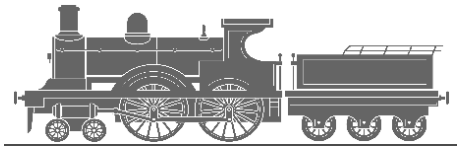

Sharing For Power

How to turn competition for IT resources into an opportunity

Knowing how to share limited resources is a valuable skill. Parents pride themselves in teaching their children to share their toys, to resolve fights over who is first on the swing peacefully, and to ask around before grabbing the last piece of cake. Some parents constrain the number of available toys purely in order to create opportunities for their children to learn to share.

Parents know that competition for scarce toys arises in surprising ways. Bob has to try a few jumps on the trampoline NOW, while his sister Ann urgently wants to build a house. Both would happily be playing their respective games except that Ann absolutely needs the trampoline as a roof for her house, and all of a sudden a resource is fiercely contested.

This is the Train Ride Reading series, not a parenting book (in case you were getting worried), but there is a nice analogy in the corporate world:

- A limited resource that many parts of a company compete for, and
- an area where successful sharing has long-term benefits on top of resolving the immediate conflict..

The "corporate toy" we are looking at is IT – systems, people, processes. There are few projects and ongoing operational tasks that do not depend on IT in some shape or form. It might just be reliance on a working PC and a stable email system, or it might be a need for bespoke software development, for setting up sophisticated new servers, managing IT vendor relationships, creating databases, etc.

Because the need for IT is so pervasive, and because IT tends to be centralised into a single department, competition for this limited resource arises all the time. This is hardly groundbreaking news.

But why is it so difficult to resolve this problem once and for all? Why is skilled and conscientious project management across the organisation not enough? And why do IT managers struggle to organise activity in their area such that competition for their resources is kept to a minimum?

It is not that IT managers do not care about their area holding up projects. To the contrary – most of them would gladly relinquish their role as guardian of a bottleneck. The issue is the special nature of IT work. Here are a few examples:

- **Small commitments stack up**: As part of routine support and maintenance, individual IT engineers make commitments all the time ("yes, I'll look into why you have no wireless coverage in this meeting room", "yes, I will get your laptop ready for your big sales trip next week", "yes, we will rustle up another test server" etc.). - It takes mature issue tracking systems and processes to consistently anticipate when the sum of those small and to an extent random commitments adds up beyond the available manpower.
- **Dealing with breakdowns**: A substantial proportion of IT time goes into dealing with unexpected events: server failures, communications outages, security breakdowns, backup failures, etc. While any IT manager will know how much manpower to set aside for dealing with such issues on *average* – there is in reality no average

week, and failures have an uncanny tendency to happen all on the same day.

- **Specialist bottlenecks inside IT**: From the outside, IT departments may look like a homogeneous bunch of techies who are experts for anything computer-related. In reality, IT departments consist of highly specialised individuals. Even in a large organisation there may only be one or two people who can e.g. quickly change the structure of a key database or reconfigure the corporate network to support a particular kind of traffic. What is more, two seemingly unrelated IT tasks may internally depend on the same specialist, and this may not be clear in advance.
- **IT work is creative**: Many IT tasks do not progress steadily. The right analogy is not bricklaying but writing or composing where periods of inspiration and rapid progress alternate unpredictably with creative slumps. Good IT managers have a feel for the *average* rate of progress, and they also know what environment is needed to boost it, but they still struggle to predict or influence when those bursts of progress occur.

Being aware of the above undoubtedly helps to share IT resources more efficiently, especially when managers from inside and outside IT learn to trust each other and to communicate across the "techie/business" divide. However, the disappointing news is that there is no silver bullet. Satisfying the concurrent competing demands on IT in the most productive way remains hard work.

But there is an altogether more positive perspective, too.

Think back to the analogy of children having to share toys. Or, in a family, having to share the attention of their parents. Or having to share their friends with others. While a child's tears over not being able to get something can be rather wrenching many parents would agree that dealing with the limited availability of resources ultimately makes children stronger and is an integral part of growing up.

So what benefit can companies gain from dealing with the limited availability of their IT resources? How does it make them stronger?

The answer is quite simple: Handling competition for IT resources forces absolute clarity in an organisation's strategic priorities. A mundane decision such as whether fixing the sales director's laptop takes priority over re-running yesterday's failed finance data backup touches the heart of what is dear to a company. Another example: Should the top software architect be assigned to devising a document management system for Legal & Compliance – or to cutting down the number of bugs in the product that is due to be released next month? And should the senior database specialist spend time on setting up a CV database for a major recruitment drive – or investigate why overnight calculations of performance metrics have recently slowed to a crawl?

As mentioned in an earlier article in the series, some of these IT decisions can have such fundamental implications that they theoretically should be taken at board level. This is of course completely impractical – but the leaders of an organisation cannot shirk establishing priorities and principles as the foundation for others to take those decisions on their behalf. Examples include the attitude towards taking risks, the balance between change and stability, the relationship between employees and the organisation, or the positioning in the marketplace.

And here is the positive consequence: Establishing a foundation of strategic priorities and principles, communicating them, and aligning everyone to them is, by pretty much any management theory, a crucial ingredient for

making an organisation successful. In other words, the scarcity of IT resources may hold back individual projects but it can ultimately make the whole company stronger.

The message for company leaders is clear: When yet another project is constrained by an IT bottleneck – consider it an opportunity to check your organisation's fundamental priorities, and whether people in the organisation actually live them.

At the same time, the role of IT managers has to grow beyond administering scarce resources in the most efficient way possible:

- IT managers have to ensure maximum transparency of work in their area so that everyone across the company can see where resource contention occurs and which projects are involved.
- IT managers have to take a bird's eye view of all IT-relevant projects and not only identify the most productive way of sharing IT resources between them but also find opportunities for cross-project solutions.

Here is a real-life example of the latter: In a medium-size financial company, the Office Manager desperately needed a way of managing all those facilities management issues. The Research Project Manager required visibility which versions of certain research output were actually used in live operations, and the Compliance Officer was leaning on IT to properly document system changes. Three projects? Two out of three departments having to wait in line for their requirement being addressed? - Not necessary, because in this case, the IT bird's eye perspective showed a common pattern in these seemingly diverse requests, and a single project (the introduction of a customised issue tracking system) addressed all three in one go.

Similar situations occur all the time. It is up to IT to take the lead in spotting these opportunities and demonstrating the potential synergies to the business. In this way, even a seemingly overloaded IT area can go from holding a company back to driving it forward.

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