

# IT: Innovation Enabler or Obstacle?

A CIO'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHALLENGES AND WHAT WORKS.

Coming from the operations side of the business, I know what it's like to be IT's customer. Quite simply, I want what I want, when I want it. Ideas for operational innovations could happen on a daily basis as we discover new customer demands, more efficient processes, etc.

Naturally, then, upon hearing the discussion about IT's role as an innovation-enabler at the last CIO summit in Philadelphia, I felt a sense of urgency to investigate the topic further.

I decided to interview Kevin Apperson, the CIO and 13-year veteran of Allegis Group, TEKsystems' \$6 billion parent company.

When I shared the CIO summit's guest speaker's opinion that IT is not seen as innovative — in fact, they tend to be seen as “slowing innovation down” — Kevin's first response was “I'm not surprised.” There are several reasons innovation is a challenge for IT (see note on Key Innovation Challenges for IT). He then proceeded to discuss how he effectively battles this challenge on a daily basis.

Insight: Despite the fact that innovation in an IT organization isn't easy, below are a few recommendations both Kevin and I have seen work well at Allegis Group, as well as at other client companies I've consulted with:

## Understand the Customer's Customer.

To effectively serve the nation's largest technology staffing and services company, this is Kevin's mantra. His end customers — the sales force and recruiting populations — are successful only if they can satisfy

their clients and consultants. Thus, the more IT understands their customer's customers top value drivers and challenges, the better positioned they are to innovatively support their own customers in winning business and delivering value.

## Cultivate Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) with the Curiosity Gene.

While Kevin has yet to 100% cement his mantra into daily IT operations at Allegis Group, he is making substantial progress by developing business SMEs on his staff. Through planting his best businessminded IT employees into our operations, his department gains a real-time line of sight into his customer's goals and challenges. A curious nature is an essential characteristic of a successful SME; they ask insightful questions that foster their own understanding, while illuminating issues and opportunities the business might not otherwise perceive. These folks are also able to seamlessly translate business requirements into IT terms that bring fresh ideas to life. As a result, the more traditional “techie” on Kevin's team gain the necessary understanding to go beyond designing cool technical tools — they can deliver truly innovative business solutions.

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#### **Institutionalize Proactive Communication with Business Leadership.**

Kevin and his direct reports host periodic forums with business leaders to discuss the strategies and operations guiding our decisions — and to determine how IT can help drive them. Since leaders can easily grow tired of such discussions if they perceive them to “go no where,” Kevin ensures he has a strong meeting facilitator and wins the attendance of key decision makers. Each meeting is then able to conclude with agreed upon commitments and timelines that move projects forward.

For his team to be productively innovative on a day to day basis, moreover, Kevin cascades the information discovered and discussed in these leadership meetings. Every IT employee, no matter what their specific role, is required to understand the customer's (customer's) goals and business needs. Without this context, it is impossible to prioritize IT projects, let alone add strategic value to them.

#### **Prioritize Innovation within Reasonable Boundaries.**

Kevin is currently in the process of connecting his IT leaders with the business leaders to collaboratively develop performance standards for IT. He understands that, if innovation is not included in IT's definition of “success” — and thereby incorporated into performance reviews of the function and the individuals within it — you can bet “innovative” will not be an overwhelming characteristic of his IT organization.

#### **Key Innovation Obstacles for IT:**

- IT works in a box of the skills they have and what they know. Some IT employees have never been exposed to the actual customers they serve and the problems those customers are attempting to address with the help of IT. Without understanding

the business beyond IT, IT will struggle to support that business.

Furthermore, IT employees do not always have the skills necessary to support an innovative idea effectively. They tend to work with what they know — no matter if there is a better tool or method to meet the customer's needs. While the customer is not likely to be technical enough to foresee specific issues with this tendency, the customer is likely human enough to get frustrated when a critical innovation takes a lifetime to build or experiences performance issues post implementation.

- IT often operates from a reactionary position. The IT department serves multiple functions — marketing, operations, finance, etc. — each with different needs and different work styles. What they do have in common, however, is that the innovations they need, they needed yesterday. IT is often not brought into strategic discussions until late in the game. At that point, every customer's innovation is “key critical” and IT struggles to juggle multiple priorities with limited resources.
- IT works within certain boundaries that are not always innovation-friendly. Many CIOs report into the CFO. The ensuing focus on costs frequently leads to a symbiotic focus on “keeping the plane safe” rather than “building a fleet of planes that can do a lot of neat tricks.” Since IT is not regularly seen as a partner in the planning of new innovations, moreover, they struggle to build business cases that may balance an innovation's required expense with the expected, strategic benefit. In addition to the resource and time constraints (which are exacerbated by reason #1) IT is also bound by their current infrastructure. Consequently, a seemingly simple innovation could be near to impossible without the right foundation in place.

Mike McSally, VP • Staffing Operations for TEKsystems

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In sum, although innovation in the IT world is no piece of cake, it is possible to make progress towards that goal. Forging a true partnership between IT and the business to serve the business' customers is the key to successful IT innovation.



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**[mmcsally@teksystems.com](mailto:mmcsally@teksystems.com)**

**410.540.7404**