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Stability, Agility: Finding IT's 'Right Speed'

To balance disparate priorities, some forward-thinking CIOs are tailoring delivery models to address the procedural, architectural, and "people side" of running IT at multiple speeds.

In recent years, a long-standing IT phenomenon has garnered significant attention: the essential tension between stability and agility in IT. On one side are the predictability and controls necessary to manage risk while delivering large-scale enterprise IT with the requisite reliability, scalability, and security. On the other side is the push to drive innovation and disruption with new features, tools, and technologies. The conflict between these extremes has been oversimplified, suggesting a bifurcated, either/or proposition that offers little guidance on managing the unavoidable gap between the two priorities.

Leading CIOs are striking a balance, recognizing they must be prepared to tailor their approaches—the underlying governance, disciplines, capabilities, platforms, and talent—to specific initiatives based on the actual breadth of business needs. This "right-speed IT" must address three broad concerns: procedural, architectural, and organizational.

Procedure Beyond Process

Many IT transformation stories portray delivery methodology—Agile in particular—as the hero. Although delivery is an important ingredient, upstream capabilities are equally important when codifying right-speed IT. Building reach and rigor in the following IT capabilities may help organizations reach the right speed for the job at hand.

Finance management. Budgeting, prioritization, allocations, and accounting treatments all need more flexibility than annual appropriations, rigid planning cycles, and depreciation schedules do. Failure to address the differences in time-consuming finance management processes as part of an overall right-speeding initiative is a missed opportunity.

Procurement and sourcing. Multimonth RFP processes, drawn-out vendor assessments, and sourcing strategies focused on taking out cost are sometimes appropriate. But they are not the only game in town. Codify paths to adopt open-source solutions such as platforms, libraries, and code bases that could jump-start efforts across the continuum. Consider alternative talent pools, from crowdsourcing to code-athons, academia, and externships.

Vendor and contract management. Revisit nondisclosures, intellectual property protection clauses, and traditional segmentation of provider tiers. Consider creating new categories of engagement that can be deployed against efforts beyond simple fixed-scope and traditional service-level agreements. Encourage value-based arrangements in which vendors are compensated based on outcomes, or even co-investment scenarios involving joint solution development and go-to-market arrangements.

Solution shaping. Beyond determining the recommended end-to-end architecture, ascertain the appropriate speed for a given project or product. Offer the team guardrails as they combine governance, controls, delivery model, enabling processes, and stage gates to balance business impact, technical vision, and risk.

Stakeholder communications and expectation management. Don't hold back for a large periodic release. Instead, increase the number of releases or user previews to demonstrate progress. Gamify testing and reward members of the user community for providing feedback.

DevOps. Try to determine the granularity of control points, formality of reviews, and the appropriate level of automation that will be needed for the effort. The scope could include environment management; requirements management; testing automation (regression and beyond); and configuration, build, and release management. Importantly, that also includes the ability to roll back deployed solutions from production.

Architecture is Destiny

Right-speed IT should also be informed by overarching principles and programs that create the underpinnings of responsive, fungible IT capabilities. These principles and programs will also guide future architectures and applications. Accordingly, it is important to create an engineering culture in IT and a product management mindset; both can help IT leaders balance tradeoffs of opposing constraints. Specifically, consider focusing on three main domains: design, master data and integration, and building to run.

Design as a discipline. Emphasize user engagement and a persona-based approach to project delivery. Solutions should approach problems from the user perspective, respectful of but not constrained by systems and data implications. Detailed behavior studies, journey maps, user personas, storyboards, wireframes, prototypes, and other techniques for creating intuitive, simple designs may not be appropriate for every initiative.

Master data and integration. Individual projects should be expected to reuse underlying services and data. Likewise, designing new capabilities specifically for eventual reuse can help expand the library of APIs and extend the reach of data management efforts.

Building to run. Embed tools geared toward ongoing monitoring and maintenance of solutions. Instrumentation, management consoles and script, and hooks for in-line monitoring of system and higher-level business performance should be considered. Coverage and granularity of controls need to be scalable. A playbook of potential options, supported by shared libraries and code snippets, will help make adoption systematic.

Organizational Realities

The third right-speed category involves talent and organizational constructs. As sometimes happens, getting the procedural and architectural aspects right might be the easy part. It's the people side that can be more unpredictable and harder to influence. Changing IT's reputation from a static, sluggish organization to one that delivers solutions dynamically and at the right speed requires a purposeful focus on four key areas:

Mindset/culture. When it comes to successfully increasing the speed of the processes IT organizations use to deliver solutions, it's critical to instill a culture that emphasizes accountability *and* flexibility. IT employees' mindsets will drive them to learn new ways of working and delivering business value.

Leadership. Culture starts with leaders; it is shaped by their actions and decisions. In right-speeding IT, the leaders will define and reinforce the mindset needed to make the right decisions about where on the right-speeding continuum a specific initiative should fall.

Talent. Recognize that different personalities and skill sets will be better suited for different modes of right-speed IT. Build learning and development programs to help acclimate the workforce to right-speed IT nuances and nurture new capability-building and knowledge transfer across the organization. Consider partnering with outside entities that have experience and expertise in aspirational delivery modes.

Organizational structure. Use departmental assignments to build scale and common standards, methods, and tools. At the same time, eliminate barriers that could prevent individuals from making the best decisions, taking action immediately, and driving project goals. Hold daily stand-up or triage meetings in which department and domain leads converge not merely to hear pending design decisions or project issues but to take immediate action on them.

Incentives. What gets measured gets done. Rethink metrics and measurements across the board, from project tracking to individual performance management. Create explicit goals that teams can rally behind, ideally linking them to product accomplishments or

business outcomes rather than tactical behaviors that address empty organizational constructs.

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Many IT organizations are progressing beyond traditional delivery models to build capabilities that allow multiple speeds of IT delivery. Bridging the gap between fast and slow can be difficult, but a growing number of CIOs are making targeted investments in process, technology, and talent to enable delivery at the right speed for their businesses.

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