The Impact of Sound Relationships on Achieving Alignment

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

International Data Corporation (CIO, 1997) surveyed 283 top executives across three vertical industries: finance, manufacturing, and retail/wholesale. They found "a strong correlation between the effectiveness of the IT department (IS organization) and the relationship between the CIO and the CEO". "We suspect that this relationship, if it is close, permits the CIO to develop the IT department (IS organization) into a service that delivers competitive advantage for the company, thus enhancing the careers of every IT professional in the organization." In other words, "a certain amount of mutual esteem will help IT (IS) function as a business partner".

In terms of alignment, sound relationships between IT and the business become even more important. Boar (1994) states that aligning with anything other than the customer leads to but momentary success. For the IT function to achieve a state of alignment with the business, it must align with the business scope, and through that business scope enable all business functions and processes to serve the customers in a superior manner.

In their research, Reich and Benbasit (1999) point out that there are two dimensions to strategy creation: the intellectual dimension and the social dimension. Research into the intellectual dimension is more likely to concentrate on the contents of plans and on planning methodologies. Research into the social dimension is more likely to focus on the people involved in the creation of alignment. The social dimension of alignment is defined as "the state in which business and IT executives within an organizational unit understand and are committed to the business and IT mission, objectives, and plans".

Another theoretical perspective supporting the concept of the social dimension of alignment is the social construction of reality. This view would suggest that, in addition to studying artifacts (such as plans and structures) to predict the presence or absence of alignment, one should investigate the contents of the players' minds: their beliefs, attitudes and understanding of these artifacts.

This article focuses on the social dimension in terms of the construction and nature of sound IT/end-user relationships and the role such relationships play in aligning IT with the business. Research in this field has shown that relationships between IT professionals and their end users are intriguing and complex, and should be seen and managed as a multidimensional environment.

IT–END-USER RELATIONSHIPS: HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

For many years the *culture gap* between IT departments and their end users has been characterized by unfortunate differences like distrust, skepticism and cynicism. This situation impacts negatively on the relationship of IT departments with their end users, and as such on their ability to produce service and support of high quality.

Historically, the gap was caused mainly by the difference in management culture, as well as human behaviour problems on both sides. Umbaugh (1991) states in his argumentation of organizational imbalances that too often IT exists as an adjunct to the organization and not as an integral part of the whole. This situation unfortunately still exists today and contributes to the so-called *culture gap* between IT departments and their end users. Du Plooy (1995) explains this gap as follows:

"...the 'culture gap' should be understood as a gap of misunderstanding in the sense of two different organizational 'cultures' that, according to Grindley, coexist in most organizations. The two cultures under discussion here are the 'culture' of the IT profession and the 'culture' of the rest of the organization."

The culture on both the IT department and the business side is also an important obstacle in building mutual trust, and eventually in building sound relationships between IT and its end-user environment, and as such in creating alignment between IT and the business. According to Moad (1994), the IT professional has been fighting for recognition and relevance at the CEO level for the last 25 years. He gives many examples illustrating the kind of culture that exists, which could be described as the main reason for misunderstandings and misconceptions about IT amongst today's end users.

When a user initially gets involved with the IT department, he/she is introduced to one or more IT professionals who will specifically deal with his/her problem(s). Nor-

mally a sense of mutual understanding and trust grows out of this relationship, which will definitely get disturbed the moment elements of such a relationship change without the knowledge or approval of the role players. In practice, end users very seldom get involved in the management of change which will influence a relationship in which they are involved, or even get properly informed of changes that take place on the IT side. Practice has indicated that this is a typical reason for distrust and criticism against IT departments from the end-user environment.

A review of literature on the history of relations between end users and their IT departments in the data processing industry and how they were treated tells a very sad tale. The attitude or behaviour of IT departments or the so-called DP professionals was one of "we know the best," or "we know what the end user needs and therefore we don't need to try and get the end user involved". Furthermore, even today we get end users on the business side of an organization that are illiterate in terms of computer technology. These end users are normally very uncertain when getting involved in systems development projects and in many cases are the "prey" of an IT department. As a result of this attitude, few attempts were made to keep communication with the end user on a sound basis while developing a system.

Jackson (1986) describes the traumatic period in systems development in the 1960s and early 1970s. In those days programming was considered an "art," and cost and time overruns were the rule rather than the exception. As systems development methodologies developed, control was tightened and the development process assumed many of the characteristics of an engineering discipline.

In order to develop a quality product, especially in a highly complex application system, considerable skill and management expertise were required. One result of the new procedures was, if anything, a lengthening of the time it took to deliver a product. This, coupled with increased user awareness of computer potential, resulted in an increased rather than diminished backlog of applications awaiting development. According to Jackson, a study done by the Sloan School of management found that IT managers considered their application backlog to average 68% of their existing applications software portfolio. However, a survey of users found an additional 112% unbeknown to the IT managers. This illustrates, amongst other things, the typical result of poor relations between IT and its end users.

Although many efforts were made in the past to address these issues, the emphasis mainly fell on putting structures and procedures together in order to get out of the end user what his or her basic needs are. Thereafter, the IT department normally followed a lonely journey through the last phases of the systems development life cycle.

THE NATURE OF IT/END-USER RELATIONSHIPS

The preceeding paragraphs briefly describe the history of how poor relationships emerged over the years between IT departments and their end users, as well as some basic characteristics of such poor relationships. The question one can ask is, what are the characteristics of sound

Figure 1. The basic components of an IT/end-user relationship
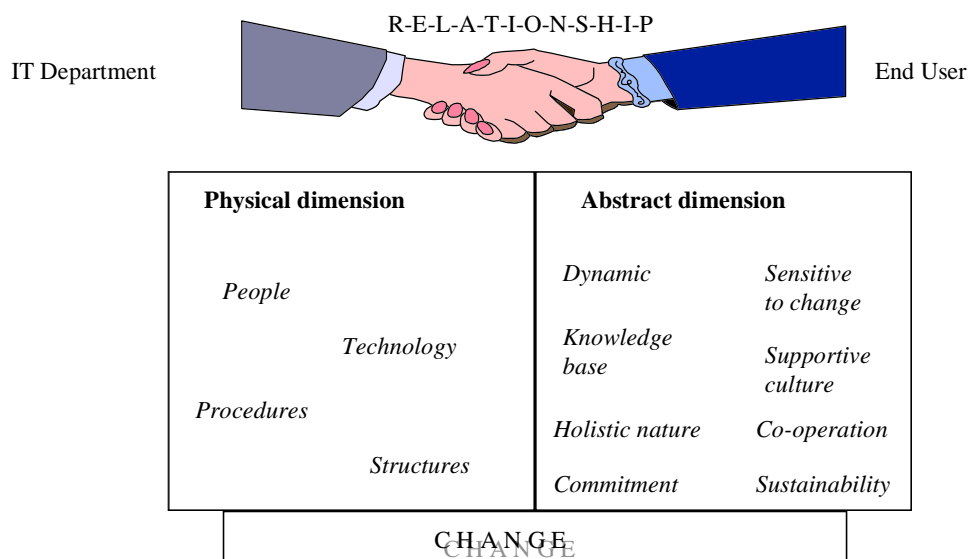
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