

IT at your service



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Information Technology is no longer just a capital expenditure, or an office expense, or repairs and maintenance. How businesses see IT is changing and has been for some time now.

This is not an easy transition and in Gibraltar we are not through it yet by any stretch of the imagination. The proposition imposes responsibilities both on the business requiring IT as well as the provider of IT products and services.

In the first instance, a business cannot always isolate the requirement of one piece of IT equipment. Take the simple example of a printer; what type of printer- laser or inkjet; networked or USB; duplex facilities; multi function; Is its speed important; how robust is it for the throughput required? Then, will it be easy to centralise the facilities within the office? What you are considering here is the actual requirement as part of your overall business strategy. In essence you are developing a requirement specification, which takes account of your business needs.

This is a simple example but the principle could apply across the scope of IT, however complex, only the number of questions may be greater and more technical in nature.

Increasingly, IT is as essential as the electricity or office space your business is in. It could be argued that with today's mobility facilities, your IT systems have become more essential.

Is anyone overseeing how its growth is being managed? How the numerous components are interacting? How you can make best use of your existing resources?



And more importantly, how you can invest wisely in the correct infrastructure and ongoing proactive and reactive support? Are you integrating your IT strategy fully into your business strategy, the application of appropriate technology? An important aspect of the business strategy is its budget and this has a direct effect on the IT infrastructure capabilities and robustness. Many of us appreciate the potential of new technologies and the latest gadgets. However the difference is that finding the advantages, integrating it to other components and networks, evaluating its limitations and potential, comparing similar products and supporting them in times of problems is part of what an IT professional is trained to do both academically and/or by vocation and experience. In turn this can be used to advise correctly what piece of technology is appropriate both to satisfy the functional requirement and provide cost options.

So having argued that a review of the relationship between businesses and IT providers is desirable, as in any good relationship, there are implications on the responsibilities on both sides.

It is common to suggest that the customer is always right in a commercial relationship; they pay after all don't they? They do, but can this possibly be extended to mean that the customer will get the best product or service, or even the most cost effective? A supplier caring for their clients would not let them take the first item they see on the shelf. This is where the relationship begins.

Would you visit your doctor and tell him/her what surgical operation you want performed on you, on the basis that you are paying for it, or go to the accountant and tell them how to do your tax returns or a lawyer and tell them how to argue your case? Invariably, the best way to proceed in each of these cases is to explain your problem and requirements and then trust the professional to handle it on your behalf having discussed with them the options and associated costs for this professional and qualified service.

Additionally "you get what you pay for". Considering how important IT products are to your business what is cost effective?

The investment must be seen in the context of what you get in return as an overall package, hardware & software products, IT know- how and consultancy, support and maintenance services, innovation and implementation, design and development or simply trust and reliability.

In turn the provider must ensure that they invest in the right personnel, training, and resources. Delivery, professionalism and integrity of the service is just as important as the technical, but all this does have associated costs which you, the business, must be aware of.

So we now come back to the underlying fundamental point. A good working relationship, where the client is fully aware of what they need from their IT, is realistic about the investment required and the personal, yes personal responsibility of the provider of reviewing this requirement with the client, keeping itself up to date, well resourced and completely competitive in the overriding interest of the customer. Simple isn't it?

It is clear that the relationship is one of mutual benefit and in summary, below is a breakdown balancing the responsibilities discussed.

The business or organisation

The business must have a clear idea of their own business plan before they can review their technology requirements.

The business must have a commitment to invest in IT to fit in with their business plan and achieve measurable contribution to that plan.

The business must have internal discussions with the stakeholders of its various functions with a view to be able to engage in requirements definition with a product & service provider.

The business must be prepared to take advice, carefully assess the implications and accept them fully in an environment of trust. This may be in terms of capabilities, reliability, efficiencies, and response-times.

The business must be demanding and realistic with its expectations on service level agreements.

The provider

The provider must invest time and effort in understanding the business fundamental operations.

The provider should view the provision of any IT component, be it manpower, hardware or software as part of a comprehensive service.

The provider must be sensitive to the businesses financial capabilities and present cost options.

The provider must be committed to being at or close to the forefront of available technologies.

The provider must commit to a service level agreement with the customer that fits their requirements cost-effectively and which they can maintain.