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Planning Not To Fail Set A Strategic IT Plan

Technologies such as virtualization and cloud computing let data centers quickly and inexpensively deploy new IT resources. But that quick and cheap mentality can cause a lot of damage if no one thinks strategically about the long-term plan and how new implementation will affect other resources.

A long-term strategy is a must. Setting the strategy usually falls under the IT or data center manager's purview. That person is also charged with selling new deployments to executives, which is easier done when it fits in with both the long-term IT and the long-term business plan, says Laura Pettit Rusick, president of OPT Solutions (www.optsolutionsinc.com).

■ Connect To The Business Mission

The manager in charge needs to consider how best to think long-term in today's environment, which calls for virtualization, cloud computing, and other technologies that have an effect on the physical infrastructure.

To set the long-term plan, begin by thinking strategically, Rusick says. First, look at your enterprise's business mission and its overall long-term business strategy and determine how best to meet it from an IT perspective, Rusick advises.

You'll need to extrapolate IT plans out over several years for long-range planning purposes, so consider how the cloud and a virtual environment will affect your physical environment. But more importantly, remember to always cleave closely to the business strategy. This advice--tying IT and enterprise business mission and strategy to IT mission and strategy--helps when selling IT implementation to executives even if the strategy includes unknowns, like a move to the cloud, she adds.

Rusick says IT managers should ask themselves the following questions when considering proposed technology implementations:

Will the technology need to be scaled in the near future, and how easy will that be? Do you require virtual servers or machines for scaling, and how will that affect infrastructure needs? How much uptime is needed for the proposed technology? How many applications will the new implementation, such as a server environment, run? How critical will the new technology be to the enterprise function? What's the best way to get there, small implementation steps or in one fell swoop?

The answers to these questions will help when setting up a long-term business and IT strategy, Rusick says. It will also help when considering how many virtual servers will be necessary in the future. But before looking to bring in new technologies, IT managers should first look at how to leverage existing in-house solutions, Rusick adds.

■ Rollout Considerations

Just as enterprise executives plan long-term when setting business strategy, IT managers should plan long-term when considering major rollouts, says Steve Shalita, vice president of marketing at NetScout Systems (www.netscout.com).

He advises managers to first consider the high-level implementation and then drill down by outlining the individual steps that need to be taken to get there. This manner of planning also helps IT managers plan strategically even in terms of cloud and virtualization technologies, he says.

This process of planning calls for monitoring present-day systems to truly understand what's happening within a data center or an IT department. IT managers can use this detailed information when considering a move to the cloud, to virtual servers, or to physical data center expansions and consolidations, Shalita says.

Take, for instance, a new data center implementation. "It comes down to understanding the issues [and] understanding what you're dealing with at an application and infrastructure traffic volume level and data structure so you can plan efficiently," Shalita says.

"If my task is to consolidate three or four data centers into two, I'd need to determine what are the traffic patterns and user issues and response times at each center, and how I could best engineer the two centers based on these profiles," Shalita says.

Laurent Duperval, president of Duperval Consulting, urges managers to continually measure the effectiveness of present IT implementations by monitoring their current technology. That way, they'll have access to data that will help with future decision making and with selling higher-ups on new implementations. Ineffective monitoring will make for ineffective IT tactics when it comes to planning future rollouts, whether virtual or physical, Duperval says.

Information returned from data center monitoring can also help when considering moves to virtual environments and when planning to scale data centers and resources, says Josh Stephens, vice president of technology at SolarWinds (www.solarwinds.com), a maker of IT management solutions.

■ Make The Case

Managers must always consider how they'll sell the strategy and any new resources called for to the executive staff, says Jill Billhorn, vice president of small business sales at technology solutions provider CDW (www.cdw.com).

IT managers must understand a company's overall business strategy and goals when making recommendations for investment in IT, Billhorn says. To understand that strategy, she calls for a seat for IT managers at the executive planning table. In this way, IT managers can also explain to executives how their own IT technologies can help meet business strategy. "Particularly, for a business focused on both realizing cost savings while simultaneously increasing productivity, IT professionals must identify and recommend solutions suited to achieving those ends," Billhorn says.

The best way to get executive buy-in for projects proposed by the IT department itself is to tie the proposed technology implementation to business initiatives, business mission, and long-term plans, OPT Solutions' Rusick says. For instance, she says, for an enterprise that has multiple locations, it might make sense to turn to cloud computing for server capabilities.

"For a business continuity side, you'd make the case that this is an environment where

Key Points

- Consider the enterprise's business goals--not just IT goals--when thinking strategically about data center implementation, whether virtual or physical implementation.
- IT managers should be prepared to make a monetary case for new technology.
- To get executive buy-in, tie IT implementation with business goals.

you can pay a small amount every month for services, but rapidly torque up if you need to," Rusick says. "There's a huge money savings there."

Rusick also says to make the monetary case for new technology implementations. That means making the case within the IT department and to executives. If IT managers know a new implementation will pay for itself or is simply a good investment, they're thinking strategically and have likely made a sound decision, Rusick says. ■

by Jean Thilmany

Roadmap To Success

The best way to set out a strategic IT plan is to develop a roadmap that charts how expenditures on specific IT solutions drive measurable value and assist enterprises in reaching their long-term goals, says Jill Billhorn, vice president of small business sales at technology solutions provider CDW (www.cdw.com).

Not only does such a roadmap help IT managers connect the importance of their IT solutions to their organization's bigger picture, Billhorn says, it also helps when making the case for funding the solution. If they can visually tie IT expenditure to enterprise goal, "then it's highly likely the case for investment will be made," she says.

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