

Balancing Strategy and Tactics

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Information technology has been, and continues to be, the dominant factor behind changes in the way organisations manage information and service delivery. In theory, the rapid evolution of hardware, networks and software development tools creates countless opportunities to improve productivity by reorganising the way we do things to create ever greater efficiency and service. In practice however this can be much harder to achieve. This is particularly true with some of the more abstract or aspirational projects which seek to implement a completely new way of working on an existing business.

Projects of this type are often technology led because technology provides the only concrete way of describing or demonstrating the objectives of the project. This can lead to a situation in which technology decisions made early in the project become the main focus of activity. Prototype systems based on an oversimplified version of reality are used to demonstrate what is possible but cannot easily be extended to take on the task in a live environment. This creates an impasse in which there is no connection between the new technology which has been implemented and the day to day processes and data used by the business and no obvious way of bridging the gap.

Conversely, if approached exclusively from the business side, projects of this type will tend to lose sight of the original vision and become excessively tactical with immediate priorities sweeping aside any more strategic goals in the pursuit of short term imperatives. This approach may appear more productive in the short term but will rarely result in anything resembling a 'joined up system'. Typical symptoms of this approach are a set of uncoordinated departmental systems which are virtually impossible to integrate effectively. This is an uncomfortable position for any organisation wishing to provide a flexible customer centric service in an increasingly competitive world.

Whilst problems of this type are not exclusive to IT they are exacerbated by the abstract nature of the underlying ideas and concepts. This above all else is what makes it so difficult to plot a course from the idealised vision of how things could be to a successful reorganisation of a real business. In practice successful programmes recognise that strategy and tactics have to coexist. Huge projects which take years to develop a whole new system in isolation from the realities of the underlying business and then expect to impose a complete new way of working almost always fail.

In contrast an approach which combines a strategic vision with a more pragmatic approach based on delivering real benefits in smaller doses and shorter time frames may not appear to be taking as direct a route but is far more likely to be successful. This is particularly true if the long term goals are kept under review because where the business wants to go will inevitably be influenced by what it learns on the way there.