

Get IT and business on same page, says Antony Harrowell



Antony Harrowell saved a floundering Myki ticketing system in Victoria.

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It's not often one can take credit for stuffing up the internet across Australia but that's exactly what Antony Harrowell managed to do early in his career. It was the 2003 Rugby World Cup and Harrowell was working at Unisys as a technical director.

“I was responsible for the scoring of all the games through to the graphics, the intranet that we put together for all of the journalists in Sydney, the extranet and the official website,” he says.

“We had the infrastructure for all of that sitting on Telstra's exchange in Pitt Street, Sydney. It was opening night and the website had 50 million hits in an hour. We had a live match tracker that refreshed every 10 seconds and as viewers in the UK logged on we got smashed.

“It actually slowed the entire internet down in Australia.”

It was the first major crisis Harrowell had navigated through and he has made something of a habit of fixing jams since then.

It was an important moment for Harrowell and helped galvanise his thinking on trying to work out why is it that IT teams often keep making the same mistakes.

The problem, Harrowell says, is the lack of a development model that emphasises visibility across an organisation where IT and business teams are on the same page and more often than not don't share a common goal.

“You can talk about customer-centricity until the cows come home but it doesn't mean anything and the problems don't manifest themselves until there's a crisis and a co-ordinated impact on the client,” he says.

“A siloed mentality means that different teams have different messages for the same customer and that the lack of a consolidated view is not good for the customer or the organisation.”

Technology may be a major talking point in the public sector and corporate circles but the chasm between how attractive a technology deployment looks on paper and just how it is actually implemented is immense. Blown budgets, scope creep and botched implementation is the harsh reality of what transpires behind the scenes.

According to Harrowell, a fragmented environment and competing agendas often end up crippling deployments and causing frustration.

“The IT world is currently struggling to make the leap from technology provider to a solutions provider,” he says.

“IT needs to be more integrated with the business than ever before and technology teams need to understand what exactly an organisation on the whole is trying to achieve and deliver. Once they have that then they can play their part and implement the right solution.”

Technology and business outcomes don't necessarily have to be incompatible but Harrowell says the parties involved often aren't speaking the same language.

“Technologists are businesspeople and unless you can clearly articulate what it is you want and why they will build something that fits the bill from

a technology perspective but is completely useless from a usability perspective,” he says.

Harrowell points to the woes of the Victorian government’s IT services entity CenITex as an object lesson in how something that seems like a good idea can lead to a less than ideal outcome. Harrowell says CenITex was set up as an ICT services provider eight years ago but the state government had no clear vision of what purpose it was meant to serve.

Another project close to Harrowell’s heart is the problematic rollout of Victoria’s Myki ticketing system. Harrowell was brought in to the project in his role as the chief executive of field services company Amtek and raised the operational capacity of the system from 10 per cent to 90 per cent in six months.

“The project was floundering and we got in there and started rolling out the hardware. Myki got stuck in the politics and what was even more damaging was that people had committed to building something without thinking how they would achieve it,” Harrowell says.

“The biggest complexity was self-inflicted. The whole system would have been a lot easier if we had refined it from the start and instead of trying to please everybody with hundreds of zone and concession options, the focus should have been on creating a streamlined ticketing mechanism.”

Unravelling complexity at the point of inception of a project, having a clear understanding of the core objective and an ability to cut through the noise to achieve it are three critical points that organisations need to address and the lessons learnt apply to the nation’s start-up sector as well.

Harrowell isn’t exactly enamoured of all the innovation speak that’s likely to be get plenty of airtime during the election campaign, saying that great ideas mean nothing unless they are solving real issues.

“Funding innovation won’t achieve anything unless we solve real problems,” he says.

“We need an innovation agenda with a purpose.

“There are going to be lot of good ideas that are going to come out but is every solution actually needed?”

Harrowell is convinced innovation and technology don't necessarily translate into better services and there's ample merit in that sentiment.

Execution is crucial to breathing life into a good idea, but starting with a clean slate is not always as easy as it sounds.



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