Two Views of Alignment

To highlight “views from the top”—both from the top of the institution and from the top of the IT organization—and to explore how the IT organization can best align with and support the institutional mission, this Leadership department column is co-authored by the president and the CIO.

John C. Hitt, President

College and university presidents are committed to the success of their institutions. To be honest, I should add that most do not spend a great deal of time thinking about information technology and its many manifestations—unless things go badly wrong. Nevertheless, presidents have a responsibility, whether through direct or indirect action, to provide campus IT leaders with the direction and resources they need to adequately support the institution’s current and future success.

Presidents generally spend most of their time attending to external issues such as funding or various constituencies, including legislative bodies, governing boards, donors, community organizations and leaders, students and their parents, and athletics groups. Internally, presidents must be concerned with developing, articulating, and implementing a vision for their institutions and for themselves as institutional leaders by asking questions such as the following:

- What is the future vision for the institution?
- In terms of this vision, where is the institution now and where is it going?
- For what does the institution want to be known, both on and off campus?
- What must be accomplished—or avoided—to achieve success?
- What are the institution’s strengths and weaknesses?
- How can the vision be articulated, and how can understanding and buy-in from key constituencies be ensured?
- How can these elements be used creatively as engines for positive change—even transformation—in fulfillment of the institution’s vision?

So why should information technology be among the myriad important issues that presidents need to deal with? Because nearly every facet of the academy has become dependent, to some extent, on information technology: administrative operations, the research enterprise, planning and reporting, teaching and learning, and the individual work of students and employees. Yet since much of information technology appears to be tactical in nature, what might create the necessary linkages between the president’s agenda and that of the CIO?

I suggest that the answer is strategic alignment. Strategic alignment is the alignment of IT strategies, priorities, investments, and outcomes with those of the institution and its leadership. It is finding the correct fit between the capabilities and opportunities that information technology affords and the priorities and needs of the institution, its operating units, and its students and employees. The goal is to align IT investments with institutional priorities in order to enable fundamental improvements in teaching, learning, research, and administrative processes—and improvements in their costs—through technology-enabled transformation.

To reach strategic alignment, the institutional strategy must be widely understood. When I came to the University of Central Florida (UCF) as president in 1992, I articulated five goals for the institution—goals that persist today: (1) offer the best undergraduate education available in Florida; (2) achieve international prominence in key programs of graduate study and research; (3) provide international focus to our curricula and research; (4) become more inclusive and diverse; (5) be America’s leading partnership university.

At UCF, we have developed an effective strategic planning process that has broad participation and visibility throughout the institution, and we have integrated my five goals into our strategic plan. Moreover, the strategic plan gains its focus, content, and power from the participation of not only the president but also vice presidents, deans, directors, department chairs, and of course, faculty and staff members, as well as the professionals in the IT division. Our goal is for the university’s strategic plan to be technologically aware—that is, for those who develop the plan to have a good understanding of how technology can contribute to the realization of the plan, along with the associated opportunities and risks. Furthermore, our strategic plan and the five goals shape the university’s budgeting process, with divisional budgets being driven by the institution’s priorities. In addition, the annual reports prepared by all campus units require an accounting of progress toward the five goals and other institutional strategic objectives.

A report on IT alignment in higher education published by the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) found a set of characteristics common to institutions that report close alignment of information technology with institutional priorities:

- Planning is considered important and is closely linked with the institutional budgeting process.
- The campus has an IT plan or engages in continuous IT planning.
- The campus environment is dynamic or stable, not turbulent.
- IT governance processes—that is, the combination of orga-
From a strategic perspective, the work of the CIO can be summarized as support, empower, and advance: support the institution’s business processes, its research endeavors, and the educational process; empower the university’s people with access to the necessary tools and information; and advance the institution’s success by continually renewing and developing IT infrastructure and services in alignment with the institution’s needs and directions.

Within that oversimplified statement lies a myriad of challenges—and opportunities. The portfolios of many CIOs are expanding while at the same time resources are being reduced. The constituencies to be served are growing, along with expectations. And as the institution becomes more dependent on technology, the stakes increase. What are some reasonable steps that a CIO can take in an attempt to maximize the opportunity for success?

One step is to become intimately familiar with the institution’s strategic plan. A good way to do this is to participate directly in the planning process. A second step is to develop a robust IT governance structure involving all of the institution’s key constituencies in an ongoing dialogue. A third is to seek input from institutional leaders and others to obtain direct feedback on what is needed, what is working, and what needs to be improved. In this regard, in addition to meeting with numerous operational and constituent-based committees, I hold regular “Quality Assurance” meetings with forty or so institutional leaders to maintain conversations about how campus information technology can align with their needs. Strategic IT alignment is a continuous process, and this “person week” of time pays off by providing a stream of direct feedback on the needs, expectations, and directions of the leaders of numerous university departments, by heading off problems before they become critical, and by fostering goodwill through personal attention and response. In addition, I meet quarterly with President Hitt, with our CFO, and with the executive vice president and provost to seek their guidance and discuss high-level issues such as major initiatives, risk factors, opportunities, and resource needs.

One of the greatest challenges in the current fiscal environment is that IT organizations are being heavily pressed to “do more with less” as resources are becoming constrained throughout the higher education institution. One of the few ways an institution has to reduce operating costs is to improve efficiency through refined, technology-enabled processes. This is most clearly true in administrative services but extends to the education and research arenas as well. As institutions increasingly recognize this opportunity, IT organizations are being tasked to support, or even lead, these changes. This provides an excellent opportunity for IT leaders to lead and to better align their services and resources to support the kinds of institutional transformations that will be required to succeed in the years ahead.

Note

By JOHN C. HITT and JOEL L. HARTMAN

Joel L. Hartman, CIO

From a strategic perspective, the work of the CIO can be summarized as support, empower, and advance: support the institution's business processes, its research endeavors, and the educational process; empower the university's people with access to the necessary tools and information; and advance the institution's success by continually renewing and developing IT infrastructure and services in alignment with the institution's needs and directions.

Within that oversimplified statement lies a myriad of challenges—and opportunities. The portfolios of many CIOs are expanding while at the same time resources are being reduced. The constituencies to be served are growing, along with expectations. And as the institution becomes more dependent on technology, the stakes increase. What are some reasonable steps that a CIO can take in an attempt to maximize the opportunity for success?

One step is to become intimately familiar with the institution's strategic plan. A good way to do this is to participate directly in the planning process. A second step is to develop a robust IT governance structure involving all of the institution's key constituencies in an ongoing dialogue. A third is to seek input from institutional leaders and others to obtain direct feedback on what is needed, what is working, and what needs to be improved. In this regard, in addition to meeting with numerous operational and constituent-based committees, I hold regular “Quality Assurance” meetings with forty or so institutional leaders to maintain conversations about how campus information technology can align with their needs. Strategic IT alignment is a continuous process, and this “person week” of time pays off by providing a stream of direct feedback on the needs, expectations, and directions of the leaders of numerous university departments, by heading off problems before they become critical, and by fostering goodwill through personal attention and response. In addition, I meet quarterly with President Hitt, with our CFO, and with the executive vice president and provost to seek their guidance and discuss high-level issues such as major initiatives, risk factors, opportunities, and resource needs.

One of the greatest challenges in the current fiscal environment is that IT organizations are being heavily pressed to “do more with less” as resources are becoming constrained throughout the higher education institution. One of the few ways an institution has to reduce operating costs is to improve efficiency through refined, technology-enabled processes. This is most clearly true in administrative services but extends to the education and research arenas as well. As institutions increasingly recognize this opportunity, IT organizations are being tasked to support, or even lead, these changes. This provides an excellent opportunity for IT leaders to lead and to better align their services and resources to support the kinds of institutional transformations that will be required to succeed in the years ahead.

Note

John C. Hitt (jhitt@mail.ucf.edu) is President of the University of Central Florida. Joel L. Hartman (joel@mail.ucf.edu) is CIO for the University of Central Florida.

© 2010 John C. Hitt and Joel L. Hartman