technology and U.S. military missions are mandating that information systems plans be comprehensive as well as flexible. Within this transformational environment, most organizations recognize the need for strategic plans that improve their ability to accomplish their goals; however, many times these plans fail to achieve the desired results.

Although several factors contribute to this quandary, one main reason is that many information technology (IT) plans are not aligned with organizational strategic goals. These plans often either fail to address the necessary breadth and depth of the required systems or are too rigid and cannot be adjusted to respond to the pace and direction of technology changes. A successful strategic IT plan maps the IT future of the organization, allowing it to field effective communication and information services, realize efficient system implementations and reap cost savings from investments.

Identifying and fielding effective information systems ensures that they align with the organizational strategy. Dr. James Thomas, dean of the School of Information Science and Technology, Pennsylvania State University, Philadelphia, points out that the relationship between organizational strategy and IT strategy is the interaction of four quadrants of a strategy alignment model: organizational vision, IT strategy, organizational infrastructure and IT infrastructure. In this planning model, IT strategy and implementation of IT infrastructure are derived from the organizational vision; however, all of these elements interact. This interaction focuses on what is possible given the current state of technology, resource constraints and organizational aspects such as culture and personnel. The fundamental concept of the model is the alignment of strategic fit and integration.

Some experts point out, however, that the relationships between organizational strategy and specific technology initiatives are not always clear and suggest that they must be plainly identified to ensure the efficient implementation of systems. Christopher Sowa, senior strategist, IBM, Somers, New York, advocates the use of strategy trees to illustrate how systems link directly to the organizational strategy and the core competencies needed to implement that strategy. This approach helps ensure that the needed skills exist within, or are obtainable by, the organization.

When integrated with budget data, a strategy tree visually identifies the IT investments of value to the organization. The key is to measure technology investments with metrics that track both the information systems' costs as well as the money

these systems will save. Although not directly linked to organizational strategy, the cost savings aspect of IT planning cannot be ignored, Sowa points out. Most organizations face at least some resource limitations. Many struggle with unstable or unpredictable funding streams.

Once developed, strategic IT plans must be revisited and updated continually. They must respond to the need for modification that results from an ever-changing environment. Sometimes the changes are incremental such as those brought on by the emergence of new technology. In other situations, the changes are revolutionary such as those triggered by the war against terrorism. Continual revision calls for a publication medium that is easily updated. Modern publication methods, high-level strategic IT initiatives, associated metrics and specific IT programs address this need.

The U.S. 8th Army's strategy IT plan exemplifies an approach that incorporates these characteristics. It fulfills many of the key elements that result in effective, efficient and cost-viable IT systems. The document contains IT guidance along the entire spectrum of planning with a high-level vision that looks 10 years into the future, provides phased road maps for specific IT initiatives and projects funding for each of these initiatives tied to organizational budget cycles.

The publication medium is somewhat unique. The 8th Army's plan was designed to exist only in electronic form. It contains more than 2,100 pages of text documents and presentation slides, a dozen spreadsheets and databases, and numerous videos and hyperlinks. More than 150 hypertext comments, which are cursor activated, help users locate relevant information.

The information is organized in the Army's standard operating procedure style of annexes, appendices, tabs and enclosures, and each corresponds to a separate file directory that contains single to multiple files and subdirectories. Different directory levels can be viewed in the hyperlinked index or document map. The index is updated automatically as new items are added to the plan.

An organization's IT strategic plan is the vision that guides communication efforts and provides detailed direction to plan and implement specific technology initiatives. It maps the IT future of the organization, permitting the organization to field effective systems, realize efficient system implementations and reap cost savings from IT investments.

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