The Changing Face of IT: Where will you fit in?
By Jennifer Hay

For many, the end of the recession means the return to the prosperity and stability that existed in pre-recession times. As economic optimism expands, people expect that jobs, salaries, and benefits will increase in parallel with the recovery. For most, these expectations will slowly become reality. Information Technology, however, is an exception that will fall incredibly short of recovery expectations. It is likely that IT will never return to pre-recession highs. The economy has triggered changes within the industry and going backward is not an option. The future of IT is forever changed. The only decisions to be made are where and how you will fit into this future.

"Why the change?" and "Why now?" you ask. IT has weathered many storms including the influx of outsourced services. No single factor is the root cause of the coming IT shift. It is the combined effect of changes in people, processes, and technology that changes how information technology fits into today's organizations. To understand where we are going, we need to look at several influences.

Business Driven. The vast majority of organizations see IT meeting their increasing needs despite large cutbacks. Slow sales and reduced revenue forced businesses to say, "We can't afford it." The theme of "do more with less" became prevalent. But now that businesses have continued to function without severe impact, they've made a significant shift to, "We can do without it." They've come to expect more for less: more agility, more deliverables, more functionality, and faster response; less hassle, shorter time to delivery, and fewer required resources. The relationship between IT and business has completely changed.

Collaborative, technology savvy business professionals. The last major generational shift in IT was the PC revolution of the 1980's, bringing extreme change in how information technology was applied in business. Today we are in the midst of another seismic shift. The next generation (the "net" generation?) has known technology from childhood. They thrive in a world of internet, instant messaging, blogs, gaming, social networking, online collaboration, and more. They think differently; they work differently; they use information differently; and they analyze and problem-solve differently.

They have radically different expectations of what technology can and should do. This signals the decreased need for outside technical skills and the closing of the skills gap between technical and business professionals. Businesses won't need technical professionals to implement, maintain, and support systems; they'll do it themselves. They will become increasingly self-sufficient while at the same time becoming increasingly dissatisfied with a slow and cumbersome IT. They understand IT practices and technology and won't settle for delays and techno-babble.

Cloud Computing. The service model – software as a service (SaaS), platform as a service (PaaS), infrastructure as a service (Iaas), data as a service (DaaS), etc. – is the next generation of outsourcing. Past outsourcing models were limited to only a small portion of the IT portfolio: a few applications via application service providers (ASPs) or a few IT functions such as development or help desk services. The new cloud services model makes it practical and cost-effective to outsource much of the portfolio. With companies such as Amazon, Google and Microsoft in the market, cloud computing becomes mainstream; it moves from emerging technology to mass consumption.

Many organizations are making the business transition to managed services for very practical financial reasons. It's an easy decision to choose SaaS, PaaS, and IaaS during volatile times when investments in long-term projects, costly infrastructure, and permanent employees are beyond an organization's reach. Even before the economy recovers and investments increase, these services will be commonplace and considered best practices within most organizations.

Over the next several years, you will see many service providers enter the cloud service marketplace. As with other technology lifecycles, expect to see a shake-out with only the best service providers remaining. Those who provide the highest quality of service (QOS) at modest cost will dominate the market.

Open Source. What better way to eliminate the cost of expensive software then to use open source to extend the functionality of existing technology. The process starts with searching for open source products that already meet your needs; in this case, it's a simple installation. If existing code is not available then the next step is to identify the code that can be customized to fit your organization's specific needs.

A collaborative environment of open source appeals to many developers for two reasons; they can help shape software functionality and they are not at the mercy of what vendors decide to do. Developers no longer need to create anything from scratch or work with troublesome off-the-shelf commercial software; what they get for using open source is more functionality in less time. Furthermore, the support world for open source software is not one of vendor dependency but of community and cooperation.

Agile. As budgets and expectations move in opposing directions, many businesses seek the benefits of agile development in their IT programs. These are already tense times fraught with uncertainty. To implement agile methods, we now ask for more change; we engender more uncertainty. We ask for radical shifts in people, in processes, and in organizational culture.

At the core of the agile mindset is the belief that being fast and adaptive is more valuable than being planned and methodical. Making the transition to agile methodologies will be difficult for those who often perceive their value in terms of delivering projects within scope, on time, and within budget. How do you hit a bull's-eye when you're aiming at a moving target? For agile methods to succeed, IT professionals must change how they think about themselves, how they act toward others, and how they work within their team. The same will be asked of business professionals. IT teams aren't alone in this endeavor--the entire organization must embrace agile methods.

Are IT teams so prepared to make the commitment to cause that they are ready, willing, and able to set aside the comfort of familiar planning, analysis, and development methods? Agile methods take the detailed planning, structure, documentation, and specified deliverables that are the foundation of many successful projects, and turn everything upside down. For those uncomfortable with change and its consequences--changing scope and changing priorities--this adds discomfort in already-unsettling times.

Summary

As network capabilities come in line with technologies, businesses are able to eliminate the inefficiencies of IT departments. The goal of business and IT alignment is no longer sufficient to meet the needs of organizations struggling to survive and grow; business executives and managers will settle for nothing less than IT integrating into their own environment. The combination of influences – business-driven IT, collaborative business models, tech-savvy business professionals, cloud computing, open source, and agile development – converge to change the shape of IT forever. As the end of IT as we know it draws near, new opportunities will arise as the next generation of information technology begins. For the innovators who are able to flourish in a time of dynamic change, the opportunities will be abundant and the rewards exceptional.

References:

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