Are you ready for a group hug? Let’s get the call center leadership and the IT support staff together and create a mutual admiration society. We can share how much we appreciate each other, talk about how well we understand each other, and discuss how we are always in lock step about what needs to be done and how to do it. We can rave about how the technology is always enabling us to do our jobs in the center and how well we work together to pursue new capabilities that will benefit the business.

Does this sound a little sarcastic to you? Or were you thinking that perhaps we have lost our minds? Well, at least we got your attention! The reality is that we think the relationship between IT and the business leaves a lot of room for improvement in most companies. But an open and honest discussion about it, and a willingness to change and adjust on both sides, can reap some real benefits. Because after all, ultimately, we all want the same thing: a successful business operation enabled with technology that works effectively and delivers a real return on investment.

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What’s Wrong with the IT/Business Relationship?

Let’s start by looking at what’s typically wrong with these relationships. Some of it may be nature: the way people think, what they value and how they operate tend to be different in IT and the business areas. Not to stereotype, but contact center people tend to be “people people”—they look out for their staff and their customers first. They are right-brained, passionate and compassionate. Give them the opportunity to satisfy an upset customer or rally their staff to meet a new goal, and they’re all over it. IT people, on the other hand, tend to be “stuff people”—they get excited about hardware and software. They are left-brained, sometimes called “geeky” (and sometimes even proud of it!). Give them a technical problem to solve, whether fixing something that is broken or finding the next thing to buy, and they’re happy.

So when we start from such fundamental differences, it’s no surprise that we have some challenges in our relationships. Some of the symptoms of dysfunctional IT/business relationships that we’ve seen are:

- Working in isolation from each other
- Purchasing technology that does not have clear value to everyone
- Poor communication and generally keeping each other in the dark… or being in the dark and just griping about it rather than doing something about it
- Finger-pointing when problems occur or there is difficulty resolving problems

On the other hand, we’ve also seen signs of a very good relationship between the two groups:

- IT people observing calls in the call center
- Business people attending a vendor demo (or otherwise investing time to learn about technology)
- IT people gathering business requirements
- Common accountability and metrics
- IT measured on business success
- An understanding of the impact of IT on business metrics

Gripes and Fears

Gripes and fears on both sides of the aisle contribute to the problems between
IT and the business. But there are some things to agree on here—for example, both groups think the other speaks a foreign language. IT throws too many acronyms and complex terms at the business, without making the “WIIFM” (What’s In It For Me?) clear. VoIP. VXML. ASR. SOA. Ugh! The business scurries about worrying about things like ASA and AHT, adherence and shrinkage. The IT staff can only wonder.

Beyond the language barriers, the two groups may feel misunderstood, and feel that their priorities are different. Each may accuse the other of bad timing: “What do you mean the upgrade is over the holiday weekend?!” Or, “We can’t put that new system in at that time; we have a major system upgrade at the same time and our resources will be committed to that!” The mysteries of what’s “behind the curtain” in each area may lead to distrust that the other group is committing the time and resources needed to do things right. Each may look like they are unwilling to do what it takes to succeed.

The business side has some specific gripes about IT, however. These include:

- They don’t take the time to understand our operation.
- They force technology on us.
- They put new technology in at the worst times—weekends, holidays.
- They don’t give us fair warning for training, staffing, backup plans, etc.
- Every time we find a good packaged solution, they say they can build it in-house.
- They don’t give us enough control; we want to be able to make changes to routing, reporting, and more.

Not to be outdone, IT can point some fingers at the business side, too. IT often feels the business has unrealistic expectations—of the technology, its costs, the vendors (no, they can’t do everything they say they can!), and the time, resources, energy and know-how it takes to succeed with today’s complex technologies. On any given project, IT fears that the project will never end because the business keeps changing its mind about what it wants. Of course, the business side of this gripe is that, as they learn what the technology can do, they want to be able to take advantage of that, and IT often won’t let them. A compromise is clearly in order. On the business’ request for control, IT’s concern is that the business doesn’t understand all the implications of having control. Responsibility goes with control.

Defining Goals… Together

The business and IT each have goals. Perhaps if we understood each other’s goals better, we would be able to work together more successfully. The box above offers a primer on the goals of your counterparts.

The bottom line is that the two groups share common goals: serve the customer well, meet corporate goals (for growth, cost control, revenue, customer service improvements, etc.), and create an environment where everyone can succeed. There are a number of examples of companies that have embraced these common goals and truly work in unison to achieve them. A few that we’ve had direct experience with include:

- A company that met the lack of teamwork between IT and call center head-on, and embarked on a mission to change it. The project was so successful that the two units eventually merged together, reporting into one person.
- An organization that measures IT success by customer (call center) success—further proving that common goals can lead to stronger relationships.
- An IT department that was truly motivated to develop creative changes to desktop design because they fully understood that those changes would decrease handle time and improve the call center’s bottom line.

Some Keys to Success

The above examples are not simply exceptions, but evidence of a growing trend. More and more, companies have healthy or improving relationships between IT and the business. The contact center is so dependent on technology that it is critical to work together effectively with the IT counterparts. Here are some important keys to success to consider for your company:

- Provide collaborative education for both IT and the business. Attend vendor presentations together. Have IT people learn about contact center operations, and business people learn about contact center technology. (ICMI has excellent courses and webinars for each, so let us know if you need help!)
- Build a strong working relationship that features regular communication. Have routine—weekly, biweekly or monthly, at least—meetings to talk about technology and its application in the center. Some of the meetings may be purely knowledge sharing, and others may have specific tasks. But these meetings should enhance the ability to understand each other and work together.

### IT and Business: Understanding Each Other’s Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Goals</th>
<th>IT Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Perform at a level that consistently meets or beats operational objectives</td>
<td>• Meet our broader enterprise goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reduce the chaos</td>
<td>• Get good value and return for our investments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Eliminate surprises</td>
<td>• Have infrastructure and applications (and vendors) that work well together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Meet the mandate of “do more with less” year after year after year</td>
<td>• Manage risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Differentiate from the competition</td>
<td>• Deliver on time and on budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Prepare for the future</td>
<td>• Manage the (often limited) resources we have effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Be able to support what we buy and implement</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Test the Fitness of Your IT/Business Relationship

Want to improve your IT/business relationships? Start with this little fitness check up. Have all the key people on your team—call center and IT/telecom people—score your relationship in these areas. Score each item on a scale of 1 to 5—1 is strongly disagree; 5 is strongly agree; 3 is neutral.

1. Our senior business and IT leaders give consistent direction and strategy for us all to work within.
2. When we are planning for and buying new technology, we have a cross functional team of IT and business people evaluate options.
3. Our business cases are a collaborative effort between IT and the business. We always understand why we are buying a given technology and the value it has for the company.
4. We create clear requirements for technology that are business driven first, while considering the technical needs to fit in our environment.
5. When we are implementing technology, the business participates in testing and approves the system before going into production.
6. Our technology people understand the operation of the call center.
7. Our technology people understand the mission criticality of the center and plan technology changes accordingly.
8. We understand each others’ priorities and the tradeoffs due to resource limitations, and work together to resolve issues.
9. Our business people like to learn about new technology and what it can do for them.
10. Our business people understand how technology governance works — from the planning and investments, to the day-to-day support and troubleshooting.

HOW DID YOU DO? Find your scores in the list below and then get ready to work on improving that relationship!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCORE</th>
<th>MEANING AND ACTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Most companies will not score this low. If you do, things are really broken. You probably need to get some outside help to facilitate discussions. Consider some change management as you work to improve technology planning and executing together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>You have some serious work to do. Identify any strengths you can build on, and create some actions to address the biggest pain points first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>You have a decent starting point, but know there is still room for improvement. See if there are any areas where you can readily extend your spirit of collaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>You are in pretty good shape. Look at areas where you scored lower and see if you can define some specific actions to improve your collaboration and processes there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>You have a rare, fit relationship between the business and IT. First, celebrate. Then make sure you maintain that healthy environment and continuously improve.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Don’t forget to look at differences in how the business and IT staff score the situation. Your first step may be to clarify the understanding of the degree and nature of your relationship challenges.

- Collaboratively maintain a “wish list” of technologies. This list will provide focus for your learning, and provide opportunities for the business to point out the value that technology would have and for IT to point out how the technology would fit, or the challenges that would need to be addressed.
- Document workflows and employ robust call content reporting. IT enhancements are all about finding ways to improve the current operation. But without knowing the starting point, you have no opportunity to accurately assess the impact of any proposed changes. Workflows and detailed information on call types provide everyone with the raw material necessary to properly evaluate and prioritize all the options.
- Create some key positions that help the business and IT work together. First, have a set of dedicated, highly qualified project management professionals. Medium to large companies should be able to afford and keep these resources busy. Smaller companies may need to get help from outside. When there are a lot of projects going on at once, regardless of your size, don’t be afraid to seek outside resources to help. Another key position is the business analysts. These resources are the liaisons and translators that are so critical to business and IT success. Create a highly empowered position, which may sit in IT or the business, depending on other characteristics of your organizational structure.
- Clearly define the IT governance structure. IT gover-
Governance defines the structure for projects and their oversight, as well as the day-to-day application of technology to business needs. Ideally, the business and IT work together to define IT governance. IT governance ensures common understanding of the structure and content of a business case, the service level agreements and escalation processes, and other critical elements to technology oversight and management. Governance can also help to define the boundaries between what IT must do, and what level of empowerment the business areas have to make changes to technology (e.g., routing configurations). Governance can also define the accountabilities and metrics of IT in supporting the business, and ensure alignment of the accountabilities; IT succeeds when the business succeeds.

- Similarly, ensure a common understanding of key sourcing strategies. Sourcing strategies include buy versus build, in-house/premise-based solutions versus hosted solutions, and best of breed versus suite solutions. A company should have a preferred position for these key strategies, and both the business and IT should understand those positions.

- Carefully write and consistently execute service level agreements (SLAs)—whether internal or external. SLAs ensure that the business gets the response it needs when something is not working, or when it needs a new capability. Build a framework for SLAs that can be used with internal resources, as well as with vendors. Customize it for each technology and situation.

The Foundation for a Solid Relationship: Leadership and Trust

There are a couple “priceless” elements that ensure success, as well. The first is good senior leadership that sets an example for collaboration and compliance. If the top leaders in IT and the contact center work well together and follow the governance, SLA, and other processes defined, the troops will follow.

The other key element is trust. Build and maintain trust with your counterparts, respect the expertise they bring to the table, and the relationships will thrive with benefits to all. And there is no time like the present to get started!