

Moving from the IT/MIS “Techie” Image to a Business Partner Role

An outsiders view on the critical mindset change for today's internal IT/MIS professional

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The great surge in the outsourcing of IT/ MIS functions has been in progress for several years now and looks set to continue. The objectives for outsourcing are typically based on delivering cost savings, improved service delivery and a strategic desire to focus on the core business. Many large IT/MIS functions have suffered from a negative internal brand that has often contributed to the desire of some business leaders to off-load the function to an external service provider. Typical line criticisms of the function have included blown budgets, lack of flexibility and responsiveness, late delivery and a failure to provide what the business wants. Whilst these criticisms, will in some cases, have been exaggerated, the fact is that major problems do occur in managing the internal relationships between line managers and the IT/MIS department. But is this any different to any other function such as Finance or for that matter HR? Probably not, but IT/MIS professionals do tend to get more than their fair share of criticism because of the huge costs involved in their work. A key aim of outsourcing is to often make visible the true cost of IT/MIS in a business. Equally it is a department that has to work with a lot of complex technical issues that often become a blur to the operational manager. The harassed business unit manager's term of contempt for the IT/MIS department is that it often employs a bunch of “techies” who struggle to communicate and fail to deliver what the business needs.

In today's customer centric world, technical expertise is simply the ticket to the game for the aspiring IT/MIS professional. To excel IT/MIS people have to proactively manage internal relationships and operate effectively as business partners and internal consultants. This demands a change in the mental models, attitudes and skills for the traditional professional. Today, it is not enough to be technically proficient; you have to demonstrate a strong business understanding and possess real influencing and client management skills. The challenge is how to become a highly effective and trusted Business Partner.

At Performance Dynamics we were recently involved in a project to help rebuild the working relationships between a company and their outsourced IT partner. The relationship was in great difficulty; trust was low, and there was a strong adversarial atmosphere in the building. E-mails were being sent across the office rather than face-to-face meetings taking place. At the heart of the problem were major failings in how the relationship had been managed on both sides. The client felt they had been “turned over” by a service provider who seemed incapable of delivering what they had promised. Whilst the service provider felt the client was being totally unreasonable in wanting everything for nothing. The situation really was rock bottom. Yet around the large room were a group of highly skilled, motivated and experienced professionals. How had the situation and relationship become so dire?

Clearly there were problems with the original contract that had been signed. From the contract it was clear that the service provider had been over zealous in their desire to win the work; clearly promising too much, whilst the client had perhaps been naïve in expecting to get so much. But at the same time the mental models that people were using to manage the relationship were based on a traditional support function and colleague relationship. In many outsourcing situations existing staff are simply transferred to the new provider with little training in how to manage what is a new and fundamentally different relationship with past colleagues and line managers. The result is that people do what they have always done rather than adopt a new perspective and working approach that is based on a new “client-centred” contractual relationship. The so-called professional service provider had clearly not done a good job in helping staff make the adjustment from a “colleague to client” perspective. It was also clearly evident that they were not doing a good job in managing the client themselves.

Too often the IT/MIS professional will view their client as a “user” or a “colleague.” There is of course nothing wrong with this perspective – colleagues are good friends with whom we can discuss things and share a joke with at the end of the day. After all we’ve known these colleagues for several years. It means we are happy to turn up a few minutes late for a meeting or not always make the extra effort to be fully prepared for the meeting. At best we will do whatever we can to help those colleagues who respect us and try to understand our challenges. But for those colleagues who don’t respect us well they can be sometimes made to wait. Colleagues might be stalled or deliberately avoided when difficult issues come up. We might even be tempted to tell the occasional small lie or provide a false promise in order to keep a difficult situation under control or to avoid upsetting a difficult colleague. Uncomfortable

as these observations might be, they nonetheless exist in the best IT/MIS organisations. They are the negative aspects of adopting a colleague perspective.

The huge advent of outsourcing and the creation of internal markets has done much to highlight the need for effective business partnering and client management skills amongst IT /MIS professionals. Unfortunately these skills are often confused with the classic project management disciplines of time, cost and quality. Business partnering and client management skills are quite different. Yes, they may utilise some of the basic disciplines of good project management and use project charters or terms of reference but they also go far beyond that.

The fact is that there is a huge difference in seeing people as clients rather than colleagues. In the client centred world it is the IT/MIS professional who chases the client for responses and answers; you proactively manage and drive your clients. If a client is chasing the IT department it generally means the relationship is not being managed correctly. In the “colleague” world the IT/MIS professional might turn up late for a meeting whereas in the client world it is only the client who has the right to be late for a meeting. In the client centred world the IT professional is there to help the business deliver greater value through effective solutions and they facilitate this process by forging extremely powerful relationships that are based on a meeting of equals. Some professionals dislike this approach; “It makes us too subservient” they say, “after all we are the experts! Very often the line does not know what they want!” Such attitudes ignore the huge benefits of managing internal customers with effective client management disciplines. In the colleague relationship the IT/MIS professional may lead on a key decision only to be blamed by line managers at a later date if things go wrong. Whereas in the business partner model the IT professional directly challenges the client and make them feel the “pain” and “ownership” of making tough decisions. They recognise that it is the client that has to ultimately own the problem and the solution. They realise that the best solution is the one that will enjoy the support and ownership of the client rather than the best technical solution.

In the business partner world client expectations have to be managed above all else; the objective of effective client management is to avoid a “surprised” client. A surprised client is all too often an unhappy or angry client. The outsourced IT/MIS department frequently had lots of unhappy clients. Better to tell your client today that the project had a two day over-run this week rather than delay the difficult conversation for another month and have to then report a seven day over-run. Classic IT professionals will often try to avoid the difficult conversations

whereas the business partner actively seeks out the line to engage their client. An effective business partner combines excellent technical skills with astute client management skills. They possess a strong level of self-awareness and a sound understanding of the wider business.

Today's IT/MIS professionals need to be immersed in the world and skills of clients rather than colleagues. Acquiring the skills of a business partner or internal consultant are as essential as the traditional IT and project management skills. Thinking client rather than colleague is the only way for IT professionals to grow and prosper. IT directors need to lead the charge to drive this approach deep into their organisation.

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