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Special Report - How to Use Technology to Reshape Your Company

June 22, 2010
By Daniel Burrus

Today we're in the midst of several technology paradigm shifts that are spreading faster than anything we've seen before — and that greatly impact organizations and CIOs worldwide.

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First, there's the computing hardware shift. Previously, you could only use a computer by accessing a mainframe using a terminal. Then came desktops. Mainframes did not go away. We simply changed our primary interface device. Next came laptops. Mainframes and desktops still didn't go away, but the laptop became the interface device of choice.

Now, the power of a laptop is being put in the palm of our hand with smartphones and smartpads. And because they are a phone, multimedia computer, video conferencing platform, still and video camera, locator and navigator, and game and entertainment center that is with us 24/7, they are transforming all areas of life.

The second shift is in software and software distribution. We went from enterprise level software for mainframes to personal and business packages for our desktops and laptops. Now we have the "app" software revolution. Again, the old doesn't go away, but the main tool we're using is changing. And because apps allow us to personalize our devices to suit our unique needs, this revolution will grow rapidly.

With apps becoming more popular, it's now time to explore the third shift, which is the emergence of a new level of apps, what I'll call enterprise level apps (ELA). These are apps customized for such wide-scale applications as purchasing, logistics, supply chain management, sales, and military security, just to name a few. These apps are designed not only to make people more productive in their work, but also to do some of the work for them.

For example, in the medical field, they'll be ELAs for disease management, for patient records, and for remote diagnostics. The app will be more like an essential tool to perform a specific function rather than an ancillary item. Combine this with the real-time data revolution that's also taking place, and you can see how groundbreaking enterprise apps are.

Never before have people been able to get information and data in their hand right as it's happening. So when something occurs, is produced, or a need arises, that information is immediately visible to anyone authorized to see it in the exact way they want and need it to be. To have that visibility — and have it with you 24/7 — is both powerful and amazing. Instead of just having real-time data, companies are redefining themselves and transitioning into real-time enterprises, which means they are using real-time data to make better decisions faster.

Of course, all these shifts present some real-time challenges to CIOs. As the CIO or IT expert in your company, you need to understand the depth of this revolution.

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Historically, CIOs are used to having control over the company's technology, and they like everything to be behind the bulletproof enterprise IT veil. Many CIOs and IT professionals are not happy with the increased focus on cloud computing, yet that's precisely what their company's staff is using when they use their personal computers to search Google or access other applications in the cloud.

This dislike for cloud computing is understandable. It is, after all, outside of the control of the IT network that the CIO and his or her staff have worked so hard to develop and secure. But let's face it apps, SaaS, social media, smart phones, smart pads, and a host of other cloud options that your employees use, both at home and increasingly at work, are here to stay.

Consider this: In early 2010, there were 150,000 apps just in the Apple store. Then that number increased to 200,000 apps. Now we're close to 300,000 apps with billions of downloads. So it's growing fast, with no indication of slowing down.

In my work as a strategic consultant to large organizations, I'm amazed at how many CIOs are not embracing this paradigm shift. As a CIO, you have to ask yourself, "Will there be more in the cloud options, including audio, video, storage, and apps, next year than there is this year?" The answer is a resounding "Yes!" You can't ignore it. Many of your own people and your own executives are using cloud-based services right now. And if they're using them, being more productive at home than they are in the workplace, and

doing things that are more advanced on their smart phones and smart pads (at least in their minds), then the CIO has a problem.

You can't have people thinking that the IT department is holding the company back. Instead, you need to be helping them move forward. Granted, it's human nature to protect and defend the status quo, and there are some security concerns with the emerging technologies. But at the same time, you have to remember the old adage, "It's easier to ride a horse in the direction that it's going." In this case, the horses of technology are going in a new direction at a pace and speed we've never seen before. It's time for CIOs to pay attention to this and do more than just go along for the ride.

Case in point: In January 1993, IBM knew the future of its company and it was the most admired company on the planet. But the horses of technology changed direction. By the end of 1993, IBM was getting close to going out of business. It missed the shift. But IBM is not an isolated case. Many other companies have missed the shift. Think about it: When was the last time you bought something from Polaroid?

Now we have another gigantic technological shift taking place, and the last people who should miss it are the CIOs and the IT department. The shift is here, it's easy to see, and it's as plain as day. Therefore, it's time to start directing the horse on the journey.

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