



Managing technology... when you're not a technologist

We all have to manage tech projects whether we want to or not. But is it possible to be an effective technology manager without a tech background?

Most executives find themselves dealing with technology projects – as users, investors, occasional victims, or as managers. Most find the experience puzzling and, while they sometimes deliver efficiency gains, IT projects never seem to be on time or budget. Many never end. Some appear to serve IT more than business, but no-one is sure, since reports are full of obscure terms. Faced with the need to run a tech project without a computing degree, executives either retreat to ‘all I care about is date and cost’ or micro-manage, second guessing every decision. The bad news is that neither approach works. Complex technology projects can't be managed in terms of time and money. Most IT systems are designed to adapt to changing business needs. Also, the underlying ‘building’ materials for tech projects – platforms, components, programming languages, devices and browsers – change all the time. Resisting that change, for example, by only allowing fixed ‘approved’ tools to be used, is a classic mistake non-technical managers make, stifling innovation and exposing systems to security or performance risks. At

the other end of the extreme scale, micro-managing technology people, without deep knowledge of what they do, is impractical. At best, it slows everyone down; at worst, it results in endless confrontation. Once mutual respect is lost, it is hard to get back.

But finding the middle ground is easier than it seems. First, managers need to remember the laws of common sense apply. If something seems too technical, it is not necessarily dangerous. If, however, a piece of technology was the best thing ever yesterday, but today is old news and must be replaced with the next great

‘Technologists love iterative, agile project delivery’

thing, something is off. Most sound technical decisions are actually made for understandable reasons: to make things faster, prettier, more secure, more compliant or more supportive of change. If such translation does not appear possible, skipping the new tech is likely the right call.

Second, successful non-technical leaders learn to look at change as an opportunity, not a frustration. Technologists love iterative, agile project delivery; business people roll their eyes, thinking this is a way of evading

commitment to a date. But the other side of the coin means you gain working software every two or four weeks. From ‘never quite done’ to ‘we get a new version every month and it works’. Flip your thinking and rewards will come.

Third, business people should get rid of the habit of asking technologists about cost. They can't come up with an accurate answer and pressing them does more harm than good, forcing everyone to make assumptions and assume risks that inevitably backfire. ‘But I need to know the budget!’ might sound like a reasonable demand, but it is useless as no-one can know what the business will need tomorrow. Instead, business should simply tell IT what ‘it’ should cost, and provide technologists with the autonomy to do the best job for the business within set constraints. Take it from the technologists: it makes things easier.

Finally, acquiring technical skills is easier than ever. One can learn the basics of app development in weeks in specialised classes, or pick up some a knowledge of databases or business process management systems at one of the massive online open courses (MOOCs). None requires an advanced scientific background. Do yourself a favour, spend a few days learning and discover that, all of a sudden, it becomes easier to talk to – and to understand – the techies.

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