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Fix What Ails IT

Tips & Help To Spiff Up Operations & Goals In The Year Ahead



As technology changes how companies do business, many IT departments are finding that they need to adapt or die, to put it dramatically.

Areas for improvement abound (see the article "[What's Wrong With IT?](#)"), and although it may seem daunting to take on tasks such as spiffing up IT's image or reconfiguring staff roles, such large-scale changes could give an SME (small to midsized enterprise) the edge needed to survive and thrive in the coming years.

■ Know Thy Users

A significant challenge for IT now and into the future will be the growing sophistication of users who employ devices both at home and in the office and bristle at IT's security measures.

But an SME doesn't have to choose between giving users what they want and keeping the network safe, says Dennis Szerszen, vice president of corporate development for security firm SecureWave. The first step in tackling the problem is to actually give users more power, he believes, and see the devices as useful tools rather than irritants.

"The easier you make it for employees to use their devices, the better," says Szerszen. "As long as there's business value, it's important to give them some control about what they use."

Another important tactic is to put some responsibility for security in the hands of the users, which involves an abundance of communication. Rather than issue edicts about what devices can be used and issue dire warnings about repercussions of security breaches, IT should collaborate with users, says Szerszen. This will make employees feel a sense of investment in network security.

"You'd think there would be rebellion if you tell employees they can't use their MP3 players to download files or that they can't take stuff off the network on the weekends, but if it's explained, then people find a way to make it work," Szerszen notes. "When there's accommodation on both sides, it minimizes conflict."

Often, the thought of giving users more control over security measures makes IT types bristle, but as gadgets get more business-focused in the coming years, IT will have to learn to play nice with users and even let them help shape how policies are written.

■ Staff Changes

One of the most common difficulties in IT departments is the lack of change in terms of skills, notes Kenneth Rau, a senior consultant at IT advisory firm Cutter Consortium. Many IT departments have been content to keep hiring programmers and support staff when they should be looking for skills that will take them into the future.

"To be successful, companies have to find alternatives to what they're doing and recognize that they need new capability," he says.

For programming and support, Rau is a fan of outsourcing. Because there are so many hosted applications available, and many can be customized to suit an SME's needs, there's less need for an in-house programmer for a small business. Support services, too, have become more user-friendly to the point that employees can navigate through support resources themselves.

To harness outsourcing properly, IT managers should ideally be hiring people who have crackerjack negotiating skills and experience in dealing with multiple vendors. Sometimes, these types of candidates won't even be IT-based but pulled from marketing or sales departments. Bringing on just one or two employees savvy enough to draft contracts, negotiate new service arrangements, and keep outsourcing providers on track will go a long way toward fixing an ailing IT department, Rau says.

"At many of the firms I assess, I've found that if they replace the five or six people they have with one contract negotiator, they'll do better in terms of operations," he says.

■ Image Fix

Being noticed only when something bad happens has caused IT to be seen in a poor light at many companies, with employees grousing about technology that doesn't work but being oblivious to technology that's fast and flexible.

The situation is akin to hearing from a friend only when he's in trouble. After numerous phone calls, you'll begin to think the person is always getting in a jam, because there's no basis for comparison to other events in his life.

Although negative perceptions about IT seem to linger, they can be dispelled with patience and persistence from a data center manager and IT staff, experts note. To make successes more noticeable, IT managers have to step up, says Joe Bakan, senior technology advisor at IT consultancy Ekaru.

"Highlight improvements and publicize the department's worth, especially when everything is going right," he says. "Build bridges based on these successes and interact with employees across the enterprise."

When IT and other departments get together in a way that's friendly, rather than only when there's a problem, image problems will lessen considerably, Bakan says. To jumpstart the process, you might consider hosting presentations, offering application training or other quick classes, and even producing e-newsletters that illuminate changes in technology.

Some IT departments use email communication to introduce staff members and make them more accessible to other employees. For example, knowing that Joe in tech support is familiar with Java leaves many departments cold, but hearing that he was a ping-pong champion in high school at least gives everyone a point of conversational contact.

Changing negative perceptions, as well as giving users more control and changing IT department roles, can be challenging for any SME. But making shifts now with an eye

toward long-term goals could bring major benefits in the years ahead. ■

by Elizabeth Millard

Manage Expectations

One advantage to making IT staff members more “real” to other employees is that expectations will also be better managed, says Ekaru Senior Technology Advisor Joe Bakan.

“Managing expectations is key,” he says. “Keep your customers informed and follow up routine jobs and projects with a short customer satisfaction survey.” Not only does this generate useful data to improve quality, he notes, but it sends a message that IT cares about what users think.

Communicating IT’s Message

In creating an e-newsletter to combat negative perceptions, here are some areas to highlight:

- Recent department successes
- New hire bios
- IT employee activities (anyone been cliff jumping lately?)
- Classes being offered
- Security reminders (not directives)
- News about viruses, bugs
- Home software that’s fun or useful
- Open-house info (a little food goes a long way)