

Chapter 9

Key Success Domains for Business–IT Alignment in Cross–Governmental Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

Business-IT alignment is a crucial concept in the understanding of how profit-and-loss organizations use Information Technology (IT) to support their business requirements. This alignment concept becomes tangled when it is addressed in a socio-political context with non-financial goals and political agendas between independent organizations, i.e., in governmental settings. Collaborative problem-solving and coordination mechanisms are enabling government agencies to deal with such a complex alignment. In this chapter, the authors propose to consider four key domains for successful business-IT alignment in cross-governmental partnerships: partnering structure, IS architecture, process architecture, and coordination. Their choice of domains is based on three case studies carried out in cross-governmental partnerships, in Mexico, The Netherlands, and Canada, respectively. The business-IT alignment domains presented in this chapter can guide cross-governmental partnerships in their efforts to achieve alignment. Those domains are still open to further empirical confirmation or refutation. Although much more research is required on this important topic for governments, the authors hope that their study contributes to the pool of knowledge in this relevant research stream.

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INTRODUCTION

Business-IT alignment (B-ITa), already a hard problem in businesses, takes on an additional complexity in government organizations because these address non-profit goals and political agendas. This adds non-measurable, unstated, or conflicting goals to the alignment problem, making it harder to assess the degree of B-ITa—not only in the public sector, but also in the private one. Moreover, cost/benefit trade-offs in government organizations are made differently from the way they are made in businesses driven by profit. In this chapter, we provide some guidelines for B-ITa in Cross-Governmental Partnership (CGP) settings, that is, settings in which two or more government organizations cooperate to provide services to citizens. The organizations may or may not represent the same level of government (e.g. federal, provincial, or municipal government) and their service delivery model may or may not span multiple jurisdictions. Note that we will refer to this by using the term “business”-IT alignment, even though we are talking about governments, because this is the term commonly in use.

Recently, an unprecedented number of organizations in government and the private sector have entered into partnerships. These partnerships help to deal with the increasing complexity of finding new sources to create competitive advantage in a global market. The increasing importance of partnerships came together with the trend for globalization and the advanced use of Information Technology (IT) to reduce transaction costs by using external resources without owning them (Santana Tapia, 2006a, pp. 3-8). B-ITa is a crucial concept in understanding how partnering organizations use IT to support their business requirements. Yet, alignment between business and IT in any organization is a hard problem that currently requires improved management methods, skills, and practices. With the advent of partnerships, the problem becomes more complex because in such environments, B-ITa is driven by goals of differ-

ent independent organizations. In CGPs, B-ITa is commonly driven by mission. Mission-driven B-ITa is complex because of the culture based on rules and budgets that characterize government agencies in general (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

In this chapter, we propose to consider four key domains for successful B-ITa in CGPs: partnering structure, IS architecture, process architecture and coordination. The term ‘domains’ requires some explanation. A domain in a CGP is a coherent set of processes performed in that CGP. Our claim is that improvements in these domains cause more improvements of B-ITa in cooperation across government agencies than improvements in other domains do. B-ITa domains within single enterprises have been studied elsewhere (e.g., Chan, 2002; Federal Architecture Working Group, 2000; Luftman, 2003). Those studies show that domains such as skills, technology scope, partnership, governance, competency measurements, communications, informal organization, requirements, and IT architecture help to align business and IT in single enterprises. However, our claim is independent of the results of such studies since we focus our research on partnerships between independent organizations instead of on single enterprises.

Our selection of domains is based on literature review and professionals experience. We empirically validated our domains by means of three case studies conducted in (1) an inter-organizational collaboration among governmental departments of the state of Tamaulipas in Mexico, (2) a networked organization between the province of Overijssel, the municipalities of Zwolle and Enschede, the water board district Regge and Dinkel and Royal Grolsch N.V., all in the Netherlands; and (3) a network of government agencies in Canada.

In the next section, we first elaborate on B-ITa and CGPs. This serves as basis for the rest of the chapter, which is organized as follows: first, we briefly present the B-ITa domains that we identified after reviewing literature and conducting a focus group session. Then, we describe the case

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