STRATEGIC TECHNOLOGY PLANNING, COMMON SENSE FOR BUSINESS

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The modern business environment bears little resemblance to the one that existed ten years ago, and almost none to that of the 1970's. Remember the telex and that ultimate office machine, the IBM Selectric? The explosion of technology in the marketplace has altered the landscape in a profound way. Businesses that have kept up to date have done well. Those that haven't, well…

Any firm that wishes to remain viable in the 21st century must utilize some form of strategic planning. Today more than ever, companies find it necessary to assess their business processes, their use of technology, and the capabilities of their staff. In essence, this is Strategic Technology Planning.

A good strategic plan begins with the identification of business goals, and then develops a comprehensive roadmap that drives technology investment toward those goals. It takes into account all aspects of a company's technology, including hardware, software, network, equipment, telecommunications and staffing resources.

The best planners will not only focus on these technical assets of a company but also on the efficiencies they provide. Too many companies are satisfied once they have completed significant changes in technology and rarely consider how effectively they are really being used. Planning, by its nature, should designate not only *what* tools are to be put in place, but *how* these tools will be aligned with the way people work (or should work). The net result is often that fewer applications can be used to perform a greater number of tasks more effectively, information sharing between systems can be increased and users are exposed to fewer disparate systems. These benefits certainly make the planning process a small investment of time in comparison.

A technology plan provides significant tactical information as well, including a timeline and a process for the acquisition of new technology. It takes into account the budget, culture and future goals of the organization. It also considers the staffing requirements of new systems and processes. It outlines training goals, and sets forth specific criteria for hiring and organizing employees.

Finally, strategic technology planning identifies areas where business continuity planning has been inadequate. Information and communication systems play a vital role in today's business climate. Interruptions in these systems can cause havoc in any business environment, and lead to a serious loss of revenue. While a disaster recovery plan is different and more comprehensive than a strategic plan, a good strategic plan examines the potential for unplanned downtime and suggests methods to lessen its impact.

Despite the benefits of these efforts, it is common for planning to take a back seat to the day-to-day emergencies that IT departments constantly battle. An advantage consultants can bring to a company is simply focused attention on the planning process. Outside resources can also add broader industry exposure, business perspective on technology and knowledge of technology not currently in use at the company. Our firm stays independent of products and vendors to help our clients through the planning process without introducing ruinous bias.

Many planning projects begin their life as seemingly straightforward technical upgrades. These upgrades often begin as a single project, but result in the re-thinking of many related components. For example, when a company has a need to upgrade its network operating system significantly, it will find (often late in the project) that its policies, accompanying application upgrades, staffing skills, remote access, cabling, backups, security schemes or wide area network will also be effected in important ways. Planning would not only spotlight these relationships, but also identify the less technical aspects of such fundamental changes, including standards across offices and preparing users for the changes.

Planning can also be very focused. In companies where technology provides a potential competitive edge, planning specifically for e-commerce or enterprise web development sets the stage for coordinated efforts. These planning sessions identify the clients' desires, company goals, tools, standards, development methodologies, and even the high level workflow necessary to make development effective and flexible. Most importantly, involving clients or customers in the planning process ensures the final products meet their needs not just the best intentions of the IT department.

Today, planning is more than a review of a corporate infrastructure - it is more than staffing analysis - it is more than an outline of future goals - it is common sense for business.

Brad Robbins co-founded Baker Robbins & Company *with David Baker, and was a recipient of the Year 2000 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award.* Baker Robbins & Company *has become nationally recognized as a leading technology consulting firm with offices in Houston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco and London. For more information call (800) 505-0510 or visit their web site at www.brco.com.*