

Wayne Umland, CIO, Insurance

Successful technology/business strategist and thought leader. Our customers drive our businesses - their needs should drive our actions. Every business should have a strategic plan and a strategic technology vision. Marry them up and you've created a successful enterprise, able to quickly meet the needs of customers and take advantage of "business moments" as they emerge. Technology serves to help drive business to places it's never been before. With the new digital decade upon us, we can't "walk to the station" or we'll miss the train. Consumerization of new technology takes place at an amazing pace - almost immediately. New competitors are emerging faster than ever. Don't look in the rear-view mirror. Learn appropriate lessons from the past and thrive with the future.

— First person Bio-sketch from LinkedIn at the time of publishing

Interview Questions

Structure

- 1. What is your preferred structure for an I/T department in an organization like yours in your industry? Why do you prefer that structure and why do you feel it serves the business?**

As a seasoned technology executive, Wayne Umland had strong answers for the questions noted. When asked about his preferred structure, he was swift in his reply "I/T needs a seat at the table." Wayne was talking about the executive level. His point was that I/T needs to have executive level status and influence, and that comes only when reporting to the CEO.

Below the senior level, Wayne envisions a structure that facilitates and encourages the constant mingling of I/T and business team members to the extent that they operate as one team. "There is a real need for I/T to be out in the business units. Whatever structure is chosen, it needs to have that element."

Wayne has utilized a conventional structure in models that have worked for him: Applications (Development and Management) and Infrastructure. He believes the structure should be adaptable through whatever means is possible. In his case, he preferred creating sub-groups within the summary groups to address specific business needs. For example, when analytics began to align more with the business objectives stated from the business, he carved out an analytics sub-group. When it became a larger piece of the strategic objectives, he made it its own group.

As for the recent trend and talk about CMOs and their encroachment on traditional I/T areas of influence, Umland responded by noting that there is not "encroachment", but rather a co-mingling leading to cooperation.

Focus

- 2. What are the key areas / strategies / tenets you align with on every initiative to ensure it is aligned with the business?**

Wayne establishes specific objectives that map directly to the business objectives of the overall company. He does this by setting meetings with each business unit head to determine their priorities for the year. He then identifies with the business the projects that align with the strategy. After all of those meetings, the initiatives are categorized. Each of the projects and the I/T projects that need to be done from an infrastructure perspective are slotted into each category.

When it comes to balancing innovation and cost control, there is some maneuvering that must be done in Wayne's opinion. First, he is a proponent of an innovation lab. He believes that this is something that should be considered as a normal part of development and a fantastic way to develop talents. That said, before a project is ever brought to the table, Wayne insisted it would need to be vetted and, if it made sense from I/T's perspective to pursue, then it would be brought to the business side for validation and approval.

3. What are the key indicators you see that repeat themselves through your successful business aligned initiatives?

Wayne's greatest indicator for alignment is a collegial atmosphere amongst the business and I/T teams. When he sees harmony, he has confidence. Additionally, when he is not called on by his teams to be an intermediary, and he gains in a sense that he is "not needed" he feels more comfortable.

4. How do you encourage your teams to stay invested in the business? How do you keep them business focused, and not technology focused?

Wayne's answer was fundamental and to the point "You reward them for serving the business." His approach was capitalism at its best. Where people are incented, they will succeed. His preferred mechanism was profit sharing. He admitted that other rewards came in the forms of trips or parties that include family, but they were tangible rewards all the same. Wayne admitted that those mechanisms were not always available for everybody, so he would always be conscious of thanking his teams. "Sometimes a thank you is enough," he said. In general, he took a recognition and reward based approach.

Wayne also uses business shadowing to keep his teams sensitive to the business needs. Through the incentives and exposure, he feels his teams stay invested and engaged with the business.

Communication

5. How do you maximize awareness of I/T successfully servicing the business? Up, down and laterally?

Wayne takes the approach that I/T needs to present its value. He noted that many times I/T is expected to be successful. He called it the "should have been good anyway syndrome." His first method of promoting success is to have a good relationship with the business, so much so, that they are more disposed to hearing about the good things I/T is doing. He uses conventional means of group meetings, intranet posts, and blogs to get the word out that I/T is succeeding in servicing the business. His point was that this was a "no rest" activity and should not be overlooked.

Development

6. What are the most common barriers to business alignment you have faced repeatedly?

Wayne had a very unique perspective on barriers. His first point was that business is becoming another form of shadow I/T. He said, "There is quickly approaching a tipping point between I/T and the Business. Without the proper balance, business can become another hot pocket of shadow I/T, and that won't benefit any organization. It is incumbent upon I/T to forge bonds and collaborate." The fact that Wayne acknowledged that pockets of I/T not being within the purview of the internal I/T department hurts I/T was very insightful. In a sense he was noting that the more I/T doesn't have vision into, the less they can serve, and the less relevant they become.

Wayne also sees the daily grind as having a limiting factor on alignment. He noted that often the daily duties that I/T is burdened with can hinder vision and alignment. This was a good point as often we see daily duties as taking away from time to innovate, but to see it through the spectrum that it also hurts alignment with the business was a new perspective.

Additionally, he noted the classical personality type of I/T professionals as a limiting factor, but one that can be overcome with good leadership.

7. If you had to highlight things that you learned from life lessons, what would they be?

Wayne was introspective when he answered this question. He said he realized that business alignment starts when you are honest with yourself as a technology professional. He noted that a personal view may not be right or may not be complete and that the business contribution makes it better. He said that acknowledging you could be wrong is a huge leap.

He mentioned a story where his organization implemented a system. It was one of the first CRM solutions that came to market. The system was being pushed by the marketing team. In his opinion it was a good idea, but no due diligence and no thought about where it might lead were considered. Shortly after it was acquired, the company who developed it was sold three times in succession, and their product lost value and was not supported, so his organization had to jettison it.

The lesson was learned though, and the organization acknowledged that the situation was poorly evaluated. They opted for a new system which was fully vetted and the business units were intimately involved with the technologists to ensure that it met both the business needs and the technology needs. It was able to be integrated well and provided the information the sales people needed to make them better at their jobs.

8. Do you have any best practices or tricks of the trade that help you see when technology is being proposed for technology sake?

Wayne has a number of things he looks for when he is assessing a proposal for a new technology. First, he tries to read how the person presenting is phrasing it. If it is in tech lingo terms, he gets suspicious. He likes proposals to be presented in business terms. "Whenever people ask for new features, I see that as a red flag," he said. His point was that he likes to hear the outcomes, not the means.

He also likes to know if there is a specific vendor behind the proposal. He was not hinting that he mistrusts vendors. However, he was taking ownership that internal I/T needs to be the genuine test to value considering the entire portfolio of objectives. A vendor only has their point solution in mind.

Finally, he likes to see how the business champion is embracing it. Lukewarm or technical focus is a red flag. He likes to see true business ownership with enthusiasm.

9. Do you have any real life stories where you saw a decision moving towards technology for technology sake and you were able to refocus the decision on the business? How did you do this? What were the results?

See #7