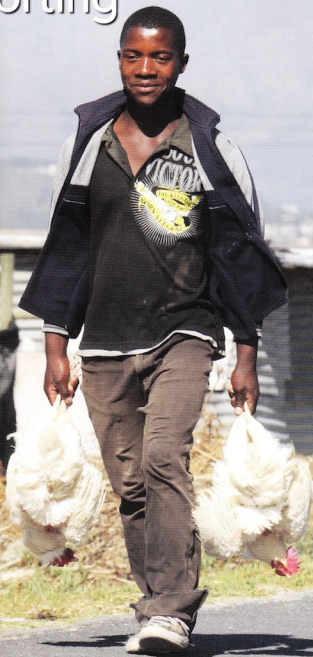


10 DIRECTORSHIP

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THROW OUT YOUR IT DEPARTMENT • TOP 10 MISTAKES IN CUSTOMER CARE

Get rid of your

IT

department

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Corporate life is often spiced up by the rivalries between internal departments. It can be a bit of harmless fun. But sometimes there is real needle in it. And none of these is worse than the antipathy people feel towards their IT department. It's often undeserved, and IT is regularly misunderstood. But, there is also little doubt that IT wields too much power in the average company these days. I'd suggest a simple solution: get rid of your IT department. It's not as crazy as it sounds.

I need to declare my interest in this topic. For much of the 1990s, I was involved in growing an IT startup company that offered solutions development and training. I wrote the exams to qualify as an MCSD (Microsoft Solutions Developer), and freelanced as a web designer and end-user solutions developer (in VB, VBA and SQL if you're interested). I was also involved in the early stages of developing CAATs (computer assisted auditing techniques), whilst an articulated clerk at KPMG.

So, I do have both understanding and sympathy for IT departments. But I also think it's time for a shake up.

Separate IT infrastructure from end user support

Let me be clear about what I am proposing. IT should be responsible for the large technology infrastructure that is the backbone of a company's operations. This includes any proprietary software, the server farms that store the organisation's data and the central hardware that is required to manage the operations of the business. But when

it comes to end-user computing – especially desktop machines, laptops, office equipment (such as printers), smart phones, cellphones and end user office software – IT's role should be limited to setting standards for compatibility and nothing more. I realise this may require some adjustments to current systems, but these will be worth the effort and serious value for money.

Let me explain.

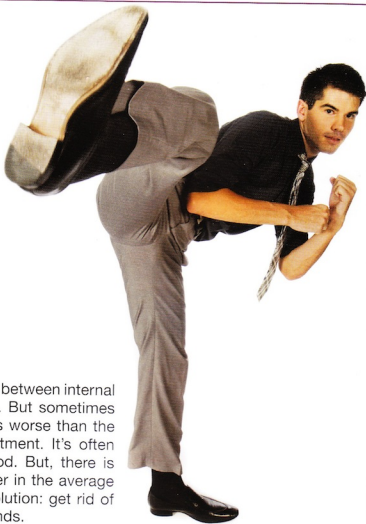
End-user hardware supply and support is the bane of the IT department's life. The whizzkids in IT (assuming you have some) didn't join the IT industry so they could manage laptops and mobile phones' asset registers, answer support calls on how to get a Blackberry to synch with the company's mail server, or to handle the admin related to printer repairs. This should simply not be their problem.

We don't supply people with clothes to wear at work - we just expect them to be suitably dressed (and even enforce dress code policies). We don't supply our staff with watches, but we do expect them to be on time. We don't send taxis to pick them up

from home every day - we just expect them to get to and from work on their own. And if their car breaks down, it's not our problem - they have to both get it fixed and still get to work on their own (and on time). So why do we feel the need to supply people with mobile phones and laptops?

Your people should be given broad specifications and told to get their own equipment, organize their own insurance, their own support and their own replacements if needed (that is, after all, how they handle their transportation). You'll be surprised (or not) to discover that breakages and repairs will dramatically decrease with this approach. And if people complain about the extra cost, you could actually take the money you save by downsizing IT in this way and pay it out to each staff member to cover those costs. Everybody wins.

And, even better, the people who want a Mac, or an iPhone, or a Samsung, or don't want to use MS Office, or whatever they moan about all the time, can go out and just get what they want. IT's job should be to create a central infrastructure that can be



accessed by as wide a range of devices and platforms as possible. This is the modern approach to computing anyway.

Don't let IT tell you it can't be done. Computers are more compatible than they've ever been, as is software. Cloud computing will improve this even more. This is both possible and desirable.

Usage Policies

The second change I propose relates to usage policies. Many companies restrict access to certain websites (such as social networking sites, YouTube, etc.) and block emails being sent to competitors. Unless there is some genuine technical reason to do this (and the only one I can think of is bandwidth problems), it is ridiculous for IT to impose such draconian one-size-fits-all policies.

And, let's be honest, in most companies, people get around these blockages anyway. They use their own Gmail accounts, requisition for a 3G dongle so they can surf the web without going through the company gateway, or simply use one of the numerous mirror sites to get access to Facebook and other sites anyway. In other words, the policies don't work at a technical level. The fact that most of them are ill-conceived in the first place is a moot point.

Don't let IT play their 'security' card, either. This has become an IT shorthand that they use to stop any conversation about change or innovation: 'But it will compromise security'. It should be pointed out to them that, like airport security, their policies are not able to accomplish what they're intended to achieve. They are mainly there for the appearance that 'something is being done', and serve to merely irritate the 99.9% of people who have no intention of subverting the system. And even

if security is weakened slightly, so what? In an age of transparency, a lot of what we spend time and resources protecting might just as well be in the public domain anyway. I realise I am being overly simplistic on this issue – but I do believe that we have not had adequate discussions on what needs to be secured and how that security can be assured. I don't think my proposal about end-user computing will impact security in any meaningful way. But I am sure IT is going to claim that it will.

To Spam or not to Spam

The third issue is just a small bugbear of mine, but I'll take the opportunity to put it out there: sort out your spam filters and spam procedures. Most company spam filters are much too stringent and block too many emails. Worse still, most do not inform the intended recipient that an email has been blocked. This creates a really bad impression for people struggling to communicate with a client or supplier.

For example, a large banking client of ours allows no emails with image attachments to go through its firewall. The problem is that outgoing emails from the bank convert the embedded bank logo into an image attachment. When you reply to the email the bank's own logo gets attached to your reply and then gets blocked by its own email filter. How dumb is that?

Who to report to

Finally, I'd like to see the IT department reporting differently. The CIO can report to the Board and senior management on core IT infrastructure issues. But IT should also be directly accountable to whoever is responsible for branding, customer service and staff engagement. The branding and customer-facing focus is obvious, as this is often where clients and customers interface with

the company (websites, computer systems, call centres, etc.).

The staff engagement issue is less obvious. Increasingly, we're hearing that young, talented people are completely frustrated by the IT policies, hardware and software they have to work with in their organizations. In some cases, this is becoming a dealbreaker for them, and a reason to leave their current jobs. As the recession ends and talent becomes mobile again, you don't want outdated and frustrating IT to be the reason your bright stars leave. Whoever is responsible for this needs to take IT much more seriously than it currently does.

The IT department is integral to most businesses and vital for their success and smooth operation. But most IT departments have too much power, manage too many things, and do not provide adequate support for the businesses they serve. It is in their best interests, as well as the best interests of the company, to sort this out sooner rather than later. My proposals will not solve everything, but they're a good start.



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