

■ Lance B. Eliot, Feature Editor, Eliot & Associates

Doctor's Orders: Do an Annual I.T./I.S. Check-up

Lance B. Eliot, Eliot & Associates

Is your company using Information Technology (I.T.) to the fullest extent possible? Are there I.T. innovations that could help make your company stand above your competitors? Has your top set of executives carefully analyzed the pitfalls associated with your current use of I.T. and laid out a course to improve and achieve superior I.T. performance?

Sadly, most organizations cannot answer an unqualified "Yes" to the preceding questions. Caught up in the day-to-day agonies of running their business, very few CEOs, COOs, CFOs, and CIOs are able to step back and see a larger picture regarding their enterprise-wide use of Information Technology. Instead, fixing I.T. problems and rolling out long ago ordered applications tend to dominate the attention that I.T. receives today.

In addition to potentially missing out on the effective and efficient use of I.T., organizations also need to look closely at their Information Services (I.S.) function. Should their I.S. function be increased or decreased in size? Should I.S. be centralized as a shared service or decentralized into individual business units? Do they have the right skill sets in I.S. or are they lacking in the skills properly needed to take their company forward with I.T.?

I emphasize here that companies must look at both the I.T. aspects of the organization and the I.S. aspects at the same time. In essence, you cannot fully grasp the nature of the I.S. function needed until you understand the manner in which I.T. has and will be used by the organization. Likewise, you cannot lay out plans for I.T. adoption without understanding the nature of the I.S. function needed to field and maintain such systems. Though the I.T. and I.S. co-dependency might seem like a chicken-and-the-egg dilemma (i.e., which comes first?), the truth is that both need to be analyzed and coordinated together.

Time for a Check-up

As a consultant and doctor (Ph.D., that is), I have been increasingly called upon by company executives to perform an annual I.T./I.S. check-up for their firm. Offering an unbiased outsider view, I help them identify symptoms and corresponding causes for poor I.T. performance, and work with them to develop a plan of action to produce vigorous I.T. health.

The apt analogy of a medical doctor and a patient needing an annual check-up is appropriate in this circumstance. Most patients become complacent and fail to see a doctor on a proactive basis. Only when they begin to suffer an ailment do they then react and seek out a physician.

Firms tend to behave similarly. When their multi-million dollar I.T. investments falter, or when their I.S. function resigns en masse, only then do most firms realize that it might be time to perform a check-up.

However, firms that try to perform their own self-diagnosis are likely to mask the true extent of their problems. Similar to a doctor or patient that tries to cure himself, the unwillingness of facing the truth about your problems can lead one astray from a proper corrective course of action ("if I rest then maybe the problem will just go away").

More enlightened firms are now seeking to perform an I.T./I.S. check-up on a regular, usually annual, basis. Although this may originate because of nagging problems with I.T. and I.S., such firms and executives nonetheless have realized that they need to routinely check their vital signs and make sure that the proper I.T./I.S. diet and exercise are being observed.

From top to bottom, an I.T./I.S. check-up involves rapidly assessing the status of I.T. and I.S. throughout the organization. A comparison to the organization's own potential for better use and to other



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organizations (including competitors, world-class examples outside their industry, and other organizations) produces useful insights into improvements to be made.

A check-up must also involve the development of a plan of action for moving forward with I.T. and I.S. improvements. If a check-up is conducted but no action is subsequently taken, the organization loses the benefit of the check-up and will become cynical about any future check-up activities.

This need for action amplifies the importance of performing regular check-ups. A patient is more likely to act upon a doctor's recommendations if they know that they will be seeing the doctor again and therefore asked to verify implementation of the prescribed remedies. Organizations are bound to ignore an I.T./I.S. check-up unless the members believe that improved performance will be expected and later measured.

The Check-Up Method

My approach to performing an I.T./I.S. check-up involves five major steps:

1. Assess the business and I.T./I.S. alignment.
2. Assess the I.T./I.S. SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats).
3. Generate an I.T./I.S. gap analysis.
4. Identify business and I.T./I.S. remediations and initiatives.
5. Implement the remediations and initiatives.

I describe the check-up as an I.T./I.S. Strategy Assessment (this sounds more official than simply a "check-up"). The effort involves meeting with top level executives, meeting with selected middle level managers, lower level managers, and staff throughout the firm. In addition, meeting with selected customers can be insightful to fully gain an appreciation of how well or poorly the I.T./I.S. components are married into the organization.

Step 1, assessment of the business and I.T./I.S. alignment, requires reviewing the overall strategy of the business and then reviewing the strategy for I.T./I.S. Are the strategies integrated? Does I.T./I.S. get considered during the development of busi-

ness strategy, or does it get handled as an afterthought? Are the products and services of the organization being blended with I.T./I.S.? Do top executives understand how to exploit advances in I.T.?

Step 2, assessing I.T./I.S. SWOT, involves looking at the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the deployment of I.T. and I.S. by the organization. Are users actively utilizing the deployed I.T.? Does I.S. have the skills required to deploy and maintain the systems in use or planned for use? Do other companies do a better job of fielding I.T. or integrating their I.S. function?

The first two steps are closely intertwined. To understand a true cause-and-effect relationship within an organization and its use of I.T./I.S., you must understand the nature of the business, the nature of I.T./I.S., and the nature of how the business and I.T./I.S. exist and work together. In many cases, the two do not work together, and pointing a finger at the obvious target (namely, I.T./I.S.) may do little good from a remedy perspective. The business may need as much change as the I.T./I.S. side does.

Step 3 is a summary of the first two steps that highlights the critical gaps between where the organization is and should be. Using the medical doctor analogy, the third step provides a written statement for the patient that lays bare the findings of the diagnosis.

Step 4 involves the creation of a series of recommendations and ultimately an action plan that seeks to remedy existing ills and describes major projects or initiatives that need to be launched (or redirected). Again, using the medical check-up analogy, this is the prescription for the patient along with a detailed statement of how to carry out the prescribed remedy (such as exercise twice per week, perform specified types of exercises, stop the intake of foul items, etc.).

Step 5 then involves implementing the action plan articulated in step 4.

On a periodic basis, perhaps annually, the cycle of repeating all 5 steps should be undertaken.

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Conclusion

When was the last time your company conducted an I.T./I.S. check-up? If long ago, it might be time to revisit how your company is using I.T.

and how it might improve its utilization of newer technologies. How is your I.S. function performing? If excessive tensions exist between your I.S. function and the rest of the business, it might be time to check and see why the problems exist and determine how to remedy them. An organization that wants to compete in today's marketplace cannot afford to be in poor I.T. and I.S. health—make sure that you get a check-up and reach good I.T. and I.S. health. ■

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