

Strategic Vision for Information Technology

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INTRODUCTION

Today's dispersal of information technology (IT) decision making across many organizational managers and employees offers the promise of greatly increasing the extent to which IT is applied to the organization's managerial and operational work systems (Boynton & Zmud, 1987; Jarvenpaa & Ives, 1990). Along with the advantages of distributed action, however, come the potential disadvantages of inappropriate allocations of effort and resources and associated outcomes — chiefly poor investment decisions, lost opportunities, duplicated efforts, and incompatible platforms and applications.

One strategy for minimizing these disadvantages lies in the development of a common understanding among an organization's members concerning the primary roles to be served by information and by IT throughout the organization. One tactic for achieving this common understanding is through the development, articulation, and dissemination of a strategic vision for IT (Brabston, Zmud & Carlson, 2000; Collins & Porras, 1991; Nanus, 1992; Parker & Benson, 1991; Robbins & Duncan, 1988).

A 1994 study of banking showed that "while only 9% of CIOs interviewed said their firms have failed to effectively outline an information systems vision to the lines of businesses they support, a full 30% of business leaders reported a void in this area" (Hoffman, 1994). Effective development, implementation, and communication of a strategic vision for IT should significantly reduce this gap.

BACKGROUND

An organizational strategic vision is the shared understanding of what an organization should be and how it must change to get there (Schoemaker, 1997). According to Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (1998), "vision serves as both an inspiration and a sense of what needs to be done — a guiding idea... vision often tends to be a kind of image more than a fully articulated plan... that leaves it flexible, so that the leader can adapt it to his or her experiences" (pp. 124-125). By sharing a common strategic vision, organizational members will better understand how their individual roles contribute to their organization's

strategic mission and will be more likely to act in an appropriate and consistent manner when faced with uncertain or ill-defined situations.

"Having a strategic vision redefines the rules for acting opportunistically or incrementally. The strategies, plans, and budgets should be determined by the vision" (Schoemaker, 1997). Similar benefits are believed to arise when a strategic IT vision is shared by an organization's managers and employees (Parker & Benson, 1991). If an organization's managers and employees are aware of the organization's strategic IT vision, they are more likely to make more effective IT decisions.

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

The process by which a strategic IT vision is developed is clearly important. If the process produces an appropriate, aligned IT vision, one that its developers believe in, one that they can strongly sell to others in the organization, then the IT vision may become reality.

An organization's overall strategic vision is a shared, realistic, yet idealistic and attractive view of the organization that inspires and motivates others, through their individual and collective efforts, to move toward the vision (Collins & Porras, 1991; Nanus, 1992). Figure 1A graphically represents how an organizational strategic vision can serve as the stimulus for all organizational planning. Figure 1B depicts a similar role for the strategic IT vision. The intent is similar but with a narrower scope involving only the organizational role of information and IT. As shown by the dashed lines, the IT strategic vision must be aligned with the organizational strategic vision (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1993; Parker & Benson, 1991).

Figure 1 models the relationship between an organization's strategic vision and its subsequent planning and goal setting and those of the IT strategic vision. The typical process at the organizational level is that a group of individuals develop the organization's enterprise-wide strategic vision (e.g., Gerber's vision that "Babies are our most important product"). This vision is then communicated to others in the organization, resulting in the setting of strategic goals, from whence tactical goals are set, and finally, operational goals are developed

based on the tactical goals. Each of these goal sets should be aligned with the enterprise-wide strategic vision.

In the same way, a group of individuals would develop the IT vision, communicate it, and set goals at each level. At each stage of the IT strategic vision process, the vision and goals should be aligned with the vision and goals of the enterprise-wide strategic vision, as indicated by the dashed lines.

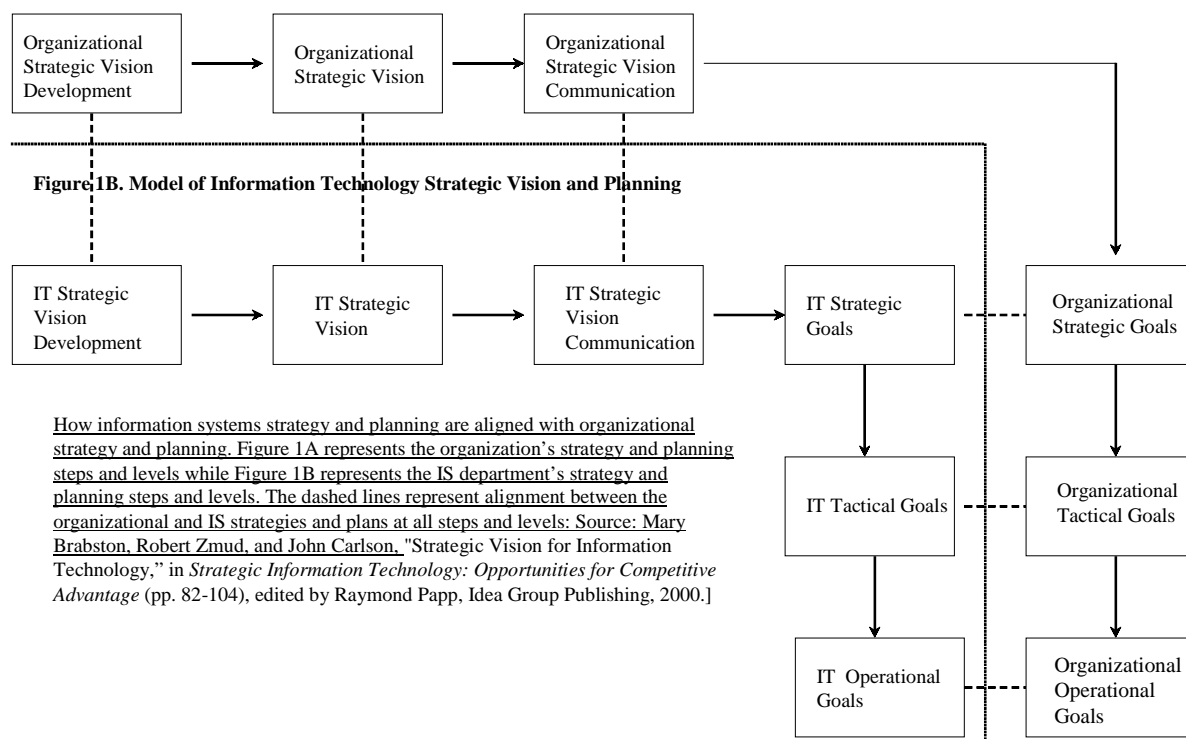
If appropriately developed, articulated, and disseminated, a strategic IT vision should both formally and informally influence the many IT-related decisions made throughout an organization so that these decisions, taken together, enable progress toward achieving the organization's overall strategic vision. In the absence of an enterprise-wide strategic IT vision, information and IT decision making will most likely be framed, rather than by an overarching organizational purpose, by the numerous (and potentially conflicting) mental models that are maintained in the minds of individuals, as well as those that are collectively developed by formal and informal groups throughout the organization concerning the appropriate roles of information and IT (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995).

Most often, strategic visions are phrased somewhat generically in order to increase the applicability of the

vision to each organizational member (Nanus, 1992). This may be particularly important for a strategic IT vision so that this vision is not unintentionally restricted to a particular time frame, IT platform, or set of IT applications. However, although the vision is abstracted to apply across diverse organizational contexts, it should not be worded ambiguously or in such a manner as to create confusion on the part of organizational managers and employees working to apply the vision.

It is important here to distinguish between a strategic IT vision, our focus here, and a strategic vision for an organization's IT (or information services) function. The IT function's strategic vision articulates the organizational role of the IT function as well as the dominating values applied in carrying out these roles (c.f., Nanus, 1992). It may be valuable, but not necessary, that the strategic vision of the IT function be communicated across an organization; it is only necessary that it be communicated to those organizational managers and employees who significantly affect the IT function's efforts in carrying out that area's mission, for example, IT departmental employees, IT vendors, and so forth. Essentially, then, the strategic IT vision paints a picture of the what and why associated with an organization's use of

Figure 1A. Model of organizational strategic vision and planning



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