

IT in context

The first of four papers commissioned by aap³

Should we still be describing IT as a support function when in fact technology (and the perceived need to bring on board the latest developments) could be actually setting or at least influencing the strategic agenda in some way?

In other words has IT become a business driver in its own right?

The issues were addressed at a symposium hosted by aap³, the IT engineering, business solutions and recruitment specialists.

What are the most significant IT challenges?

Robert Finlayson, Managing Partner, Lamb Brooks solicitors: “The challenge is identifying which software is going to see us through the next five years, although IT people will probably say that is too far a horizon, because change can be disruptive.”

Jim O'Donnell, IT Director, Cisco: “Essentially it's about how to move money being spent on IT operations to investing in the growth of the company.”

Gary Jeffries, Managing Director, Hughes Ellard: “There's the debate between 'on premises' and hosted, and related to that is the whole issue of support provided by third parties and the traditional method of charging by time and materials, which is in effect an open-ended cheque.”

Hayley Quinn, Executive Vice-President - Director, Shared Services, aap³: “It's ensuring that systems in the UK work in other jurisdictions where the company has a presence.”

Robert Law, Chief Executive, Langdowns DFK: “Nowadays, in order to be as close as possible to our clients, it is important to enable them to plug into our system, because more services are being procured through IT. Another issue which has to be addressed, and I'm not sure that as users we are in a position to do it, is the compatibility conflict between IT and telecoms.”

Andrew Minns, Head of Finance, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra: “I would say the challenge is maximising the IT you have invested in. Having the capability for effective digital marketing, for example, isn't the same as capitalizing on it!”

Roy Martin, Managing Director, Brazier Interiors: “We are now more dependent on IT to keep us on track with the client than we were say five years ago. For example, there is software which doesn't just provide 3D photographic quality imagery of a proposed interior, but it enables you interact with the features, such as the light switches. It's not just the funding which can be an issue but training people to operate such an advanced system.”

Mark Aitchison, Group Finance Director, Colton Care: "There is a debate over in-house or managed service. The problem with a third-party arrangement can be that as your company grows, so it becomes apparent that their input isn't sufficient for what you need."

Robert Law, Chief Executive, Langdowns DFK: "We started by managing our IT in-house, but as technology became more complex, and updates more frequent, we weren't able to keep up to date with developments so readily."

Andrew Minns, Head of Finance, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra: "We have third parties for managed back-up and our firewall; it's a question of identifying what can be readily outsourced."

Gary Jeffries, Managing Director, Hughes Ellard: "Every company needs good first-line support in-house so that the dinosaurs can find the on button. But what is less easy to manage is the relationship with the external service provider when a fault takes either two minutes or two years to fix. As I said, the IT sector needs a pricing model which gives the customer more certainty."

Jim O'Donnell, IT Director, Cisco: "It's interesting, because a multinational will have the same challenges, but on a different scale. What we have been doing over the last three years is to move IT from being an operational cost centre to the deliverer of strategic advantage. The context of IT is the important consideration. Is a particular task mission critical which could affect the company's stock price? If so, we manage it ourselves. If not, there's an opportunity to let someone do it and we can manage it through service level agreements."

Are companies really able to harness IT - or is it happening the other way around?

Robert Finlayson, Managing Partner, Lamb Brooks solicitors: "We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that IT is a tool; it isn't why we are in business. I'd like to think it's the need to focus on delivering the best possible legal service which calls the shots. We have an operation in South Africa which deals with much of our personal injury work, and having a seamless IT link to our UK offices in Basingstoke."

Robert Law, Chief Executive, Langdowns DFK: "There is a danger that IT is applied simply because it is available. Social media exists purely because of technology, and everyone is drawn to it as a result, but that doesn't mean every new concept is always appropriate."

Jim O'Donnell, IT Director, Cisco: "IT can rob us of productive time. What we have done is to move towards a collaborative-based toolkit approach. I can give you an example of how it works. Before, a document would be emailed to say a dozen people who would make their comments and each send it back. Now the document is in one location, and the originator simply goes to that source to see their colleague's input. As a result of the collaborative toolkit, internal emails have dropped by 82%."

Robert Wilson, Director, Upton McGougan: "No matter how sophisticated the IT, people still like to print reams of paper; when they receive an email, the reaction is to forward it to others. It becomes a problem in terms of storage and the time taken to communicate."

Hayley Quinn, Executive Vice-President - Director, Shared Services, aap³: "Client expectations have certainly been raised by IT. Everything has to be immediate. Even smaller companies are realising the need for a customer relationship management because otherwise they could be at a competitive disadvantage."

Roy Martin, Managing Director, Brazier Interiors: "Of course it's no good if the client doesn't understand what your IT is producing or presenting. What I think IT has done is to level the playing field, but in a way which doesn't take account of a company's pedigree. A few years ago we would negotiate a project with a client because they wanted to draw on our fifty years of experience. Now we need to quickly produce a design which is better than the one they saw from another company last week."

Gary Jeffries, Managing Director, Hughes Ellard: "Ten years ago if a company was looking for a building, they would call a number of agents, talk through their requirements and then receive some brochures through the post. Today they start by putting their requirements into a search engine and the information is dispatched to them electronically, so the tempo has been increased."

Robert Wilson, Director, Upton McGougan: "The large drawings we would print off and put in the post are now required instantly because IT makes that possible, and the level of detail required by the client at an earlier stage has increased tenfold."

Robert Finlayson, Managing Partner, Lamb Brooks solicitors: "I think it is fair to say that clients are more informed because of technology. Instead of vocalising something that has been picked up at the golf club, they are more likely to have done some research on the internet."

Robert Law, Chief Executive, Langdowns DFK: "IT can have a huge impact on pricing for the service sector. If something is delivered quicker because of IT, there is an expectation that it should cost less. There doesn't seem to be any consideration of the investment made in order to achieve that better service, so a company has to make sure the company is informed of the value proposition."

Mark Aitchison, Group Finance Director, Colton Care: "The quality of management information has improved because of developments in IT, but so has the requirement for that to happen."

Andrew Minns, Head of Finance, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra: "With each new development, it can be a challenge to keep the writing joined up. For example, we have a database of 50,000 names, but then there's a need to capture their email addresses. I don't think streamed concerts on the internet will replace live events in the concert hall, but clips on You Tube could help lower the barrier to encourage new, younger audiences to come along."

Roy Martin, Managing Director, Brazier Interiors: "Of course the younger generation is heavily into social networking, so it has to be a way forward, but it all seems a bit messy to me. Basically a company needs to understand its market and its customers and where they are going – that should be the driver, not the latest social media phenomenon. Some friends trade through Facebook, but they're selling consumer products."

Gary Jeffries, Managing Director, Hughes Ellard: "What I like about social media is that the analytics behind our website means that it's measurable in a way which isn't possible with advertising and direct mail."

Robert Wilson, Director, Upton McGougan: "You know if someone has looked at your website. You don't know how many people have looked at an advertisement. But digital communication has to be appropriate. My only connection with Facebook is to see what my kids are up to."

Jim O'Donnell, IT Director, Cisco: "The all-embracing effect of IT is interesting. People think why can't I use computers in the office in the same way as I do at home, but companies have to look after issues such as Sarbanes-Oxley compliance, intellectual property. At the same time, a company has to find ways of allowing their employees to communicate in the way that they want to. The more flexible you make your IT, the more you'll get out of it. Before we would communicate around the world by email. Now, with a web camera on my PC, I talk for a couple of minutes, put it on a central location, and send the people I want to communicate with a link."

Andrew Minns, Head of Finance, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra: "The average age of our audience is late fifties. Our remit is to develop a younger audience and IT gives the opportunity to open up effective lines of communication."

Gary Jeffries, Managing Director, Hughes Ellard: "I think it's more about attitude than age. My mother uses Facebook and I do more on Twitter than the kids."

Roy Martin, Managing Director, Brazier Interiors: "There's just so much of it. If IT was water, we all would have drowned by now."

Gary Jeffries, Managing Director, Hughes Ellard: "And because of that, one of the most difficult challenges is getting people to pick up the phone and actually speak to the customer. The richness you get from a conversation can't be replicated by email."

Robert Wilson, Director, Upton McGougan: "The message is briefer in an email, which means it's open to misinterpretation compared to a conversation or even a letter."

Robert Finlayson, Managing Partner, Lamb Brooks solicitors: "One way of combining speed of response with effective communication is to write the letter with its more formal structure and considered content and attach it to an email as a PDF."

Robert Wilson, Director, Upton McGougan: "I'm not sure where we are on the subject of the paperless office. I can't image a meeting where everyone is scrolling up and down on their laptops; paper still has a place."

Jim O'Donnell, IT Director, Cisco: "I think there is only a certain amount of change that a company can absorb, and IT can be too quickly deployed." Robert Law, Chief Executive, Langdowns DFK: "Nobody would argue against the improvements that IT brings, but there is an issue relating to timing in terms of utilisation."

Mark Aitchison, Group Finance Director, Colton Care: "The sheer amount of product means it isn't easy to find out the best means of addressing a particular requirement."

Robert Finlayson, Managing Partner, Lamb Brooks solicitors: "I think we are going to see certain applications, like CRM, becoming an intrinsic part of a business software package."

Jim O'Donnell, IT Director, Cisco: "I would like to see a menu for each package so you can see how much the video element costs for example. Then it would be possible to prioritise which features you need to introduce and when in terms of budget and timing."

Hayley Quinn, Executive Vice-President - Director, Shared Services, aap³: "It isn't something we'll probably see in our lifetime, but I want the IT industry to get technology to the level where there isn't the need to up-date every six months."

Robert Wilson, Director, Upton McGougan: "I'm being a bit ambitious here, but I'd like the focus to be on universal compatibility, so there are no connectivity issues."

Reference

aap3 – global IT and business solutions provider for all business entities, operating across consultancy, IT engineering, web solutions, and recruitment, providing a tailored solution that fully matches the client's needs, ensuring a real return on their investment.
www.aap.com

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra – performing to over 250,000 people annually with over 130 concerts, the BSO is the biggest arts organisation in the south of England, covering over 12,000 square miles from Exeter to Brighton from Basingstoke to Bristol. A corporate patrons scheme was established for businesses in 2011.
www.bsolive.com

Brazier Interiors – established for more than forty years, Brazier Interiors takes total responsibility for the whole office and commercial project. Their design & build management ensures that all Brazier Interiors clients receive a fixed price contract that is delivered on time with one point of contact.
www.brazier.co.uk

Cisco – creators of the multi-protocol router, Cisco are the world leaders in networking, investing more than \$5billion a year in research and development, filing 700 new patents every year.
www.cisco.com

Colton Care – eighteen quality care homes covering Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire, and with a range of services spanning residential care to nursing care and dementia care.
www.coltencare.co.uk

Hughes Ellard – property consultants and chartered surveyors with a thirty-year pedigree working throughout the south of England for property owners, occupiers, investors, and developers.
www.hughesellard.co.uk

Lamb Brooks – ten partners and over sixty-five staff who provide a complete legal service from offices in Basingstoke, with clients ranging from owner-managed businesses to two of the world's largest corporates.

www.lambbrooks.com

Langdowns DFK – chartered accountants who described themselves as '100% business advisers'; established in 1954, with three offices in Hampshire. The firm became an independent member of DFK International in

1997. www.langdowns.co.uk

Upton McGougan – award winning engineering, multi-disciplined consultant engineers offering services including structural, civil, building services, traffic and transportation.

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