

Fusing IT and business to dish up a digital transformation treat

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It is unlikely to have escaped your attention that the culinary world is witnessing an explosion of fusion cuisine, with chefs mixing various cooking styles and cultures to create previously unimaginable gastronomical delights.



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Challenged to increase the productivity and profitability of their restaurants, these experimental pioneers are embracing innovation to stay ahead of the competition and ensure the long-term viability of the businesses they serve.

The pressure currently mounting on the modern CIO is not too dissimilar, with CEOs increasingly demanding that they align their IT processes with the overarching strategic objectives of the organisation and prove the long-term business value of their investments.

In many ways, this requires the CIO to become every bit as creative as these chefs, fusing the interests of different lines of business (LOBs) to cook up an innovative digital transformation offering that whets the appetite of the entire organisation.

So, what are the key starting points for any enterprise looking to improve its IT-business alignment?

Collaborative environment

In a recent survey conducted by the International Data Corporation (IDC) in East and West Africa, the overwhelming consensus was that the digital transformation process should be jointly led by IT and the business.

While the emergence of use cases built around innovation accelerators like robotics, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things (IoT), and 3D printing is driving a new wave of business process transformation led by individual business units, the IT department must always be involved.

Allowing business units to operate in silos encourages the spread of shadow IT, whereby business units procure IT solutions without the knowledge or approval of IT. This can introduce complex problems around security and management and cause cost and governance issues to spiral out of control, ultimately placing the overall strategic goals of the organisation in jeopardy.

As tempting as it might be for customer-facing teams such as sales and marketing to go off and pursue their own digital agendas, none of their initiatives should ever be allowed to happen in isolation. Successful digital transformation requires extensive collaboration and cooperation between IT and business leaders to ensure the right outcomes are achieved.

An example of the integration required between business and ICT can be seen in the development of the Konza Technopolis. Planned for development approximately 60km south of Nairobi, this technology hub wants to attract the likes of business process outsourcing, software development, data centres, disaster recovery centres, call centres, and even a university campus to become the Silicon Valley of Africa.

Focused targets

For organisations struggling with large legacy infrastructure, it is important for IT and LOB leaders to agree on a series of smaller, short-term goals aimed at kickstarting the digital transformation process.

Transitioning to cloud-based infrastructure gives organisations the scale and freedom to experiment with new innovations at a realistic pace, making it relatively pain-free to trial smaller-scale solutions. Introducing digital assistants into customer service channels or launching a mobile app to improve customer service are just two examples of small steps that can deliver significant returns.

Beyond these improvements, there are various key performance indicators (KPIs) that can be leveraged to ensure that IT is properly supporting the broader strategic goals of the business. These can include financial KPIs that incentivise CIOs to allocate a higher share of their investment budgets each year to newer technologies such as cloud, AI, and data analytics.

At the same time, CIOs can help LOB executives identify potentially redundant processes or tasks that can be augmented or supported by AI or other machine-learning applications, with an eye on measurably reducing human error and the associated costs.

In Kenya, these tactics are being used to address congestion in Nairobi. Government invested significantly in installing cameras, automated traffic lights, and modernising LED signs as a means of reducing traffic. And while the success of the project has been limited, it does show a clear intent to embrace change.

Looking internally

Continuing with the cooperation theme, internal focus groups are an extremely useful tool for improving IT-business alignment and facilitating enterprise-wide digital transformation. These groups should incorporate representation from

different functions across the organisation, with IT and business units given clearly defined roles and responsibilities as part of a unified roadmap or vision.

IT's primary role should be to provide agile test and development environments that allow business units to experiment with solutions and refine them as and when needed. IT should also draw up structured technology frameworks that business units can refer to when deploying digital solutions.

Kenya is one of the leading economies on the continent and is known for a good business environment, an exciting start-up culture, and embracing digital innovation. More of this is needed to ensure complete alignment between IT and the business.

But if the CIO is to become the new chief (or should that be chef?) of digital transformation, they cannot be expected to do it all alone. Indeed, LOB executives must be willing to communicate transparently and continuously with CIOs to share their visions and goals. Only then can a genuine fusion of IT and business be achieved - one that enables the organisation to unlock the true potential of digital transformation and begin operating like a digital-native enterprise.

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