

ICT Fashion Victimhood

Description

When I think of the term “Fashion Victim”™ these two shots from *Brazil* (one of my favorite movies of all time) come to mind:



There seems to be no length to which some of us will not go to prove that we are on top of the latest and greatest trends. Katherine Helmond’s character in the film, above, is a case in point. Over the course of the film she sports ridiculous clothing and submits herself to intrusive, painful and ultimately destructive medical procedures, all for the sake of fashion. By the end of the film she has virtually destroyed herself.

These days, many ICT organizations are not far different. Spurred on by the technology trade press, they seem to feel the need to jump on every bandwagon that comes along. With distressing frequency, they can’t even articulate the benefits or justify the expenses or risks. They only know that they have to effect a “Digital Transformation,” get moving on “DevOps,” eschew “Bimodal IT” and migrate to “the Cloud.” They also seem to feel great urgency about “Big Data” and “Business Intelligence” because everyone else is supposedly doing it and they have to get ahead of the disruption in “The Force.” Early in my career, client-server computing was equated with teen-age sex. Everyone claimed to be doing it, everyone thought everyone else was doing it but almost nobody was.

Please don’t misunderstand me; every one of these technologies and trends has value but only in the right place, at the right time and for the right reasons. Companies that pursue the latest and greatest products and services without appropriate consideration and planning do so at some risk. While there is risk either way—doing something too early vs. not doing something when you should have—it quite frequently seems that only the latter risk receives any consideration, motivating companies to expend effort, time and money on things that distract them but don’t actually add value to their business.

On the other hand, at the same time that they are pursuing the next great thing, many organizations neglect the basic blocking and tackling that comprise common best practices in ICT.

Here are some of the common self-inflicted risks that I have seen over the years and in recent times:

- The organization has no EA model, no roadmap, nor any guideposts to inform their ICT decisions. There may be no alignment with business strategy, business models or operational models and no systematic methods for assessing and quantifying risks and benefits of competing transformation initiatives. There may be no portfolio or investment management done at all for ICT projects. I think the following interchange between the Cheshire Cat and Alice sums this up succinctly:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where,” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get SOMEWHERE,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

- The organization pursues immature solutions and purchases early-stage products from immature vendors. The first entrant into a new market category is often surpassed by a subsequent entrant, who benefits from observing the strengths and weaknesses of the first. Irrespective of actual product characteristics, the critical mass (the install base) has a substantial impact on the commercial viability and longevity of technology products. Just as Betamax succumbed to the market share advantage of VHS, many superior products lose out to products from larger companies that are able to commit more money to marketing and supporting them. Selecting a superior but niche product ultimately fuels technical debt.
- The organization applies brand new technology to automating evolving and not well-understood business processes. This may be most common in companies undertaking digital transformation. Both new and novel technology and recently-transformed processes are risks and supporting the latter with the former reinforces the risks significantly. While it may not be possible to avoid doing both, especially if an organization is performing a technology-driven transformation, the huge increase in overall risk should be recognized and mitigated as comprehensively as possible. Often, it isn’t.
- The organization undertakes a high-risk transformation without staff onboard with expertise and experience with the business processes and technologies involved. With limited or no understanding of the real impact of changes on ICT’s ability to support the transformed business, there is a possibility of failing at the transformation or failing by succeeding. In the earlier days of the Internet, many website operators succeeded explosively until their infrastructure failed, enraging potential customers. These occurrences usually preceded failure of the ventures that implemented them.
- The organization fails to assess and understand the true requirements and benefits of the solutions it pursues. Do you really need DevOps if you’re operating in a very mature and stable market and modify your systems infrequently? Is it worth it to migrate your applications

from relational database repositories to NoSQL? How will a digital transformation impact the way your business looks to your customers and the way it is supported by your ICT team?

All of these solutions require significant shifts in business processes, technology tooling and solution architecture. All of them provide specific benefits that are not of equal value to every business and all of them are risky.

So, what to do?

- Have an Enterprise Architecture (EA) function. Your business's strategy and business models should drive your organization's structure and infrastructure. While there should be flexibility to accommodate opportunities that are identified within your company to improve its performance, most changes should be driven by the company's strategy. EA is the group of people that should be charged with ensuring that this relationship is maintained.
- Actively monitor technology developments; build POCs to understand the potential value new products, services and approaches may bring. Keep in step with evolving technologies so that you can plan to migrate away from those that are becoming superseded before being faced with an urgent need to avoid lapsing into an unsustainable infrastructure.
- Monitor your marketplace to maintain a current SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, threat) picture. Map emerging technologies and the technology-driven transformations they enable to the enterprise's SWOT matrix to prioritize and focus your surveillance on the technology product and service market.
- Incorporate scenario analysis into your strategic planning efforts to identify technology-driven transformation opportunities. Combine the results of this work with your SWOT model to create potential future-state or to-be models.
- If you are an established, mature competitor, don't feel obligated to jump on every new development immediately after it is introduced. In many cases, you can do better by keeping your eyes open and learning from others' experience.
- Don't force your organization into a high-risk position where it's not going to be competitive. If one of your competitors jumps on a new paradigm that would force you to implement an unfamiliar technology at a rate that you're probably not prepared for, reconsider. You may fall behind for a while but that's better than falling off a cliff. What may seem like an existential threat often isn't.

There's no question that technology is evolving faster than ever and that more and more effort will be required to develop and maintain the knowledge level required to make good decisions for your company. Nonetheless, the costs of this effort are far outweighed by the potential consequences of short-sighted investments that can disrupt your company instead of making it competitive.

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