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E-biz vision helps all sing same tune



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Few e-businesses have a guiding vision — which is rather odd when you consider that strategic planning with respect to other issues is often given a great deal of importance.

Management executives in far too many organizations tend to pursue what I call "buzzword-based" business strategies. Last year, B2B was hot, so managers ran around pursuing the idea of "e-marketplaces." Today, "supply chain" is the buzzword-du-jour, and now everyone has to have a supply chain strategy. Tomorrow, something else will appear on the horizon, and everyone will rush to get involved.

No doubt those who subscribe to the idea of "Internet time" will criticize me. Too many people have bought into the myth that companies must become "fast" and pursue strategies that help them respond to the "New Economy" instantly. Well, no one denies that we've got to hasten our ability to adapt to changing business circumstances, but acting fast without a clear goal is a recipe for disaster.

What companies need is a realistic e-biz vision, even if the concept of "vision" seems old-fashioned, like some sort of nineties-style MBA thinking. But from my perspective, the dot-com carnage and the lack of success that many companies have had with their on-line initiatives suggest that the New Age fast-management techniques touted by so many e-biz enthusiasts simply haven't proven themselves.

An e-vision is critical for many different reasons. First and foremost, the mere process of preparing a vision forces management and staff to do a lot of thinking about the nature of their business and how it might be impacted by e-biz. People need to assess the opportunities and threats that can occur with the wired economy, and prepare a road map to respond accordingly. Merely starting on a vision process will get everyone talking and thinking about what needs to be done.

A vision also helps to address the many cultural issues that can cause havoc as an organization starts to go down the path of wiring itself to the global economy. There can be a great deal of suspicion with employees, distributors, suppliers and other business partners, who might fear a negative impact from e-biz efforts. A road map can help to alleviate these concerns.

Having a vision also helps to keep things on track and provides for more effective project management, ensuring that every potential project is held up against a crystal ball, in order to see if it fits within the grand scheme of things.

Without that critical assessment, organizations are doomed to pursue a bunch of projects piecemeal without ever having a real idea as to why they are doing things or how they fit together. Even worse, they might think that their path to the future is best determined by the computing "architectures" and "e-biz platforms" that are touted by major technology companies.

Finally, a vision helps to bring cohesion to overall corporate efforts. Larger organizations can easily suffer from the problem of multiple projects in different divisions. The vision at least gets everyone singing the same tune.

Certainly, it isn't easy to develop a truly effective and sustainable e-biz vision. The rapid rate of technological change that envelopes us means the vision will need to be modified, updated, and kicked around well into the future.

But trying to go forward in the absence of a vision just doesn't make sense. Until a vision is formed, most e-biz projects will remain peripheral side shows.

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