Developing Devoted IT Customers

William Seidman, Ph.D.
Michael McCauley

Executive Summary

Most non-IT people dislike the IT department, mainly because IT departments tend to be focused on technology and not customers. The most successful IT departments are, however, very customer-focused.

This article presents the need for IT departments to be primarily customer service organizations. It then discusses the key characteristics of the most successful customer-focused organizations and how those characteristics can be applied to IT. Finally, the concept of digital coaching technology (DCT) is presented as a highly efficient tool for enabling IT groups to become highly customer-focused.

IT as a Customer Service Organization

Most non-IT people dislike the IT department. IT is usually seen as selfish, unresponsive, decoupled from the operations of the business, and a significant obstacle to organizational success. At best, IT is seen as a necessary evil. This may seem harsh, but it is the truth!

Why is IT perceived this way? Primarily because IT is a customer service organization that doesn't like its customers. In fact, most IT people see themselves as 'technical experts' not as 'service providers.' Customers are nuisances for most IT professionals.

Yet IT is nothing but a customer service organization. IT's sole function in an organization is to provide capabilities that enable others to perform their functions better. Not surprisingly, IT organizations with little interest in customer service undermine the effectiveness of their organizations, while those that develop devoted customers by being highly customer-focused significantly enhance corporate success. For example:

- The field sales group of a large insurance company found a software tool that would enable them to generate millions of dollars in additional sales. Before field sales could use the tool, the IT department had to do a 5-minute installation test. IT took 6 months to get around to conducting the test. Field sales estimated that the poor response from IT cost their company over $80M in sales.

- The operations group of a large fast food chain needed to install a new application that would enable district personnel to better supervise the

restaurants in their district. IT tested and installed the application within 3 days of the request for help. The operations team estimated that the IT response helped create over $110M in additional revenues.

So if you really care about overall corporate success (and I am sure that at least a few of you do care), the IT department needs to think of itself as a customer service organization, focus on being a great service provider and be committed to developing devoted customers.

Keys to Excellent Customer Service

In fact, IT needs to follow the known practices of great service providers in other environments. Based on our research in a wide variety of customer service environments, the top performing service providers:

- Solve their customers most critical business problems

- Interpret corporate initiatives in ways that create significant excitement for themselves, their team and, ultimately, their customers

- Know that great customer service requires excellence in all aspects of a complex, comprehensive interaction with their customer

- Always begin with improving the people focus and skills of their team

- Focus on overall, repetitive behavioral patterns, not specific people or issues

- Live by service behaviors that are very explicit

- Continuously monitor the team's attitude and behaviors and the customer's response

So how can an IT executive make their organization more customer service focused?

Naturally, the single most important factor is that the senior management team actually believes in the value of customer service. If senior management provides great service to their personnel, and make it a priority to emphasize the importance of customer service, IT will begin to be more customer service focused. But senior management must truly believe in customer service, and never act in anything but a completely service focused way, even for an instant. Any deviation will be interpreted as a sign that technical issues are more important than service and the IT department will quickly revert to their technical comfort zone.

While the management team's commitment is a good start, it is only a start. In order to implement customer service throughout the organization, each individual needs to make a personal commitment to service and to actually provide great service, which few may know how to do. This can be a particular challenge in organizations with many IT people.

Digital Coaching Technology

Digital Coach Technology (DCT) can quickly and efficiently solve this problem. DCT's knowledge harvesting capability can be used to gather the expertise and behavioral patterns of the IT people who best exemplify the service ethic, polish them into a repeatable "best practice" and store them into an electronic library. This takes a maximum of 3 days.

When someone needs to improve their service capabilities, they enter the library, recall the stored best practice content and are guided to personally absorb and apply it as though the top performers were physically present and coaching them, but without the top performers participating at all. DCT also guides IT professionals to systematically gather and interact with their customers' expectations, which are different from and more important than requirements since success is determined entirely by meeting or not meeting customer expectations.

As a result of DCT coaching, IT professionals will visibly change their attitudes toward a more intense service focus in as little as eight minutes and show a sustained behavior change in as little as 90 minutes. These results can be achieved even in large, global IT organizations.

In addition, DCT can directly create efficiencies in the execution of IT projects that facilitate far better service for their customers. Using DCT to develop pre-existing best practices for certain repetitive activities such as systems upgrades and implementations, and to guide teams to apply the previously stored knowledge to new projects, IT can significantly improve its own performance. For example, some IT departments have reported that DCT had the following impacts on their projects:

- Reduced planning time 80%

- Reduced project performance time 50%

In a few instances, the IT department was able to convert new, complex corporate initiatives into a specific action plans, and to begin to execute the action plans, in as little as 6 days. This gave IT management a level of flexibility and responsiveness previously unavailable to IT departments. Of course, the IT customers were thrilled with these performance improvements.

Conclusion

In summary, who cares about IT service and a commitment to developing devoted IT customers? Everyone should! In today's highly competitive business environment, IT groups must be customer-focused in order to be successful. DCT provides a means for IT to focus on their customers, reducing both their planning and project execution time by as much as 80%.