

No Man's Land

Are IT relationship managers a good idea?

A trend in recent years has been for IT directors to appoint 'relationship managers' to work with business units, as a key part of their strategy. Usually, although not always, drawn from within IT, they are typically there to improve communications and understanding between business leaders and their IT experts. In practice, beyond this basic brief their day jobs differ depending on the real opportunities they can find to make a tangible difference in either service management or investment management.

*In the early days, they can help to achieve significant breakthroughs, but as time goes by having a people acting as a 'bridge' between the business and IT can lead to uncomfortable issues about true added value and conflicting loyalties. **Chris Potts**, himself a former relationship manager, explores the differences between success and failure and the next steps in our evolution in this key area of strategy.*

We know that there is very often a gap in communication and understanding between business leaders and their IT experts. From the work I do with leading companies in a variety of industries here in the UK and around the world it's obvious that this is still a fundamental reason why executives can fail to see the true value of their IT investments.

So as IT Director you decide to appoint some people to bridge this gap. What do you call them? IT Account Managers? IT Relationship Managers? Business Engagement Managers? Something else? As this is all about communication and understanding we need to tread carefully - what we call these people will communicate a great deal about our own mindsets and where we see ourselves and them in the value chain.

We want to highlight very clearly, both to the people themselves and the people they will work with, why they are there - what their day job will be and the commercial benefit they will deliver. And when their loyalties are tested, which is bound to happen at some stage, whether they represent the interests of 'the business' (the customer), 'IT' (the supplier) or some kind of middle ground between the two.

Let's look at why we are doing this in the first place. Sure, there is a gap in communications and understanding but we need to focus on any real commercial damage this causes and our options for dealing with it.

Senior executives' main strategic issue with IT is that they still can't see the links between spending money on IT investments and services and the creation of real business value. As a result they are not sure whether they are maximising the value of IT, or even whether IT spending helps to create any value at all.

They want people who can show them these links and then make sure that everyone understands and exploits them to maximise value for money. These people can't be from the supply side of things or they are bound to have a conflict of interests - they must be an integral part of the business team.

Are our relationship managers the answer? Perhaps so, if they are dedicated to helping their business colleagues to maximise value for money, know how it's done and are measured by this outcome. But they will find this hard to do if they sit in some kind of no man's land between 'the business' and 'IT'.

As an interim step, they can help move things on but before long they will need to go native and become part of the business team. They will then be our business experts in creating value from IT investments or from customer-side IT service management, so maybe we should call them IT Investment Managers or IT Service Managers from the outset.

Which brings us to a strategy punchline. If these people are our gone-native business experts in maximising the value-for-money of IT services and investments, where do you, the IT Director, sit in all of this?

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