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Enablers and Inhibitors of Business-IT Alignment

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Abstract

This paper provides insight into identifying areas that help or hinder business-IT alignment. Alignment focuses on the activities that management performs to achieve cohesive goals across the organization. The aim of this paper is to determine the most important enablers and inhibitors to alignment. The paper presents and analyzes the results of a multi-year study of strategic alignment. Data were obtained from business and information technology executives of over 800 firms representing 15 industries who attended classes addressing alignment at IBM's Advanced Business Institute. The executives were asked to describe those activities that assist in achieving alignment and those which seem to hinder it. These enablers and inhibitors to alignment were then analyzed with respect to industry, to time, and executive position. The results indicate that certain activities can assist in the achievement of this state of alignment while others are clearly barriers. Achieving alignment is evolutionary and dynamic. It requires strong support from senior management, good working relationships, strong leadership, appropriate prioritization, trust, and effective communication, as well as a thorough understanding of the business environment. Achieving alignment demands focusing on maximizing the enablers and minimizing the inhibitors. The data show these factors to be constant over time and to be nearly identical for business executives and for IT executives. Furthermore, the data validate published anecdotal descriptions of enablers and inhibitors.

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This article identifies the major enablers and inhibitors in the achievement of business-Information Technology (IT) alignment. Alignment involves the activities that management performs to achieve cohesive goals across the IT and functional (eg, finance, marketing, manufacturing) organizations. Therefore, alignment addresses both how IT is in harmony with the business, and how the business should or could be in harmony with IT. IT requires strong support from senior management, good working relationships, strong leadership, appropriate prioritization, trust, and effective communication, as we Business-IT alignment refers to applying Information Technology (IT) in an appropriate and timely way, in harmony with business strategies, goals and needs. It is still a fundamental concern of business executives. Information Technology (IT) has become an important enabler of business strategies in such areas of mass customization, competitive differentiation, quality improvements, and process automation and improvement. Achieving and sustaining alignment demands focusing on maximizing the enablers and minimizing the inhibitors that cultivate alignment. Alignment continues in importance today as companies strive to link technology and business (Papp, 1995, Luftman, 1996, Luftman & Brier, 1999). Alignment addresses both. Business IT Alignment is about using information technology (IT) effectively to achieve the desired situation of an organization. It can be used to achieve objectives, for instance to improve financial performance or market position. Some definitions of Business IT Alignment focus on the results of an organization and on the harmony between IT and business decision-makers within the organizations, which demonstrates the positive relationship between information technology and financial measures. This is in contrast with the powers within organizations in which IT and business professionals are