Waste Not, Want Not

How organisations can benefit from dormant potential in IT.

Being frugal is back in vogue. Weekend supplements of newspapers are full of advice on how to make less money stretch further. As obligatory ingredients they feature fond memories of Granny conjuring tasty meals from yesterday's leftovers, step-by-step instructions for mending clothes, or rosy suggestions for planting your own allotment.

On the face of it, making do with what we have is just a pragmatic response to hard times, and that applies to business strategy just as to life in general. But there is a quest tucked away in this pragmatic approach. "Making do with what we have" implies that we really find out what we have; it implies that we seek out dormant potential that has been untapped so far. And this is a quest that, although triggered by current circumstances, is a universal journey that is exciting and beneficial with or without crisis.

This is a short article, not a book, so let's focus on one particular type of untapped potential: the productivity of IT specialists.

At first glance, this may sound like a narrow niche with limited impact. But IT plays a fundamental role in virtually every organisation and therefore the productivity of IT engineers – software developers, system administrators, support staff, database experts, etc. – has to be a core concern. Few would deny that increasing the productivity and efficiency of IT directly benefits the whole organisation.

So where is the untapped potential? Why should there be untapped potential given the long history of models and methods for optimising productivity? How is it possible that there is room for improvement that is regularly overlooked?

The crux is that an IT department tends to form its own little universe within an organisation. Knowledge, tools, and processes of IT specialists are somewhat alien to those outside of this universe. For people without IT background it is hard to grasp the IT mindset, to understand (let alone to predict) what IT specialists get excited about, what they take pride in, what angers them and what holds them back. Contrary to popular belief, IT specialists are indeed human beings but they do tick differently.

Consequently, the vast arsenal of proven HR techniques to help employees reach their full potential – individually and as a team – cannot be directly applied to IT. It is often tried anyway, and with the best intentions, but it almost invariably leads to frustration on both sides. The gap in understanding and communication is reminiscent of C.P. Snow's seminal observation of "Two Cultures" fifty years ago even though Snow was looking at different groups of people.

And so untapped potential exists in two respects: Firstly, the cultural gap and poor communication between IT and the rest of an organisation creates friction and inefficiency. This is such a familiar problem that people sometimes forget that it is actually solvable. Secondly, within IT, proven techniques for improving team collaboration, motivating employees, driving change, etc. are not widely applied, and hence especially the brightest and most creative IT specialists do not reach their full potential. This is a pity

since there is actually a strong tradition in IT to reflect about methods, processes, and tools to optimise project delivery; this reflective stance just does not extend to issues seen as the domain of HR.

Let's get practical. "Waste not, want not" is the goal, and here is a list of actions and considerations to achieve this. This is the IT productivity chapter of Granny's Guide To Frugal Living:

(1) **Embrace the difference**: People choose different careers because they have different strengths and personalities. While any organisation requires a basic set of shared behaviours it is counterproductive to expect employees in areas as diverse as, say, Sales, Legal, and IT, to function in the same way. Identify and exploit the differences, don't lament, fight, or try to ignore them. It is OK for your corporate culture to exist in different flavours – after all, you would not expect subsidiaries in Angola, Japan, and Sweden to operate in exactly the same way, either.

(2) **Work with IT emotions**: Despite its rational and scientific appearance, IT can be a highly emotional field. A good example is writing software: For a given problem, there are typically far too many possible solutions to pick one purely based on rational arguments. The degrees of freedom that remain after a software developer has adhered to all requirements and standards are precious to him. And so removing anything that encroaches on that space (e.g. overzealous project specifications) is a huge motivational and hence productivity boost.

Conventional wisdom says that employees are more productive when they gain satisfaction from their work. This is true for IT specialists as well. Since it is virtually impossible for a non-IT person to predict which type of IT work satisfies a particular engineer it is

unwise to rely solely on non-technical managers to make project and resourcing decisions.

Finally, create opportunities for IT specialists to share their pride in having done a particularly good job. In parallel, IT specialists typically need coaching in presenting their work in a way that is meaningful to a non-technical audience.

(3) **Maximise the return from technical workshops**: An unproductive meeting of IT specialists wastes resources at a rate of £500 - £1000 per hour. It is wishful thinking to assume that a group of great people locked in a room will automatically come up with great results. It is equally wishful thinking to assume that a professional but non-technical facilitator will make a difference. What is required is a two-track facilitation that covers non-technical and technical aspects at the same time, that fosters a constructive and creative atmosphere while crystallising technical insights and structuring the problem solving process.

Some team leads or project managers can cover both tracks but it is a rare combination. It is worth considering external assistance if the expertise does not exist in-house (yes, this is a gentle plug for my own offering). This leads on to the next point:

(4) **Grow hybrid leaders:** The culture gap between IT and Human Resources is too fundamental to be papered over with policies and communication programmes. But the gap can be bridged by "hybrid" leaders who are equally at home in both spheres, who speak the language of IT but have the coaching talents of the HR world, who can get excited about a particularly elegant piece of code but also thrive on helping an engineer push the boundaries of her abilities. There is a long tradition of IT connecting with "the business", i.e. the

users and sponsors of IT services, with various flavours of business analysts and solutions architects performing a bridge function. But connecting IT with the sphere of HR is rare, and growing hybrid leaders to tap into that potential can be extremely rewarding.

Incidentally, this is the same approach that C.P. Snow advocated to bridge the "Two Cultures" of, broadly speaking, science and humanities.

(5) **Align technical and business thrill**: Businesses have an agenda – being profitable, cracking new markets, leading the field, etc.

IT specialists also have an agenda – trying cool new technologies, cracking tricky problems, expanding their knowledge, etc.

These are obviously crude generalisations but the fact is that there is not much overlap between these two agendas. Of course, it is the bread-and-butter responsibility of managers to align personal and business goals. In the case of IT specialists, establishing that alignment can take a considerable amount of ingenuity. Financial incentives only go so far – bribing an IT engineer to stretch from 80% of his potential to reach 100% is inordinately expensive. Finding a credible connection between the thrill of technical work and the success of the organisation is a much more rewarding and sustainable approach. Hybrid leaders as described above have the odds stacked in their favour to achieve this.

The above list is certainly incomplete. One could consider the impact of vertically integrated teams, of cross-company networking, or the thorny issue of establishing the uneasy twin chains of trust and control between IT and board level. But the fundamental message should already be clear: There is dormant potential in many IT specialists, and it is actually straightforward to tap into it. The main barrier is the scarcity of "hybrid" managers and

leaders who combine a technical mind with deep people management talents. This barrier can be overcome – in the short term through external coaching and facilitation, and in the longer term through leadership training and maybe a rethink of standard career paths.

So if "Waste Not, Want Not" hits the right nerve – here is one way of putting it into practice.

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