mrc

Technology Buyer's Evaluation kit

step 1: recognizing the problem

Most IT departments find themselves getting fatter and fatter. Not the people running them, of course, but the systems, processes, and software within.

To further complicate the overall health of IT, the status of the recent economy left many shops struggling to work within terrible budget constraints.

> "Our imagination is the only limit to what we can hope to have in the future."
>
> --Charles Kettering

To accommodate this ebb of funds, and tidal wave of layoffs and hiring freezes, businesses began putting all projects, functioning outside the realm of pure survival, on the back burner... and have been keeping them there despite turnarounds in the economy.

The problem with such economic downturns is not just that they hinder the potential of making forward strides, but they often forego proper maintenance of the status quo, and actually move departments in a backward direction.

During desperate times, quick-fix software is often the only thing that gets through, and these technology Band-Aids can become permanent, unwieldy solutions, further complicating future technological advances.

Don't think this applies to you?
That's normal. Often, these conditions happen very gradually over a long period of time, so it couldn't hurt to take a look. But, at the same time, we're certainly not in the business of making you do anything. If you want to keep working long hours to finish projects that could be done in less than half the time using the right solutions...that's your prerogative.

And if you're doggedly adding to your collection of "work-arounds" instead of modernizing the best way and moving forward...then this article isn't for you.

But, if you want to get your job done more efficiently, and get home for dinner at a reasonable hour. Or, if you want to make more money because your boss notices that you're suddenly cranking through projects, AND the company is saving money from the systems you've put into place...then read on, my friend.

This article will help you analyze your current IT job flow, plot your course, and create a plan of action. Like the final results you will achieve, this paper was built to be flexible. You can use the exercises in this paper as a simple self-evaluation checklist, or formulas you can cherry-pick to suit your needs, or simply as a motivational tool to get you moving in the right direction. It's entirely up to you.

step 2: finding a place to start

Now, let's figure out a starting point.
You need to know where you are before you can decide what direction to head. Which of the following three categories defines your department's culture the best?

(Take the self-evaluation quiz on the next page, if you'd like more clarity on what direction you are leaning: the past, the now, or the future.)

Past culture: Your focus tends to center around budget and cost, and your shop tends to make do with the tried and true, whether or not it's out of necessity due to money restrictions, employee comfort-level, or the seeming efficiency of current legacy solutions.

Now culture: Your office nickname is "Smokey the Bear" because you are constantly putting out fires. Your department's focus is to make sure that current operations are on track, and running as smoothly as they can. For

now, you deal with ad-hoc reports, individual user demands, and maintaining the status quo. According to Forrester research, analyst Phil Murphy in *To Cut IT Costs, Manage Resources Like an Investment Portfolio*: "Seventy-three percent of application budgets go to maintenance, and if I can shave 10 or 15 percent off of this, that's real money I'm saving."

You would like to move forward with new solutions, but there is just not enough time in the day. This includes bringing in consultants or money spent in separate departments for software/hardware that does not sync with IT systems, platforms, or expertise.

Future culture: You are in the fast and the furious lane. Your budget is there, or finally starting to be there, and you are in the process of creating Web applications, modernizing and re-engineering legacy applications, creating extranets, intranets, executive dashboards, and doing it all with the flexibility to quickly move toward future platforms, hardware configurations, and product lines. This includes providing software language training for staff and/or hiring consultants to create systems with advanced technology that the staff may or may not be familiar with.

quizzical

Self-Evaluation Quiz

Who you are
Figure out what type of IT leader you are, and where your attention has been lately. This should give you a clearer idea of your philosophy and any lacking areas where you might want to focus.

How does your organization look at the IT department budget-wise?
A) A necessary money pit with little or no return
B) An investment intricately tied to business unit performance or company productivity
C) A profit center that generates new business channels and capabilities

What will you be spending your budget on?
A) What budget?
B) Integrating disparate systems and processes; aligning IS and business goals
C) External customer management; and implementing new technology

Which statement best describes your philosophy on IT's role in the organization?
A) To be as small a drain on resources as possible
B) To enable business initiatives; maintain systems
C) To envision new business possibilities and initiate with technology

How does your budget this year compare with last year?
A) Lower
B) Lower or the same with more responsibilities
C) Higher

What personal skills are most critical for success in your position?
A) Knowledge of programming language; technical proficiency
B) Negotiation Skills
C) Understanding business processes and strategies, technology options

What's the biggest barrier to effectiveness in your role?
A) No money
B) Aligning IT and business goals; managing user expectations
C) Lack of key staff skills; changing technology; poor vendor support

What's your single most important metric for determining IT value?
A) ROI, ROI, ROI
B) Improved efficiency and productivity
C) Contribution to revenue growth

Overall, in what positive way did the IT department most impact your business last year?
A) Cut costs
B) Increased productivity
C) Helped grow revenue streams and business innovation

If you had mainly **A answers** circled, you tend to make do with **what's worked in the past**, out of necessity or effectiveness.

If you had mainly **B answers** circled you are **focused on the now** and keeping operations running smoothly.

If you had mainly **C answers** circled you are **focused on future**

How does that fit with what you have REALLY been up to?
To best capture this section, I recommend performing this short exercise. Take a piece of paper and a pen, and time yourself for a minute. Write down, without thinking or analyzing, as many projects as you and your department have recently worked on. Do it as a stream of consciousness, and don't exclude anything that doesn't count.

Once you've made the list, look over it. This exercise shouldn't take you much time. The purpose is to understand the time that you are currently consuming, to make sure that the culture you've laid out for yourself is in sync with your current workload. It should also give you an idea of some of the obstacles or clashing priorities that you need to either factor in, or to weed out.

Cathy Benko, a partner with Deloitte Consulting and co-author of a book about project portfolio management in an interview last year says, "ask yourself one simple question: In the case of budgetary contraction, which projects would you accelerate, maintain, slow down, or stop? Most of your projects should be of the kind that you would maintain or accelerate in either scenario."

Because this is a self-diagnosis technique, the lists are wide and varied. Some developers are working on long-term projects, like an ERP installation that overshadows every other project normally on their calendar. Others spend their days doing varied chores outside their expertise like trying to restore someone's hard drive after opening a virus, or fixing a network issue.

Note: **Now, before we continue, please note: This article isn't meant to dumb down the process. This is a very important procedure, and the tone that we've taken here is meant to give levity to what can sometimes be an overwhelming process. Too many articles and management manuals are written entirely in techno/market-speak, with a very cut and dried manner of scientific analysis, impossible tasks to find quantitative precursors, and time-consuming drivel that inspires you, the reader, to become discouraged and leave change sitting on the back burner.**

work out

step 3: guesstimate

Once your list is made, estimate how much time you spend doing each of these projects. If it's daily, how many minutes/hours a day? It's not brain surgery, so best guess is okay. Use the least common denominator...days, weeks, etcetera, as you go through and compare the projects.

Now, by each project listed, even if it's just a dumb re-booting of someone's computer, list which culture it falls into:

P (making do with the green-screen, fixing problems),

N (ad-hoc reports, responding to users),

F (creating new applications, modernizing old, integrating technology advancements).

And then, tally about how much time you are spending on each category.

This entire exercise should take you less than 10 minutes start-to-finish.

hide&seek

step 4: alignment

Okay. Now, take a peek.

First of all, does your current culture align with the project load your department has been handling?

If so, then it's time to move onto the next phase...
where you are going, and how you are going to get there.

If not, you may need to re-evaluate exactly which areas best define your actual needs, and then make decisions/goals from there.

step 4: defining your needs

Figuring out the end-goal can be intimidating. But, don't stop here. It's the easiest place to throw up your hands and give up...but if you break it down into byte-size pieces, you can deal.

Don't be skeptical. This is a tried-and-true organic process that is used in industries and organizations worldwide. Unfortunately, it's going to seem a bit like throwing darts, and like all computing...garbage in, garbage out.

Jot a quick list of areas that you think are weak in your company, whether they are in your departmental jurisdiction or not. Are you noticing a slump in sales? Is the business losing customers? Is it gaining customers more rapidly than it can service properly? What kind of complaints are users bringing to you? What kind of last-minute projects are being thrown at you?

To help you further flesh these ideas, out, use a tool we found useful in a White Paper on selecting software solutions. Mark Surman and Jason Diceman from Commons Group write, "The first step in the process is to clearly define your needs. This should include both the overall needs of your organization as well as the needs of individual users.

Specific issues to consider include:

Organizational need: What problems are you trying to solve? Why is your organization seeking new software?

User needs: What do individual users need to be able to do with the software? Are there particular things users have already asked for?

Features: What are the actual features that must be provided by the software? How important are each of these features?

Language: What languages does the software need to accommodate?"

Now, in a separate column jot a quick list of all the projects that you've been dying to get to, but never seem to find the time for. Or, list the areas where you find repetitive tasks that might be re-examined. Where could streamlining or automation improve the business? Are you running data on disparate databases requiring constant data transfer? Does your Web site allow customers to place orders, and if so, are their orders in real-time, or does that information then need to be manually entered somewhere else? Would electronic invoicing be a good option for your company?

Again, this is a brainstorm. It doesn't matter if these are good ideas, or bad ideas.

Now, put these lists in a drawer for at least couple of days, and do not look at them. This is the dangerous part, where you run the risk of getting busy on another project, and never coming back to this...but the most important thing to consider is that you need to have a fresh perspective when it comes time to acting or editing these thoughts.

The list needs to age. Trust us.

Depart-mental health

In the meantime, to stay in the game, you're going to want to do two things: Schedule some time with your colleagues in other departments, like customer service, shipping, accounting/finance, sales, record-keeping. Ask about their day-to-day activities, their most cumbersome, their favorite tasks, and where they would like improvements made, and have them email you with any other suggestions or ideas they come up with, no matter how crazy.

Then put those lists in that drawer with your other lists.

And, while you are carrying on with your normal everyday activities, you're going to start having more ideas. Things you didn't think of before. Tasks your department is asked to perform that are tedious, or unnecessary, or inefficient, or boring...tasks that could be improved. Jot them down and toss those in the drawer as well. And, let them all sit for at least a week.

After evaluating your list, pick out the top 10 projects that seem to be most important to the business, and fill in the following chart:

Makes Money	Saves Money	Necessary Cost	Other

Charting your Course

one week later...

step 5: brass tactics

One week later... Okay, ready? It's time to go through your lists with a critical eye. What areas could be combined? Would a centralized intranet or extranet or executive dashboard give you a place to start? If so, list all applications that could be included in one of those.

Rank the top projects you consider to be most crucial, and in ranking them, also consider how these fit with your current Past, Now, or Future culture and whether they will help your company move in the right direction. Consider too any possible downsides, concerns, and make note of those.

Surman and Diceman also advise to consider constraints.
Some common areas to consider include:
Budget: How much do you have to spend? (include training in that)
Timeframe: How quickly do you need to implement? Is there time for customization work or does it need to be ready tomorrow? Did you consider customization in your budget?
Compatibility: What kinds of databases, and platforms are your solutions currently on, and where do you want to take them?
Skills: What kind of skills do you and your existing staff have? What skills do end-users have? Can you leverage their skills to take pressure off of IT?[2]

step 6: mapping it out

Now, try to organize your lists into a top ten list, and fill out the above chart placing each in one of the four categories above.

If you got this far, well done! This chart will leave you with many potential projects to fulfill your business goals, so it might pay to use an industry expert as a sounding board.

With over 23 years of experience under our belt, we will provide you with some ideas of where to begin, who to call, solutions to consider, and angles to pursue to make one of these projects into a reality. And we'll do it at no cost to you.

To arrange **for your FREE application consultation, call us at 630-916-0662** today, or drop us a line at **mrc@mrc-productivity.com.**

mrc
www.mrc-productivity.com
555 Waters Edge Drive, Ste 120
Lombard, IL 60148
ph. 630.916.0662 fax. 630.916.0663