How To Align Your IT With Your Business Objectives

IT Staff

IT Processes and procedures

IT Tools

IT Budget

Do you have the right stuff?

LeapFROG®

In a perfect world, all of your business goals, systems, processes, staff, tools, and budget line items would magically line up and produce more revenue year after year.

Instead, it takes a boatload of work to establish!

And it's effort well-spent.

Whether you're close to reaching optimal alignment between your IT operations and your business goals or have been too busy to give it much thought, this Leapfrog TechBrief will help you understand what you can do to find your IT sweet spot. We cover the critical areas where your organization needs alignment by asking:

Do you have the IT right staff?
In order to drive excellence in something, you need people who are focused on it and practice and refine it. But not all of your IT needs to be met with that level of competence — just the areas that truly drive your business forward.

Do you have the right IT processes and procedures?
Growing companies especially struggle with taking the time to establish written methodologies that will help them scale and produce veritable results. They're too busy doing the work of running the company.

Do you have the right IT tools?
There are fantastic IT tools out there but if the ones you're using aren't the ones you really need, you won't get the results you want. Have you ever tried to drive a nail with a screwdriver?

Do you have the right IT budget?
How to slice and dice your IT resources should be based squarely on your business goals because that's how you make money. Most of the rest should be spent covering risk.

With your IT ecosystem in alignment with where you want your business to go, it can help you say yes to new opportunities and challenges. And grow.

Do you have the right IT staff?

To meet your business objectives, you need IT team members who are excellent at the technology areas that make your business shine. There are important differences between IT excellence and IT competence when it comes to choosing the right IT staff. And when it comes to choosing the right IT staff for your unique company, focus on achieving IT excellence in those areas that will drive your business forward.

Excellence vs. competence

In order for someone to become excellent at something, they need to be able to focus on it. Practice make perfect, right? So, if your organization has a small IT department that's responsible for a lot of different functions, it may do a good job keeping everything going but it probably struggles with becoming truly excellent in any specific functions.

On the other hand, if your IT department focuses only on the specific IT functions that meet your business objectives, it's much more likely they'll become excellent at them.

To align your IT staff with your business objectives, choose internal IT staff that is (or can become) excellent at the specific IT functions that will actually improve your business.

t's not that other IT functions aren't important — of course your organization needs networks and systems that are highly available, stable, up to date, and secure. But having expertise in things like network management and virtualization probably won't get you more customers. For IT responsibilities that aren't related to your business goals, what you need is IT competence.

Three examples of choosing the right staff

1. Insurance companies
Let's say an insurance company wants products that are easy for customers to find, buy, and use. Having an excellent web presence will be critical. Potential customers will need to be able to select the product they want and pay for it, and existing customers will need to update their coverage and file claims. By delivering convenient processes for prospective and existing customers 24/7/365, the insurance company is gaining a competitive advantage. Therefore, the IT staff should be made up of app developers and interface experts who learn the insurance business inside out and make the company's products work seamlessly.

2. Property management companies

A property management company that wants to keep its tenants happy and attract new tenants will want to provide top-notch technology features to make the property more attractive. Reliable high-speed internet, mobile phone coverage throughout the building, a parking system that's easy to get in and out of — these are the kinds of things that matter to tenants and to the tenants' customers. So to align its IT staff with its business objectives, the property management company should hire IT experts who can ensure all features function properly at all times and perform duties related to getting new amenities in place or updated as soon as tenants require them or units become available for lease.

3. Healthcare companies

A company that provides healthcare wants to make sure its practitioners and staff can access and update medical records in real time — this will help them best serve their patients and run their business more efficiently. Equally important is having secure IT systems that protect patient data. To align its IT staff with its business objectives, a healthcare company needs a team that's proficient with the electronic medical records platform. They should know how to adapt it to meet the business's operations and help make the physicians and staff more productive and responsive to patients. Healthcare IT should be focused on helping train physicians and staff members on the proper ways to use their technology and how to protect patient data and privacy.

Each of the companies above benefits from knowing the type of IT expertise they need in the first place and allowing their teams the time they need to develop their expertise. Would the right IT staff also be able to handle responsibilities like network management while doing as good a job with the business-driving IT? Maybe…if it's big enough.

Do you have the right IT processes and procedures?

Your organization's technology team needs to deliver consistent, verifiable results so your business can say yes to new opportunities. Yet, growing companies can struggle with aligning IT operations and business objectives because they're so busy doing other work. Start by asking these three important questions about your organization:

1. Do you have guiding principles for consistent results and accountability?
Clear guiding principles for IT allow your organization to develop policies for effective IT management. Guiding principles form the foundation of a successful IT operation by providing an overall vision and guideposts for measuring success. Communicating your IT principles to your team helps them better understand and follow the policies, processes and procedures that flow from them. This, in turn, can move an organization from operating chaotically or in a state of perpetual response to functioning as a lean, mean, business goal-meeting machine. Plus, it holds employees accountable all along the way.

For example, if a guiding principle is that the organization needs a secure file system to protect against hacking and data theft, then the company's policies will only allow employees to access the files they need for their work product. They might need to access some additional files temporarily and can get permissions for that, but when the work is done, so is the access. The guiding principle sets the stage and the policies that flow from it protect the data by reducing the number of ways that hackers can get at it. Of course, it's faster to cut corners and let everyone have access to everything but that goes against the guiding principle and overall business objectives.

2. Can your processes and procedures be taught and verified?
Your IT processes define how your organization follows its guiding principles and your IT procedures explain how the processes actually get done. Organizations often run into trouble because new employees can't deliver with the same quality as people who have been there for years. The problem is usually because processes and procedures haven't been well defined or explained to new employees. Yes, it takes time for an organization to codify its own best practices and it's not the most fun project on the table. But without making the effort to put processes in writing in a teachable format with built-in ways to verify that they've been completed correctly, new hires will take a lot longer to ramp up. And if different team members deal with IT in different ways, you open up the organization to discrepancies, imbalances and maybe even lawsuits if there are problems related to employee or customer privacy.

Institutional memory is important and valuable — so put it in writing! When you teach people how to handle IT issues the right way, it's a lot easier to leverage your IT to meet your business goals.

3. Do your methodologies ensure you can manage change effectively?
The quality of an organization's IT processes and procedures impact its ability to manage change effectively. In real life, opportunities present themselves unexpectedly — and so do challenges. Your IT needs to be ready.

Companies that can absorb and manage changes effectively are the ones that grow and thrive. Following a set of IT standards, such as ITIL, is critical — the heavy lifting has already been done for you and effective processes and procedures for change management have already been defined. Best practices include assigning owners to each IT area – such as infrastructure, apps and support – and having each owner conduct impact analyses to look at how changes might affect the business. When your IT methodologies ensure the business can achieve what it wants when it wants, you know you've reached alignment nirvana.

Here are some specific questions you can ask to see how you're doing:
- Is your team able to hop into action because it knows how to coordinate their activities? Or will they wing it, then go back later and fix it?
- If a board member or auditor asks for your incident response plan, is it presentable? How about your authorized use policy or your remote access policy?
- What are the steps of your HR offboarding procedure?
- If you had to double your workforce in three months, do you have a model to follow? Do you have the assets and processes in place to allow them to be productive right away?
- Could the policies, processes and procedures you have right now prevent you from taking advantage of an opportunity that comes up tomorrow?

In short, is your IT ready for your organization's next step?

Do you have the right IT tools?

Using the right IT tools can make a world of difference when it comes to operating your business successfully. They help you be more efficient and productive, protect your data and systems, respond quickly to both opportunities and threats, and provide a more enjoyable work experience — among many other things. Often, however, IT tools and business goals are mismatched — are yours? Here are the five most common areas of misalignment:

1. Tools that get in the way

The first hint that your IT tools and business goals might be misaligned is if you have to wait for something. IT exists to make your life easier and more efficient, not frustrating. Let's say your IT staff typically handles requests for IT troubleshooting via email and voicemail. If your IT staff is struggling to meet everyone's needs quickly and effectively using those tools, then they need to look at different service management tools — you probably don't want someone's work grinding to a halt because he or she is playing phone tag with IT. Tools that identify who is having problems, prioritize current issues and include real-time communication features are the ones that solve problems faster, which makes everyone happier as they better align with your business objectives.

2. Tools that are not monitored

Even tools that are the best in the world at solving IT problems aren't worth much if they're not being used properly. No matter how much you spend on a tool, having skilled personnel to run it is equally important. That's why, for example, it's common to find that companies have invested in best-of-breed security tools (often to handle a compliance issue) but haven't invested in hiring or training the staff needed to run it effectively. Monitoring things like permissions tracking reports and anomaly detection notifications need to be woven into the normal work process or the information they provide goes to waste, which can be especially painful if something bad happens even though the data was right there under your nose. Absorb and use those great tools in the way they were intended and you'll transform a mismatch into a business benefit.

3. Tools that are out of date

Change is hard but not changing is worse. If your company is running apps that are difficult to patch or support, there's a mismatch between your tools and your business goals — unless one of your business goals is to create more work and risk! Kidding aside, there are plenty of reasons that companies make do with using out-of-date apps and tools. Updating can create ripple effects across the IT ecosystem that may seem expensive or disruptive, for example. But in comparison to what a company may be suffering in terms of risks, stagnation, and competitive disadvantages, updating your old IT tools — especially legacy mainframe apps — updating to current tools that match your current business goals is your best long-term strategy.

4. Tools that have workarounds

How easy is it for your IT team to integrate new platforms with your existing tools? If the integration process involves IT having to deal with the custom workarounds they've developed over the years to manage this or that problem, it's a good indication your tools and goals have become mismatched. Tools that are meeting your current business needs should function elegantly, without workarounds, and should not be a roadblock incorporating new tools that can grow your business. Tools with custom fixes can also be difficult or impossible to patch, especially the older they get — eventually you'll have to pull off the duct tape and fix it properly (hopefully that won't happen when you're super busy or in the middle of a new opportunity). Well-matched IT tools play nicely with others.

5. Tools that are proprietary or personnel-driven

The more you customize your tools, the more you limit the number of people who can manage them. If your IT team has been writing custom platforms and apps, and especially if they've been doing it for years, you will eventually face gaps between your business goals and what your IT tools can accomplish. Often your team also becomes attached to its own inventions — of course! They built them to solve whatever IT problems the organization was facing at the time, but when the problem you're now facing is a mismatch between your organization's goals and what your IT tools can accomplish, it's time to bring the two into alignment. Usually this means updating to modern, proven and (yes) off-the-shelf tools that scale easily, along with the training needed to run them. For your IT budget and tools to be in alignment, only develop your own software when it will give you a business advantage.

Do you have the right IT budget?

When your IT budget is aligned with the activities that drive your business forward, you're in great shape for growth — your employees have what they need to meet your goals and can respond to new opportunities without having to deal with IT-related speed bumps. The key is to spend most of your IT budget on the IT areas that actually drive revenue. Ask yourself these five questions to help get your IT budget and business goals in alignment:

1. First and foremost, does your IT spending represent how you make money?
Your IT budget should reflect the things your business does to grow. It's easy to have gotten into the habit of allocating most of your budget to keeping your IT running — some companies spend as much as 80% of their IT budgets on their data centers. It's also common to overspend to keep old technology alive. While it's certainly important to keep your IT running smoothly, it shouldn't be at the expense of innovation that will help your organization bring ideas to fruition and grow. CIOs need to press for a budget that will keep IT both running and growing, while also looking for ways to lower the costs of maintaining the older technology when possible.

2. Does your budget cover disruption risks?
Nothing reveals a misaligned budget quite as effectively as a disruption. Whether you're suddenly faced with weather events like hurricanes Harvey or Irma, cybercrime, or other hacks and disasters, your business needs to continue to operate and generate revenue. Look at your processes and procedures to identify risks — what must be covered to sufficiently minimize business disruption? Cover that.

3. How much of the budget must you slice off immediately for industry standards and compliance?
If your business is regulated, part of your IT budget must go towards meeting compliance requirements. It's the cost of doing business — but how much? Look to reduce the amount you're spending on compliance by streamlining compulsory activities. When processes and evidence collection are done manually they can be laborious, consuming funds and engineering time that could otherwise be spent on driving your business forward.

4. Does your budget accurately represent the priorities on your IT roadmap?
Your IT roadmap lays out your current IT capabilities — including functions, staff, and technology resources — and serves as your aspirational document defining the incremental steps needed to get from A to B. It should also align with your business strategic plan. But does it also align with your budget? Forecasting can be tricky and some steps get accelerated or decelerated based on what's going on in your business that given year. Adjusting your IT budget so it reflects your roadmap priorities is one of the best ways to ensure you stick to a growth path.

5. Where can you drive out costs?

What changes as fast as technology? Not much. This means that each year you can probably find new ways to save on IT expenses and use that money for other things, like additional staff or new services that can grow your business. You might have an outdated telecom system or legacy platforms, for example, or a WAN system that's no longer necessary because your team is now mobile. Pricing for internet service contracts and mobile phone plans also change dramatically from year to year, so be sure to check that you have the best deals available today. Few things are better for budget and business goal alignment than not wasting money!

The right team, processes, tools, and budget to align with your business objectives

Now that you may have more insight into aligning your IT budget with your business goals — and why it's important to have the right IT team, IT processes, and IT tools in place — you can consider using this information to have productive conversations with your leadership team and department heads when you plan for 2018.

Feel free to access and share this complete Leapfrog TechBrief, and visit our FrogTalk blog and Resources section for more helpful information.

How Leapfrog can help with IT alignment

Leapfrog has been partnering with businesses to help them align IT with their business goals for nearly 20 years.

We accomplish this through managed IT services, whether it's as a single-source IT provider or as a partner for internal IT departments. Using proven IT tools that best match the needs of each client is an important part of our service. We have experience with a huge inventory of tools, the cloud services to run them and the trained staff to manage them.

We also offer IT solutions architecture and a la carte disaster recovery and help desk services — our advisory services are included for all of our managed services clients, including hands-on assistance with the annual budgeting process.

For our own processes and procedures, Leapfrog uses the global ITIL framework and, for special projects, we use Agile.

Each of our clients understands the advice we provide is always aligned with their IT roadmaps and business goals — helping clients use IT to grow successfully is why we're in business to begin with. If you're interested in finding out more, please call Leapfrog at 678.394.2036 or email ken.brantley@leapfrogservices.com.

To learn more about Leapfrog, visit leapfrogservices.com or take a look at some quick facts and what we believe.