

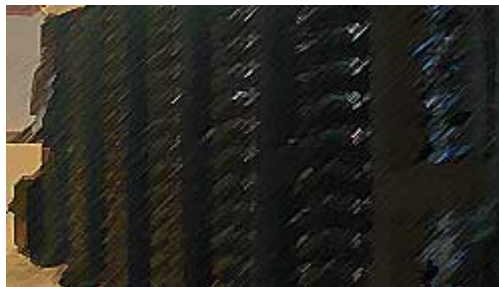


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IT grows up: consortium launches new framework for IT

A consortium of academic and business groups has launched the IT Capability Maturity Framework, a buzzword-heavy abstraction that provides a fascinating snapshot of a discipline in transition.

By Jon Stokes



IT is the ultimate thankless job—when an organization's IT organization is performing optimally, nobody notices, and when it isn't, the IT department is the target of complaints and the butt of jokes. A consortium of academic and industry partners hopes to change this by turning IT from a cost center and something of a necessary evil into a "value center." At the center of this effort is the IT Capability Maturity Framework (IT-CMF), which was launched at Chevron's world headquarters today.

Yes, I know what you're thinking: a "framework" needs a launch event? But it was actually interesting, somewhat in spite of itself. The event was a snapshot of a discipline in transition, and the assembled participants were trying to take charge of that transition in order to improve the status of IT while still retaining its identity as a coherent discipline. It's not clear to me that the latter is actually possible, but Microsoft, Intel, Chevron, BP, and the rest of the members of the [Innovation Value Institute](#) plan to try.

Keeping the business running, vs. running the business

Intel CIO Diane Bryant shared a Gartner report with the audience that claims that 67 percent of the average IT department's budget is spent just keeping the business running; another 20 percent is spent on enhancing existing capabilities, and only 13 percent is spent on "innovation." Bryant admitted that the Intel's own internal IT operation spends well over 67 percent on just keeping the business running, and she went on to describe Intel's efforts to shrink that percentage so that more money can be spent on the other two categories.



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This reflects a wider desire to move IT departments from being mostly maintenance and support operations—ones that spend their time reacting to user needs—to something that plays a more active role in "creating business value." There was also plenty of talk about raising the level of respect for IT within businesses, as well as of getting IT a "seat at the table" when it comes to running the business.

One of the IVI participants gave some more statistics that paint a picture of the current state of IT. In a survey of CIOs, the IVI found that 75 percent of them said that they would like to be in a better position to understand how IT is actually delivering value to the company; two thirds of them don't believe most of the ROI numbers that are put in front of them; and fully half of these CIOs don't actually measure value at all, since they're focused on just keeping the business running.

Whose values?

Throughout the event, terms like "value" and "innovation" were left undefined, and this was apparently deliberate, since "value" differs with the business setting. Nonetheless, the vagueness of the stated goals points out a potential challenge for the framework. To see why, let's take a look at part of the framework itself (pulled from [this page](#)):

Major Strategies				
Maturity	Managing the IT Budget	Managing the IT Capability	Managing IT for Business Value	Managing IT like a Business
5. Optimising	Sustainable Economic Model	Corporate Core Competence	Optimizing Value	Value Centre
4. Managed	Expanded Funding Options	Strategic Business Partner	Options & Portfolio Management	Customer / Service Focus
3. Defined	Systemic Cost Reduction	Technology Expert	ROI & Business Case	Customer / Service Orientation
2. Repeatable	Predictable Performance	Technology Supplier	TCO	Cost Centre
1. Initial	Beginning	Beginning	Beginning	Beginning

Source: Martin Curley, Intel / National University of Ireland

Most of the renderings of the chart above that I saw had an added vertical axis labelled "maturity," so that "maturity" increases as you go up in levels. (Note that "maturity," along with the five stages above, is derived from the Carnegie Mellon Capability Maturity Model, which itself has its roots in software engineering and object-oriented programming. This is much deeper into the weeds of quality management than I've ever had occasion to venture, so I found the [Wikipedia entry on CMM](#) helpful.)

In all of the case studies that I saw presented (and I didn't see all of them), the CIOs who evaluated their departments found that they were operating more or less at level 3 of the chart above. And this makes sense, since the difference between levels 3 and 4 is the difference between expertise in a particular set of enabling technologies and expertise in a particular business.



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And therein lies the question that I have about this framework: once you've crossed the line from "technical expertise" to "strategic business partner," haven't you left the "IT" box entirely? Or, to ask essentially the same question from a different angle: shouldn't it be the job of *everyone* in your organization to create value with the best available technology, and if it isn't, then why isn't it? If "IT innovation" only happens in the IT department, aren't you kind of up a creek already in today's business environment?

IT insights from *The Onion*

When thinking about abstract attempts such as IT-CMF's efforts to quantify IT's value to businesses, I'm reminded of the old *Onion* headline: "Bantu Tribesman uses IBM Modem to Crush Nut." Like the tribesman's novel use of the IBM modem, the most "creative," "innovative," and valuable uses of technology are also the most specific and occasional. Even more importantly, the most valuable technical solutions fundamentally require a deep understanding not of the tool, but of the *problem*.

Thinking as a tribesman solved a problem specific to his domain and just happened to use advanced technology to do it; a business person, thinking as a business person, should solve problems specific to her domain in whatever way works, using the best tools and practices available to her in her situation.

And where is the IT guy in this picture? He's the one who handed the tribesman the modem and let him take it from there, or who handed the business function the technology and let them run in some totally unforeseen direction with it. He is, unfortunately for those who would raise the status of the discipline, still just the enabler—and if his job is successful, then he's a slightly surprised enabler who looks on at a particularly creative use of his technology and says, "hey, if it works..."

Ultimately, I left the IT-CMF launch not entirely convinced that you can develop a technology-independent framework for creating business value (i.e., identifying and solving business problems) with technology. But I applaud IVI's participants for trying.



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