

Can Your IT Group Make Time to Innovate?

By Greg Griffiths

The formula for achieving business success in today's always-on, always-evolving business environment begins and ends with innovation. It's a prerequisite for staying ahead of the competition and customer needs. Likewise, constantly evolving your business model to align with customer buying behavior is the new normal.

Despite this reality, delivering on innovation remains a challenge.

Why is that the case? Why are some companies better at innovation than others? How are some able to deliver on innovation so much faster than others?

The answers are two-fold and quite simple in concept. First, those successful companies leverage technology to drive innovation. Second, they allocate resources to innovation.

Signs that innovation is a priority

As I travel the country talking with IT leaders, it's apparent that most all of them understand IT has become highly strategic and that the role they play in the business has evolved accordingly. But it's also apparent there are wide gaps between those IT organizations that are **helping lead or deliver transformation** and those that are simply along for the ride.

Sometimes the differences are easier to spot. Though in most every case, **there are clear signs I see that demonstrate an IT group is "able to innovate."** That is, that they have the time and resources to apply to it, as well as support from leadership to pursue it.

Signs of innovation

1. Dedicated leadership

When I walk into a meeting with IT people and the Director of Innovation is involved, it's a clear sign innovation is alive and well here. If that individual happens to report to the CIO, that's even better. By the way, if you are a CIO and you've been thinking about this, you should move quickly because it's possible leaders in other areas are thinking the same thing.

2. Cross-functional engagement

If the CIO has invited a few peers (from operations and/or marketing, for example) that's another sign the IT team are innovation leaders within their company.

3. Passion for their business

They have a clear understanding of, and like to share and discuss their business initiatives. This often comes with a clear disdain for the typical vendor pitch.

4. An open mind

They're interested in understanding technology options that can help them accomplish their objectives, and are open to ideas and discussion versus a typical RFP-style response.

5. Shifting resources

Internal IT resources are shifting from day-to-day maintenance, or "keeping the lights on," and they're looking for partners that can provide managed solutions to help them make this shift.

6. A solid cloud strategy

Finally, they are moving enterprise applications and services to the cloud to become more agile and execute on their vision more quickly than their competition.

Where does your team fall in this mix?

The important question to ask yourself now is whether or not you see any of these innovation signposts in your organization. Does your IT organization have time to devote to innovation? Does your executive management team support IT's role in advancing the innovation agenda?

If the answer is yes, you're on your way to where you need to be. IT's position has become more and more strategic, putting it in the best position to take on the innovation initiative. At the core of that initiative you'll find a range of new technologies, accelerated cloud adoption and a shift in resource allocation.

If the answer was no, it's not too late to get ahead. According to multiple analysts including Gartner and IDC, as much as 80% of an IT department's time is still spent on day-to-day maintenance.¹ Others including Forrester report shifting this balance can pay-off with significant improvements in shareholder value. They

reported companies devoting more time to customer experience saw a 43% improvement in shareholder value over a six year period.²

Shifting towards innovation

At a recent conference I attended, a speaker suggested that the formula for business success is picking the right technologies that have a positive impact on your customer experience and implementing them faster than your competition.

I couldn't agree more. **There is no better time than the present to put innovation on the IT agenda, and the first place to start is to shift. Shift to the cloud, shift resources to innovation and shift to vendors that become partners in enabling your transformation.**

Make the time for shifts like that now and there are no limits to where you can go from there.

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About the author



Greg Griffiths is VP of Marketing for EarthLink, where he's responsible for driving the company's go to market initiatives for the enterprise/mid-market business unit. Greg was previously VP of Marketing at New Edge Networks, a leader in IP-based network services acquired by EarthLink in 2006. At New Edge, Greg led their retail industry strategic focus, and had overall responsibility for all aspects of marketing including brand, communications, demand generation and channel strategy. Prior to that, he held executive positions with Eschelon Telecom and Enhanced Telemanagement. He's a graduate of Washington State University with a degree in marketing and has served as an adjunct instructor.

About Earthlink

EarthLink is a leading network services provider dedicated to delivering great customer experiences in a cloud connected world. We help thousands of multi-location businesses securely establish critical connections in the cloud.

Sources:

1 Gartner, "Line-of-business tech budgets may soon top IT department budgets," 2011, and IDC, Simplifying IT to Drive Better Business Outcomes and Improved ROI, 2014

2 Forrester, The Business Impact of Customer Experience, 2014