

## **9 Strategies to Improve the Quality of IT Service**

With the increasing dependence on Information Technology, today's business is severely constrained, if the quality of service does not meet business needs. Despite the increasing reliability of hardware and software, failures continue to occur. The key achieving quality service is no longer the quality of the hardware and software, but the processes used to manage the service.

The quality of IT service can have a major impact on revenue and costs.

The following strategies apply to new application development and can improve the quality of service, thereby improving productivity both inside and outside of IT. They can also have a major impact on customer satisfaction.

### **1. Define service level requirements as well as functional requirements for each new application.**

Most new initiatives in IT focus on the functional requirements of the new application. While this is necessary, and the original purpose of the initiative, it is not sufficient to meet the needs of the business. It is also one of the primary reasons why IT initiatives fail to meet their objectives or cost much more than identified in the business case.

Service level requirements may include transaction volumes, availability, response time, and any other item that could seriously affect how the service can be used. In many cases applications have not been designed to be operated. As in any product, if the product has not been designed with support in mind, the costs of support can increase significantly. This can seriously erode any return on investment. It is much easier to correct these problems during the planning and design phases of a project than after implementation.

Think of a manufacturing plant. What does it cost to change the plant after it is built?

### **2. Create service level agreements between business units and IT.**

If service requirements have been taken into consideration during the design phase, the service level agreement (SLA) will be much simpler to deliver. In most cases, service is an afterthought. The SLA is a contract between the supplier (IT) and the customer (sponsoring business unit). As in all contracts, it must define the actions required of both parties.

The biggest mistakes made in this area include:

- SLA developed at time of implementation.
- SLA developed by IT in technical terms.
- SLA is one sided (IT) only.

Most SLAs are never signed, because they were developed after implementation, are in technical terms and provide no perceived benefit to the sponsoring business unit.

### **3. Create measurements for the quality of IT service in business terms.**

In order to ensure that service meets the business unit's requirements, the quality of service should be measured. Many organizations do not measure the quality of service, and spend their time reacting to poor service.

The problem for many organizations that have implemented service level measurements is that they are measured in technical not business terms. Who cares whether the availability of a server is 100% if I can't use the application! The issue is "can I use the application to do my job?". If not, it is not available. Quite often, IT measures what can be measured. Total service can be difficult to measure, but you must look for ways to measure it. Otherwise the value of IT to the business will be limited.

### **4. Project business volumes for each application.**

Quite often assumptions are made about business volumes. The business may be depending on volumes increasing by a factor of ten, while IT assumes that the process will simply be more efficient.

If the application has the ability to handle the growth in volume, the issue may simply be funds that were wasted buying a small server rather than a large one. It is much worse, if the software has not been designed to support the volumes. This may require an upgrade to the software, or purchase of new software and a major upheaval in the business!

Project your volumes and understand the implications of volume growth! This is the same as building a plant!

### **5. Identify the business impact of failures.**

Another issue that is often not understood is the business impact of a failure. IT measures availability, response time and other technology-based elements, but seldom gets down to the true business impact. This is extremely important and varies greatly based on business needs.

Compare the business impact of a web-based eCommerce application to that of an application used by an internal business unit such as finance. Downtime or slow response means lost sales to an eCommerce application. And if that is your only business, it may mean failure of the business!

Also the business impact may change over time, in surprising ways. Consider banking, where a failure in a branch application inconvenienced branch staff and individual consumers. Then came Debit cards. The impact was felt by some of the Bank's largest customers: the grocery chains. The impact of failures took on much greater meaning!



## **6. Implement industry best practice processes for your IT operation.**

As any business should compare itself to its competitors and others to see how they are doing, so should IT. There is a significant difference between the best and average performers in IT. With the dependence of today's businesses on IT, you cannot afford to be at the bottom end.

Consider programs such as ISO 9000, ITIL® and Six Sigma to improve the quality of your programs. ITIL® is a framework for IT service management. The IT Service Management Forum provides an opportunity to meet other organizations interested in improving the quality of IT service delivery.

## **7. Implement root cause analysis to identify and prevent recurrence of outages.**

In any environment, failures will occur. Help desks have been set up to deal with these service incidents, and recover service.

Experience has shown that the most common incidents occur over and over again. If the help desk simply recovers service and does not investigate why it occurred, no action will be taken to prevent its recurrence.

The cost of these outages is high, in lost time by the business and support of the help desk and other staff. It can easily be 50% of the calls!

Root cause analysis tries to understand the source of the incident. Sometimes it is technology, but quite often it is the process of managing technology that is at fault. For example, the method of installing software has improved significantly over the last few years, but is still the biggest cause of failures! The result of root cause analysis is to implement fixes or amended processes, which will prevent the recurrence of the failure.

## **8. Measure internal and external customer satisfaction on a regular basis.**

Measuring the quality of service delivered is a good first step in delivering a quality service. However, it is not sufficient. Organizations that start to measure start to improve. As service delivery improves, it is very easy to become complacent. As the business changes, business needs start to change. This includes the quality and level of service. New measurements need to be put in place to reflect those changes.

There is no sure way of measuring everything that could impact service. Too many measurements can be even worse than none at all. The only way to ensure that what is being measured is measuring the pulse of the business, is to have a customer perspective.



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Customer surveys are subjective responses, but they provide a pulse on what your customers feel. They can let you know when what you are measuring is not reflective of your customer needs. It also reduces the chance of becoming complacent. Use regularly scheduled surveys to check the pulse.

Since some applications are meant for internal use and some by the business's customers, both may be required.

## **9. Establish relationship managers for each business unit.**

When you have SLAs in place, have good business based measurements and measure customer satisfaction, you will be well on your way to delivering the level of service required by your business.

In order to maintain that relationship, relationship managers should be established. This will ensure that there is a good understanding of the business needs, and that service plans can be adjusted as required by the business.

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Marc Lachance

M. E. Lachance & Associates Ltd.

[www.melachance.ca](http://www.melachance.ca)

[www.thevirtualcio.ca](http://www.thevirtualcio.ca)

416-358-1389

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