

A New Approach for a New Year: “Wait and See” or Leading Edge?

BY ROD TRAVERS



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At any given time there are few technologies and management practices that warrant attention from business and IT leaders.

Here are a few to think about in the coming year:

SOA

Service-oriented architecture is a conundrum. Should I buy it? Should I espouse it? Should I install it?

If you read the principles of SOA, you realize it is a blueprint for IT done right. Some companies have followed SOA principles for years, yet they've never heard of SOA. Others want to attain SOA status, so they buy audit systems and architecture guidelines. Even though SOA is purported not to be a product you can buy, there are dozens of compliance systems, services and certifications for sale. If you want to get on the SOA bandwagon, my suggestion is to buy nothing. Rather, study SOA's principles - many of which you no doubt already practice - and look at the solid fundamentals espoused in such initiatives as the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL), the Project Management Institute (PMI), and the Capability Maturity Model (CMM).

As you review those fundamentals, develop a gap analysis identifying weaknesses and opportunities for improvement. Then implement and sustain those practices and technologies which complement and upgrade your IT function. These might include a contemporary development/implementation life cycle, consistent project management practices and performance measures such as customer satisfaction, schedule adherence and financial payback.

Now let me own up to a provocative tactic I just employed. I simply said "Then implement and sustain those practices..." as if it is no big deal. Of course fundamental change is never easy and may be where some organizations look for outside help. My point is that SOA is not a silver bullet with a three-step implementation plan. You will have to do some homework.

Vista

For corporate environments, Microsoft's new operating system, Vista, represents a potentially major expense with little, if any, near-term ROI. Corporate environments should make 2007 the year of "wait and see" for Vista. Let consumers and hackers have a year to flog the system. If there is no business payback for upgrading, why do so now? Eventually, the security enhancements and the central management features of

Vista will make upgrading a worthwhile investment, but not just yet.

Ethics

The recent stock-option and pretexting scandals have proven once again that no matter how much governance we put in place (e.g., Sarbanes-Oxley, HIPAA, GLBA, etc.) some people will rationalize bending the rules, claim ignorance or abdicate responsibility. Ethical behavior is not just following a rule or coming clean after the fact. The essence of ethical behavior is doing the right thing in any given situation, regardless of what others may be doing. However, no one is perfect, so an occasional ethics refresher can go a long way toward prioritizing ethics in your company culture.

Agility

A recent survey of life insurance executives reveals market dynamics, rather than internal company issues, are the most dominant component driving management priorities. This is a welcome swing - essentially putting the customer first - but it is proving problematic for some companies that are not able to move at today's "Internet speed." Product innovation, pricing, service models and creative alliances are forcing company leaders to drive operational change more rapidly than ever, yet their systems and business processes are not nimble enough to keep up. Agility is the kind of nebulous buzzword I don't much care for, but perhaps we can pin it down a bit. Can you introduce a new product as fast as or faster than your competition? Do your agents or policyholders comment favorably about competitor products and practices? Are workarounds a way of life at your company?

If your ability to innovate routinely outstrips the readiness of your systems and business processes, then your operations aren't agile enough. You might consider a renewed focus on process design and system integration. (See SOA for some ideas...)

These are only a few hyperbolic topics vying for our attention. To my own surprise, this list contains fewer "hard technology" items than I am accustomed to seeing. It seems the IT segment of our industry is embarking on an evolution which is less about technology itself and more about management practices and operational effectiveness. In a few years we'll look back and see which ones really warranted our attention. Does anyone remember SEMCI?

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