How Information Technology can add value.

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Abstract:

Many business leaders are unsure how IT can simultaneously add value to organisation and reduce costs. By understanding the requirements of internal and external (customers / public) users, systems can be delivered that provide better customer service and reduce costs by integrating and sharing information.

Introduction:

Historically, computer systems are used solely by internal (corporate) users with data and processes evolving over time to address organisational requirements. The information contained within systems is supplemented with various information sources (spreadsheets) and people’s organisational knowledge.

Putting it simply, to produce the required end product/document requires a combination of information contained within various systems and information stored in manual sources and people’s heads. This situation eventuates over time because computer systems either don’t evolve to take on new aspects of the business - or never completely encompassed all the facets of the business.

Internet:

The Internet has facilitated the dissemination of information to external customers and the anonymous public. What used to the bastion of telephone customer service agents can now be delivered to external users electronically, around the clock for a fraction of the price.

Where customer service agents can accommodate multiple incompatible information sources computer systems cannot, limiting the ability of those systems to be used for external users. The introduction of providing information to external users via the Internet has highlighted the deficiency of many internal information systems.

Systems should not be revisited purely for the benefit of external users. Internal users will also benefit from better, more appropriate systems. It is better for customer service agents to complete calls in minutes using one system, than to hunt for information between multiple systems, frustrating both the customer and the telephone agent.

Aligning internal and external systems:

The goal is to have one systems that contains all the information required for internal processing of information and viewable by external customers and the anonymous public.

It is difficult to define everything that is needed (in one system) to satisfy this requirement; then build a system in which information is stored in a way that is useful for both internal and external users. However, this is the aspiration goal to aim for.
The advantage of this approach when information is updated in one central location is the organisation has ‘one version of the truth’. There is no requirement to transfer or copy or combine information from multiple systems. As information is held in one location, there are no issues with versioning (out of data information). By providing as much on-line content as possible, the possibility of using out-of-date information is reduced.

In practice building the ‘one system’ is very difficult. Systems for external users need to be built so they can be used with a minimum of training, but with a maximum of accuracy and interpretation. Internal employees using internal systems are more familiar with the product line and the process and have different requirements. Internal information (using organisational jargon) may need to be ‘translated’ for external users to ensure understanding and accuracy.

All the information needs to be encapsulated within the system, and every possibility needs to be catered for. Of course, there is plenty of information that should only be available to internal users, not external users. But this information needs to be contained within the system; it may be shielded or translated for external users.

An unexpected benefit of having aligned systems, internal training costs should be reduced. This stems from external systems have been designed to be used with a minimum of training – some of this benefit should flow to internal users.

Benefits:

The expected benefit from this approach is seamless availability to external customers and anonymous users via the Internet. This in turn leads to increased levels of customer service, reduced ongoing costs (not needing to provide as many customer service telephone agents) and the opportunity for better internal information with better reporting.

Additionally, this approach is scalable, providing the opportunity to service a wider area (with multiple distribution points) and more customers. No longer is the number of customer service agents a limiting factor in the business. Your customers become your data entry people – creating orders and updating information themselves, within your corporate system. This approach is commonly known as ‘self-service’.

About the Author:

Kevin Fleming has over 20 years IT experience with leading Australian organisations across a diverse range of industries from Medical, Engineering, Primary Production, Manufacturing, Wholesaling, Real Estate and Services organisations.

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