

Bimodal IT – changing your IT department from rule police to business partner



Some industry commentators believe we've reached the end of the era in which organisations' IT departments 'own' their IT. Central to this change are two factors sweeping the current IT landscape: firstly, the move to alternative consumption models which includes everything from private, to public, to hybrid cloud options in which the technology isn't owned by the organisation itself.

Secondly, there's a much stronger focus on the end user and his/her demand for greater mobility, flexibility, and more choice in how and where to work, and which tools and devices to use for which tasks.

The pace of this evolution is so fast that IT departments are struggling to keep up. And where they fail to meet the organisation's need for constant innovation that sharpens competitive edge, business units are taking matters into their own hands. With the rise of what's called 'shadow IT', individual business units bypass what they believe to be their snail-paced IT departments and procure IT services that meet their needs faster and more conveniently.

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‘But where do organisations draw the line?’ asks David Danto, Principal Consultant for Collaboration at Dimension Data. ‘Is a line still necessary between allowing business units to “do their own thing”, and the need to standardise and economise, which is usually the IT department’s remit? Are we about to witness IT becoming a messy free-for-all?’

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When no meant no

Danto gives a personal account of how he saw IT’s role change over the last decade. ‘If I think back to 2005, I can clearly remember an incident that got one of my co-workers into trouble. We were employed by a large financial services organisation that had very strict rules about what software employees were allowed to use on business-owned computers. My colleague – himself an IT engineer – had manually installed Skype on his PC to compare its quality and features to those of our enterprise communications solutions. This infraction was considered an “actionable offence” – and one that almost cost him his job. IT departments took their role as “rule police” very seriously back then. “No” certainly meant “no”, regardless of any legitimate explanation.’

However, Danto points out that the role of IT has evolved dramatically since then. ‘Early on in my career, I experienced the formation of IT departments out of necessity – to manage the explosion of devices and systems changing the workplace. In the middle part of my career, I witnessed and worked with mature, fully entrenched IT departments like the one I’ve described. But now there’s been a major transformation. It’s all about satisfying the end user today.’

More power to the people

‘Ten years ago, the idea that end users couldn’t have the tools and capabilities they needed on a daily basis was still plausible,’ says Danto. ‘Today, users experience technology advances (with things like collaboration and cloud computing) in their personal lives and through their own devices all the time. They just won’t accept a “no” from IT when they know better.’

‘The power – and in many cases the budgets – have shifted from the IT departments to the individual users and their business units within organisations. Where, in the past, an IT department could get away with responses like “because we say so”, in today’s world, every “no” to a new tool is just an app store download away from becoming shadow IT. This dynamic has forever changed the role of the CIO and the IT department. Instead of just managing what they feel is a best practice ecosystem, they now need to manage a bimodal IT environment.’



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Stepping up to the plate

What can organisations and their IT departments do to better cope with this change? ‘An adjustment in mindset is required,’ says Danto. ‘In order to adapt, technology leaders and their teams need to see themselves as partners of the organisation’s business units. Instead of focusing on technology-first solutions – that is, listening to manufacturers first and looking to apply their suggested products – a much greater focus should be placed on listening to end users first, and meeting their needs.

‘This means the role of internal communications will become tremendously important – something that technology teams have traditionally been very poor at. Once business units feel they’ve been heard, they’ll be more readily steered toward solutions that find the best compromise between aspects important to the user, such as features and simplicity, and those that are crucial to the IT team, such as security, manageability, and scalability. These compromises have to be dealt with in the open and users should be treated not as constant transgressors of rules, but like the important business partners they are.’

Innovation in collaboration

With regards to unified communications and collaboration, Danto believes the most important point for IT departments to remember is to remain innovative while delivering quality solutions to the business that provide greater flexibility and ease of use. ‘Now is the ideal time for IT departments to perform a top-to-bottom assessment of their collaboration technologies and supporting infrastructure. The central questions businesses should ask themselves include:

- Are all of our communications and collaboration technologies covered under a single, unified governance model that develops and implements integrated strategies?
- Were our tools selected to meet our organisation’s unique use cases, or were they arbitrarily chosen from one of our technology or procurement manager’s favourite vendors?
- Have we achieved the correct balance between supporting the business needs of our users, and maintaining the security and integrity of our client records and intellectual property? Too far in one direction creates risk; too far in the other will force our teams to use unsanctioned but readily available solutions and take us further down the bimodal path.
- Are most of our systems easy-to-use, simple to deploy, and scalable? Or are we purchasing systems that require custom integration with complex user interfaces that need expensive, on-site support teams to manage and operate?’

No more policing

Danto points out that good visibility of the organisation’s current technology estate, plus well-managed communication between IT and the organisation’s business units will drastically reduce the need for policing. ‘So, when today’s end-user wants to download consumer-focused tools like Skype, IT teams have a better option than playing rule police. They can rather respond: “Here’s an enterprise-class voice and video service that can call any device and offers all the capabilities of Skype. But it’s a better solution for the business, because it’s procured centrally and at the right price. It’s also secure and managed properly.” The secret is that users probably don’t care specifically about Skype, Drop Box, or any other consumer-focused tool. They simply want the outcome that the tool would provide. Most of all, they want to know that they’ve been heard,’ concludes Danto.

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