Doing More with Less: Increasing the Returns from Current IT Assets

A Case Study Summarizing our Engagement at Ryerson University

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Educational institutions are under pressure to do more with less, and this is no less true for their respective IT departments. In particular, Ryerson was seeking an approach to IT that would help it build incremental IT capability by leveraging its current IT investments.

In response to the challenge, Convergence Tech created a structured mechanism to enable Ryerson to develop these incremental IT capabilities from its existing IT investments. It also introduced ten principles of IT governance as a guide to help ensure that IT creates the value expected of it both for students and for the university.

Introduction

In general, organizations regularly pay particular attention to initiatives that could increase the value returned from their existing IT investments during periods of revenue contraction – in this case exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – rather than looking to new, sometimes untried technologies for building incremental IT capabilities.

The question Ryerson posed was what they needed to do to increase the value created from their existing IT assets, specifically those in the Registrar's Office.

One way to increase the returns from existing IT investments is to standardize the technology environment, an approach that requires a rigorous IT architecture as a frame-of-reference for decision-making, as well as a technology sunsetting policy and associated risk-managed processes to retire non-standard elements of the technology portfolio.

Another way is by means of the increasingly ubiquitous virtualization of parts of the IT environment - moving to the cloud. This however also requires an IT architecture to provide the frame-of-reference and the standards for the migration. The migration then needs to be performed with care to ensure the cost and capital savings are indeed sustainable.

While both of the above approaches depend on a detailed IT architecture as a yardstick, a quick win is to optimize the distribution of software licences. The approach would ensure that primary users of the tool are assigned priority for licence distribution, with licence requirements outside this scope needing to be supported by a business motivation, and unused licenses removed from distribution.

The Approach for Ryerson University

There is also an IT productivity approach that starts with a review of the application environment to identify areas of unused functionality within the applications used in the organization or business unit. These functionalities could then be mapped against improvement opportunities identified by the user community for further analysis. This was the original intent, with one significant outcome being the identification of opportunities for the consolidation of the IT application portfolio where functionality was duplicated.

The engagement evolved to become one where the environment was analyzed as above, but where all identified improvement opportunities are processed by means of a structured process based on their business case and organizational priority, within a framework of IT governance principles, to generate the expected value. The emphasis on IT governance is a given in many other sectors, because the goal of IT governance is to ensure that IT really does create the value expected of it.

In this respect, our board-tested approach to IT governance (based on the global IT Governance standard ISO/IEC 38500:2015) was coupled with our peer-reviewed approach to digital transformation (as published by ISACA) and our approach to digital transformation governance (as published by the Governance Institute of Australia), resulting in ten governance principles proposed for Ryerson's use case to facilitate the objective of increasing the ROI on existing IT investments. They are summarized in the table below:

Table 1: A list of ten governance principles developed for Ryerson University as part of the implementation of IT ROI improvement efforts

Principle	Description
Accountability	Ensure that there is an accountable party (or person) that helps guide the fulfilment of the nine principles below
Strategic Alignment	Identify the strategic objective(s) at Ryerson that the IT initiative will enable or will help achieve. Explain how the initiative will create value
Benefits	Qualify the benefits (quantifiable and qualifiable) that the IT initiative will generate in support of the strategic alignment principle
Benefits Realization	List and explain the assumptions underlying the proposed benefits and explain what would happen if those assumptions were violated. Describe how the benefits will be tracked to be able prove value creation (audit) in alignment with the benefits principle
Student-Centricity	The more an IT initiative creates benefits for students, the greater its strategic advantage over competing initiatives. This is because best practice digital transformation is performed in the interests of the ultimate consumer of the organization's offerings; in this case, Ryerson's students
Work Breakdown	Determine the workstreams needed to develop and deliver the IT initiative and identify responsible persons for each workstream. These persons will facilitate

	the accurate determination of the resources (and thus their costs) per stream, on a continuous basis, that are needed to develop and deploy the initiative
Resourcing	Determine the people capacity and capabilities required to deliver the IT initiative within the timeframe proposed, and map them to individual workstream elements. Document other resource needs like supporting technology, finance, and other physical/digital assets including intellectual property
Risk	Be explicit about the things that need to go right for the IT initiative to deliver the value proposed. Describe what will be done to ensure that what needs to go right, goes right for a risk item, and ensure the responsibility for each risk item is assigned to a person
Decision-making	Ensure transparency around decisions taken, issues resolved and actions exercised in the process of developing and deploying the IT initiative
Data Stewardship	Understand the nature of the data required for the initiative, and the nature of the data that will be created by the initiative. Ensure that the data requirement meets pre-defined data quality requirements including data lineage, and that the data is accessed and processed in a consistent and repeatable way with due regard for privacy and security

Conclusion

With the greatest test of the success of an IT engagement being whether the suggested outcomes are implemented, we are happy to hear that our recommendations and methods have since been put into practice to help Ryerson achieve their goal of increasing the returns on their existing investments in IT.

One challenge that emerged on implementation of the model concerns the need for the owner of each opportunity to build a business case as part of the assessment of the efficacy of an opportunity to be developed. Good business cases can however take a few weeks or even a few months to develop, depending on their scale and complexity, time that is not always available in an existing operating context.

In this respect, a first pass approach to rapidly assessing the ranking of priorities by means of an 80:20 assessment of effort, of internal value creation, of external value creation, and of organizational priority, was made with the goal of accelerating the realization of value and of building momentum for the process.

This is being put in place at this time as a means to rapidly assess which opportunities are the most significant and to develop them into value-creating interventions.

If you have similar aspirations to Ryerson University with respect to creating incremental value from your existing technology portfolio, we would love to share this experience with you.