

How Mature is Your IT Steering Committee? And Why You Should Care

by Maureen Vavra

Information Technology (IT) Steering Committees ensure that IT maximizes the strategic value of your corporation's information and technology. But how can you determine the operational level of your Steering Committee? And how can you guide it toward a higher level of maturity and make it more valuable?

New/Early-Stage Steering Committees (first six months)

The young IT Steering Committee takes on the role of enforcing review, performing impact analysis and fit, and acting as a gate keeper over uncontrolled change. This constraining role must evolve within six months for their governance role to be relevant; business leaders will opt out if all they see are roadblocks.

Characteristics of Young IT Steering Committees

- Focus on immediate control
- Help projects manage to priorities
- Set standards and define governance
- Give IT air cover in implementing critical policies and initiatives
- Balance long- and short-term vision at about 30/70
- Create a portfolio management approach to IT over time
- Have trouble staying focused and out of issue management

Maturing Steering Committees

An active Steering Committee must become more proactive and future oriented. Guided by corporate strategic direction and needs, committees need to map out an IT Roadmap for the next two to five years that defines core systems, interfaces, and direction. This roadmap must be aligned with and communicated to the business allowing the business to know when to anticipate new capabilities and major system changes, and to assess the impact of new initiatives.

Characteristics of Mature IT Steering Committee

- Govern via business strategy, IT roadmap and standards
- Stay true to list of priorities
- Enforce lean project management and milestones
- Balance long- and short-term vision at 70/30
- Guide IT portfolio and budget
- Anticipate major change
- Oversee process and data management initiatives

Make Your Steering Committee More Valuable

Start by performing an audit of your Steering Committee's current operational level, asking the following questions:

1. Is your IT Steering Committee responding to a budget, security or resource management crises? Should it be?
2. What is your committee doing about your organization's data—a hugely valuable asset?
3. Who is on your committee? Can these committee members ensure business partnership and relevance? Are you missing any critical business functions?
4. Is your IT Roadmap current and in use?
5. What is your committee's balance of long-term planning versus short-term reaction? Is it *at least* 70/30?
6. Does your committee meet monthly and does the agenda include:
 - Pre-reading
 - Management to a strategic plan
 - Data oriented initiatives
 - Monitoring of key measures, including project effectiveness
 - Time for discussion of future corporate direction

Commit to addressing each area that falls short:

1. Review the IT spend quarterly at least, ensuring that you're in control of how much resource is going into "Keep The Lights On" (KTLO) spend versus investment. KTLO can be your nemesis.
2. State a Master Data Management vision and make incremental steps toward it. Data as it pertains to key processes/key performance indicators (KPIs) is a good place to start.
3. Spend part of a Steering Committee Meeting discussing the membership representation and resolve duplicates and gaps, and who always misses. Be sure people who come are decision makers.
4. Review the IT Roadmap at least three times a year, especially in conjunction with the budget cycle.
5. Talk about your Steering focus and balance and assess whether you are progressing to 70/30.
6. Ensure monthly meetings are scheduled (not blown by) with the appropriate agenda.

The Best Steering Committees

Over time, the best IT Steering Committees handle the planning, prioritization and control functions with more ease, grouping them around business strategic planning outcomes and budget cycles. By that time, the members have built a deeper understanding of the role Information Technology plays in their business and can use the committee as a sounding board for exploring strategies to leverage core data and processes for innovation.

Maureen Vavra is a partner at StrataFusion. Contact her at mvavra@stratafusion.com; follow Maureen at twitter.com/MaureenVavra.