Shadow IT…and Kids

I was thinking about Shadow IT as there continues to be a lot of articles going around about it and a thought struck me that it's much like a host of young kids in a playground. Imagine a hoard of over energised kids running around unsupervised in a playground full of rides, structures, games and puzzles. On one hand you have a high risk environment – bumping into each other, falling out and off of things, scraping knees and elbows, possibly even broken bones or worse. On the other hand you have these growing inquisitive little minds at work, solving puzzles, figuring out how to scale things, make things work, etc.

Do the benefits outweigh the risks? Thankfully we really don't have to answer that question as it's essentially a no brainer to realise that we need to compromise between the two scenarios and introduce some control, rules and supervision that allows these curious minds to develop and grow while also mitigating and minimising risk.

So why is it not so obvious when it comes to Shadow IT? The common trend seems to be to highlight the risks or highlight the benefits but not give any of the spotlight to the transition that the CIO must manage. Either I read about the promised land of milk and honey with orchards of money trees if business is allowed to purchase their own technology solutions or the slide into the apocalypse of security breaches, incompatibility and excessive expenditure for multiple solutions that achieve the same purpose. Both camps have very strong arguments but I rarely read about how we can mitigate the risks and enjoy the benefits.

Hence the situation of Tom from Finance, Dick from Sales and Harry from Marketing all cosying up to the CEO and whispering promises of the promised land and how the evil IT gnomes are preventing them from getting there. Naturally the CEOs eyes start rolling with $ signs and they call the CIO to inform them that they don't want any of the usual naysaying and in their best Captain Picard impression just say "make it so".

All well and good to have CEOs on board with the benefits but they usually expect overnight results for minimal investment - which is simply not possible. We need to shine a REALISTIC light on how we get to Shadow IT being a positive contributor to business growth so that CIOs can get the backing of their CEOs to put in (and fund) the hard yards of putting in those controls, rules and supervision that seemed obvious in the playground. Obviously this is a strategic approach but this often doesn't wash with CEOs looking for unrealistic, overnight tactical changes.

The challenge of Shadow IT is to manage the potential downsides. The benefits today are potentially substantial but so are the risks. On the one hand security is the big thing at present, on the other hand innovation, such as Shadow IT (and BYOD), should be the focus of CIOs. The unfortunate truth is that usually the two are not natively mutually compatible.

This is where the CIOs role is revealed as being both potentially one of the most exciting and rewarding but also amongst the most challenging as they endeavour to get the buy in from the purse string holders to establish a solid and secure base to allow or support Shadow IT without risk to the business. Ultimately I actually feel that Shadow IT need not even exist if a business can get IT and the business working as one rather than see them as separate.

I also believe that the media needs to help CIOs gain credit with CEOs to achieve the potential benefits that Tom, Dick and Harry want and highlight that there should be no distinction between the business and IT - we're all part of the same team. The enforcement of Shadow IT just drives the perceived wedge between IT and 'the business' deeper. Instead of journalists pushing buzzwords and taking people out of context so that they can write eye catching pieces about game changing technologies, they should be telling the true story that there is no gain without pain. In this way CEOs get the facts, comprehend that technology is strategic, not just tactical, and are more willing to trust that their CIOs actually want what's best for the business along with Tom, Dick and Harry.

What's the view of Shadow IT in your business? Are the kids running amuck? Are they not allowed into the playground at all? Or are IT and the business one and the same, working together with the business allowing IT to put in the controls to let the business play and grow safely?