Alignment with Sound Relationships and SLA Support

AC Leonard
University of Pretoria, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

International data corporation 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 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.

BACKGROUND

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 artefacts (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 artefacts.

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 multi-dimensional environment. Furthermore, the supportive role of service level agreements (SLA's) in this regard is also highlighted.

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, scepticism, 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.

THE NATURE OF IT-END USER RELATIONSHIPS

The preceding 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 relationships between IT departments and their end users, and how are they established? To answer the question, this section gives a definition of IT-end user relationships and briefly discusses the nature of the different elements.

A relationship between an IT professional and an end user consists of two dimensions, namely a physical dimension and an abstract dimension. The physical dimension describes those elements that are necessary in order to enable contact between IT professional and its end users, whereas the abstract dimension describes the soft issues of such a relationship. These two dimensions enable one to fully describe the holistic nature of such a relationship and encapsulate the important elements of a support-oriented organization, namely mutuality, belonging, and connection, as mentioned by Pheysey (1993) in her book *Organizational Cultures*.

Without going into all the details of the different elements of the physical and abstract dimensions as described by Leonard (2002), the article focuses on describing the most important characteristics of these elements. This will give the reader enough understanding of the social nature of IT-end user relationships.

Physical Elements

As far as the physical dimension is concerned, the following elements could be seen as the most important:

- **People:** A relationship consists of all the responsible people who are involved in the systems development life cycle at a given time. "Responsibilities are negotiated and shared between systems developers, and users" (Dahlbom & Mathiassen, 1993).
- **Technology:** Technology may be seen as one of the most important elements in such a relationship, enabling the people who participate in the relationship to communicate with one another. The importance of proper communication structures, both vertically and horizontally, are emphasized by Bommer, Gratto, Gravander, and Tuttle (1991) and could be seen as one

of the most important organizational characteristics associated with unethical activity.
- **Procedures:** Two types of procedures are of importance, namely organizational procedures (such as standards and policies), which already exist and which can be seen as a given, and new procedures that are being created by people because of their interaction with the given procedures and technology (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994).
- **Structures:** Depending upon the "type" of end user, and therefore the service and support that will be offered, relationships will differ in content as far as formal and informal social communication structures are concerned. The most common of these structures are project meetings, JAD sessions, and end-user group meetings.

Abstract Elements

As far as the abstract dimension is concerned, the following elements are the most important:

- **They are dynamic:** The nature of the relationships between the IT department and its end users will, among other things, depend upon the type of end user, as well as upon regarding the end user as a human being. According to Stokes (1991), when talking to end users, the IT professional should always bear in mind their concerns, problems, environment, and responsibilities in terms of opportunities for IT services and support.
  Furthermore, he says, continuous contact with end users gives IT the opportunity to gain more insight into their problems.
- **They are sensitive to change:** Because of the social nature of relationships, any form of change initiated on either the IT or the end-user side may disturb a relationship. It is argued that any kind of change having an effect on any of the elements of both the physical and abstract dimensions of a relationship will in fact disturb the relationship because of its holistic nature, which will be described later.
- **They have a knowledge base:** The complex world of perceptions, attitudes, and approaches toward developing software products by IT professionals for the end user forces us to a point where it can be said that in order to overcome the most serious problems during this communication process in a relation-ship, a knowledge base of some kind is required before entering a relationship.
- **They have a supportive culture:** In order for a relationship to be sound, continuous support and mutual understanding, among other things, need to be elements of such a relationship. According to Pheysey,

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