

Does user satisfaction guarantee IT success?

For many IT organizations, the only metric they have to measure their effectiveness are the aggregated results from the multitude of customer satisfaction surveys that automatically get spat out from their service desk system. Unfortunately these metrics do not necessarily represent a true or fair picture of how the IT function is perceived by the rest of the business. Survey fatigue, coupled with the captive nature of the target audience, combined with statistically questionable sampling practices, coupled with the negative connotations associated with the reasons for getting in touch with the support team in the first place conspire to make the results of such surveys tainted, if not meaningless. That is not to say that such polling is pointless. It is not. However, it does have limited value on its own and should not be held up as definite proof of the value or worth of the IT function on its own.

Proponents of the user satisfaction survey will claim that it is an invaluable tool to ascertain the underlying feelings of the wider user community. And providing it is designed to avoid the traps of leading or closed questions, it does have a role to play as part of a holistic approach to determining how well IT is performing. However, many survey question sets have had little thought or efforts put into their development and instead ask the recipient to rate their experience against an undefined scale of goodness. Such arbitrary sliding scales become even more problematic if one tries to implement the same surveying technique across geographical boundaries. Different cultures respond very differently to survey requests and the results are often incomparable between regions. Where our US colleagues will perhaps award high scores for all but the very worst of user experiences, European respondents are more likely to show reserve with their praise and reserve the highest scores for the very few cases that they consider to have been handled exceptionally well.

Transactional based surveying by its very nature will always be skewed by the fact that the target respondent would not have been a survey target were it not for the fact that they were selected (and indeed in the case of user error related issues self-selected themselves) due to the fact that they contacted the service desk for assistance. People rarely call a service desk to pass the time of day or chat about the weather. People contact service desks because they need urgent assistance with an immediate and pressing pain. The emotion and frustration associated with IT issues are not conducive to dispassionate and logical evaluations of the merit of IT within the broader business context. Hence using the fact that someone has contacted the service desk in the recent past to select them to complete a survey does not necessarily guarantee a fair or unbiased viewpoint.

So given the inherent flaws of transactional surveying, how should IT determine what its users think about it? The common response from the survey tool vendors and external surveying houses is that periodic attitude surveys are the answer. These generic questionnaires are sent out on a regular basis (often annually, bi-annually or quarterly) to a (hopefully) representative sample of the total user base and ask for feedback on how well the IT function is performing. Their aim is to concentrate on the value delivered by IT on an ongoing basis rather than to identify how well it can dig itself out of the mire when it all goes wrong. Whilst they do indeed negate many of the problems of the transactional survey they do have their own issues. Unfortunately, these surveys are often handicapped by their respondent base themselves. If you ask a person with limited experience of a subject what their view of that subject is you will invariably get a non-committal "it's ok" type of response. Many users have very limited exposure to IT functions outside of their current and previous employers and may lack an understanding of the art of the possible. If a person has only ever experienced appalling IT support is transported to a below average environment then that would seem excellent in comparison to them.

Satisfaction surveys do have value. But they should never be taken as anything more than an indicator of potential trends and opinions. Actions speak far louder than words, or indeed the ticking of boxes on a survey form. Rather than focusing upon top box analysis and respondent demographics IT executives would be better served by considering the answers to the following list of questions taken from "Effective IT Service Management: To ITIL and beyond!":

- Does the most senior IT executive within the business report directly to the CEO?
- Does the CIO attend all board meetings? Are IT related issues routinely discussed at such meetings?
- Are IT related performance metrics included within monthly management reports?
- Where is the CIO's parking space in relation to other senior executives?
- Is corporate IT policy dictated by the in-flight magazines that the CxO level executives read whilst on the plane?

Does user satisfaction guarantee IT success?

- Is IT seen as a provider of toys for the boys? Or is it recognised as a valuable business contributor?
- Does the IT function actively participate within routine business reviews?
- Are there regular interlock sessions between every aspect of the business and IT to ensure requirements and constraints are fully understood?
- Is IT actively involved within ongoing continuous improvement programs and/or business process re-engineering activity?
- Is the IT budget isolated or is it formally split across all business functions depending upon operational usage / need?
- Are business critical systems and services identified? Has their importance been communicated to everyone within the IT function? Could every member of the IT team tell you the financial impact (i.e. cost per hour or opportunity cost per hour) of each business critical IT service if it were to fail?
- Do IT initiatives originate from within the IT function or are they instigated from within the business itself?
- Does the business understand the technical constraints under which the IT function operate and any limiting factors (e.g. legacy applications on archaic unsupported platforms etc) that may prevent them from meeting the needs of the business in the short or medium term?
- Is IT seen as a tactical or strategic issue by senior management?
- Do senior executives in non-IT functions accept and openly recognise the contribution that IT makes to the areas under their control?
- Does everyone within the IT function understand the different roles, responsibilities and dependencies of other business functions and how they combine to deliver the value to customers?
- Can IT management articulate the value proposition of the business that they support? And can everyone within the IT function describe what it is that the business does? Would your front line help desk agents be comfortable giving a 1 minute elevator pitch about your organisation?
- Is there a formal 3-5 year plan for IT within the business? Is this plan reviewed and approved by the board? Is everyone within the business aware of this plan and its content?
- Do senior IT executives review the short and long term business plans of other business functions?
- Are IT representatives regularly invited to local departmental meetings?
- Is there a vehicle (newsletter, open forum etc) to communicate IT related information to the business? What level of readership / subscription is there?
- Is the IT section of the organisation's intranet accessed frequently?
- Does IT proactively approach business leaders and suggest ways in which IT could be leveraged more effectively in their areas?
- Are there formal user satisfaction surveys in place? How often are these metrics used within the day to day management of the IT function?
- When was the last time a member of the IT team was voted employee of the month / invited to attend an off site team building event for another department? Are IT employees eligible to win and/or attend corporate recognition events? When was that last time that a member of IT was recognised in this way?
- Do IT work closely with the HR function to profile the IT related skills of the user base and develop generic training plans and technical pre-requisites / skills requirements for common roles within the organisation?
- Does the new-starter induction program include the IT function and how it contributes to the success of the business? Or is it just about getting the users laptop running and setting up their email account?
- Is there an IT suggestion box scheme or similar for the business to record improvement ideas? How often are these ideas reviewed / recognised / implemented?
- Do all IT staff follow the corporate dress code?
- Could every member of the IT team tell you the current stock price, who the major competitors are and where your business sits in relation to them in the marketplace?
- Could every member of staff name at least one member of the IT management team? Does everyone in the business know the IT helpdesk number / intranet site URL?

So how did you do?

Does user satisfaction guarantee IT success?

Predominantly “Yes” – Congratulations! Your IT function is the exception that proves the rule... Either that, or you are a delusional fool that has forgotten to take their medication and shouldn't be allowed to play with sharp objects. If you really are doing all these things already then you are far ahead of the curve in terms of the way that IT works with the business and are undoubtedly experiencing many benefits from such a close and symbiotic relationship.

50:50 Mix of “Yes” and “No” – Congratulations! You appear to be on well the way to joining the ranks of the wider business community and gaining acceptance as a valued contributor to the organisation. The questions will hopefully act as a guide and point of reference for future initiatives, allowing you to consolidate your position and make even greater strides forward.

Predominantly “No” – Congratulations! Honesty is a vital component for any trust based relationship to succeed.

Happy users are a bi-product of IT success, not the measure of it...

Over the past decade there has been much talk of the need to align the IT function with the business. The theory being that if the IT function is heading in the same direction as the business it can begin to actually help, rather than hinder, the business to meet its wider objectives. IT leaders and vendors have seized upon this piece of conventional ‘wisdom’ and have lavished many hundreds of hours and millions of marketing dollars upon the promotion of IT as a valuable business contributor rather than a necessary evil.

Whilst user satisfaction levels are important, they only represent one aspect of the performance of the IT function as a whole. Relying on a single metric is never a good idea, especially when that metric is based upon the subjective opinions of persons who may not be fully aware of the facts. IT must do more than make its end users happy. IT must add value to the business and help drive revenue and reduce costs if it is truly to become accepted as a business peer.

Rob Addy is a Research Director with Gartner covering IT Infrastructure Support Services across EMEA where he advises organisations on a variety of Support and Outsourcing related areas. He is also the author of “Effective IT Service Management: To ITIL and beyond!” which was published in September 2007 by Springer. See www.gartner.com and www.effectiveitsm.com for details.