IT IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE INTEGRATION TEAM

Graham Oakes reflects on how the IT department could be reborn. 'Integration Team' anyone?

Graham Oakes: survival will come by embracing diversity

I hear rumours that IT is dead...

The web team point to their sites, apps, social media: "None of this is touched by the dinosaurs of IT," they explain.

Collaboration strategists likewise – they share documents via clandestine online services that IT never sees. And, from the other direction, agile developers question the value of a department that sets itself aside from 'the business'.

Yet every organisation still seems to have an IT department.

They're often unhappy with this department. "It's too expensive," they complain. "Service levels suck." (No matter how good it is, the service could always be better.)

The business like the individuals they deal with, but hate the overall IT department – arrogant, driven by abstract process rather than human warmth. Yet they tolerate this beast within their midst. Why?

Looking at IT departments, they mostly do three things:

1. Feed and water the machinery that runs a scary proportion of most organisations' activities and communications.
2. Help people use the complex, unintuitive interfaces presented by the above machinery.
3. Integrate new capabilities on top of that machinery.

The rumour-mongers point out that option (1) is becoming less important – the 'gods in the cloud' are taking it over. (These gods are mostly IT people, but we'll overlook that.) Likewise, with option (2), they wave their iPads and talk about 'consumerisation'. Technology can now be used without three tiers of helpdesk support – another nail in IT's coffin.

As for integration, well IT is so slow we might as well do it ourselves.

This misses the point. IT is clearly changing. Infrastructure is a commodity, a good candidate for outsourcing. (But don't underestimate the skills needed to manage outsourcing.) Standards of device and application design have improved radically. (Or perhaps we've finally bred a generation that is adapted to technology?)

But integration won't go away – it's increasingly where the action is. In a digital world, integrating diverse applications and devices has become more than a necessary evil. It's become a basis for competition: advantage comes from embracing diversity and using it to gain fresh insight and evolve new products. Someone needs to be able to weave disparate applications into a coherent whole.

IT is well-placed to fill this role. It has the technical skills. It already touches every part of the organisation. It just needs to learn to deal with the messiness – human and technical – of evolutionary development. Survival will come by embracing diversity and helping the organisation deal with it, not by locking down diversity via policies and standards.

This is where I think effective IT departments are going. If they hide behind their firewalls, they'll die. If they become the Integration Team, they'll thrive.

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