

Book Review

IT Business Partnerships – A Field Guide, Paving the way for Business and Technology Convergence, John Sculley&Joseph Topinka, CIO Mentor Press, 2014, 392 Pages, INR 1771.

The relationship between Information Technology (IT) and business has been stressful for more reasons than one. More than two-thirds of businesses do not view IT as a strategic partner and do not consider IT in their strategic planning efforts. Some businesses even consider IT as a cost center. The lack of inter-personal relationships and a differing mindset about their expectations of each other, often exacerbate misgivings even further. During my corporate days in the U.S., I have felt that the businesses struggle to strike a meaningful relationship with IT and vice versa. The waterfall software development methodology of those days didn't help much. Requirements were handed off to IT and the software product that turned out was often disappointing for the business. There is then the headlong rush to fix defects and at times updates are improperly done. Such outcomes often queered the pitch for constructing better relationships between IT and the business since previous encounters promote a very defensive mind set.

With the advent of agile software development, business and IT become co-located, have a better understanding of each other's priorities, work in sprints (where a chunk of the requirement is developed to the customer's satisfaction), and accept changes to the original requirements. Such fluid processes have changed perspectives about each other; however, much still needs to be changed. Large corporations, bureaucratic and inflexible, especially often find making changes very difficult (Mahadevan et al. 2010). For instance, document keepers and governance bodies often resist or are unable to keep up with the changes.

Topinka's book doesn't talk much about software development. However, he works to change the mindset especially of IT employees on how they should strike a relationship between them and the business. For instance, he makes a fervent case for IT not to position itself as an internal service provider or say things like "IT and the business" and "We need a seat on the table". Such catch phrases have the possibility to further alienate IT from business.

Topinka topples another misconception I had in mind about alignment. He neatly explains alignment as the first step towards true IT and Business integration, where a handoff happens from business to a ready and waiting IT team. What is really required is convergence where business and IT understand all aspects of each other's needs relative to strategic imperatives. This is in line with what El Sawy (2003) calls as Fusion where IT is not only immersed with the business environment such that they are indistinguishable to our perception and form a unified fabric. An example Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmsanson (2013) have for this fusion concept is in a situation where Social Computing cannot be differentiated from the content experience. In earlier version, social computing is a valuable complementary offer or a mere tool, and its use is optional.

The need of the hour is a complete behavioral and process change of how IT is perceived in the organization. To address this issue, Topinka calls for the establishment of an Information Technology Business Partner (ITBP) position, reporting to the CIO of the organization. He dives into the qualities that an ITBP should possess in chapter 2 by delving on 8 core strengths where being strategic, communicative and involved in ideation seem to key to me. Topinka also spells out a catch all and beyond version of essential duties and responsibilities of an ITBP. ITBP are supposed to embrace the company culture, learn the business through field research and have a good understanding of how the company makes its money. ITBP should aggressively iterate through options to come up with innovative and integrated solutions and actively promote the value add IT provides for the organization.

The structuring of the ITBP function discussed in chapter 3 shows how the ITBP can be placed within different departments. For instance, the ITBP can be placed in 3 or 4 areas of a large department. As an example Topinka suggests 3 ITBP's to engage 6 areas within the supply chain department. He recommends that the 3 supply chain ITBP's consult each other and report their findings to the CIO. I can imagine this as a solution to the problem faced in my work place where an ITBP is placed each in the development, testing and implementation areas of the software development department. Sometimes, certain areas may have 2 or 3 ITBP's depending on the size and complexities of the project executed. Such a direct feed to the CIO will build a fused and articulate approach to corporate strategy.

In the obstacles to implementing ITBP chapter, Topinka makes a fine point that IT is its own worst enemy process or certain entrenched views prevent IT from seeing the big picture. However, the biggest drawback of Topinka is his inability to address the issue of outsourcing. He believes that corporations are misguided into thinking IT is just a commodity. However, outsourcing is very much the elephant in the room and Topinka does not have solutions on how to integrate outsourcing with corporate strategy.

IT governance gets a new name, Business Technology Investment Committee, BTIC or BT, as in Business Technology coined by Forrester. Topinka calls it BTIC and an important area for ITBP to proactively advocate business and customer needs. The ITBP has the role of aligning the business unit, formulate business cases and find a place on the roadmap for their projects. Apart from renaming governance, there is nothing new that Topinka has added to the process that decides whether a project gets approved, thus having certain downstream process activated.

ITBP are given insights on how to negotiate with the Project Management Office (PMO) using quarterly sprints and tools such as the Capabilities Roadmap. Topinka recommends that ITBP's get the New Product Development Professional (NPDP) certification which will help their career moves as well as working better with product managers. The rest of the chapters guide ITBP's write a business case, communicate with coworkers with social media for instance, and some advice on improving Emotional Quotient (EQ) along with the science behind it.

Overall Topinka presents a compelling case for ITBP and comprehensively covers the qualities and responsibilities that ITBP's should possess. He also lays out many tools; techniques and behavioral changes that could help ITBP's get their work done and are successful in achieving a state of melting IT and business as one entity. However, he places a lot of responsibility on the ITBP's shoulder. The ITBP could be at the BT, talking to the product manager, and preparing a financial statement all on the same day. As mentioned earlier, Topinka has no strategy for integrating outsourcing with which has emerged as a necessary evil in the arsenal of many corporations.

Such major endeavors are successful only with full support of top management. Working across many divisions, the ITBP could run into product managers who don't buy the ITBP vision leading to uncooperative behavior. This melting between

IT and business will require tremendous energy and will power to surmount many obstacles that come on the way. Perhaps, one of the ways to introduce ITBP would be through a pilot program using one division so that others see the benefit of such an association. One of my superiors in corporate America used to tell me to do my homework every day similar to what school students do! Being prepared prior to meetings give you important nuggets of information and better decision making capability. As an ITBP, doing home work will make the difference between whether the melting of IT and Business is done efficiently or appears coarse in the grand scheme of things.

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RAJAGIRI Management Journal

ISSN 0972-9968

Published by Rajagiri Centre for Business Studies
(A CMI Institution)
Rajagiri Valley P.O., Kakkanad
Kochi - 682 039, Kerala, India
Phone: 91-484-2426554
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