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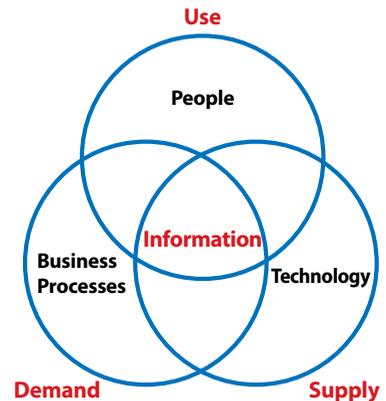
Beyond **information**

It is a mistake to think that successful organisations gain their edge from having more knowledge. In most cases the difference with the competition is created by the speed with which they convert that knowledge into actual actions. Whichever way you look at it, the decisions concerning whether, and in which way, information, knowledge and insights lead to strategic actions, are still made by mere humans. Therefore, it is necessary to pay more attention to the human behind the information.

Let us assume that every employee within the organisation sees information management as a core activity. And rightly so. The organisation has set up a clear structure for this purpose, with various tasks and responsibilities. We have shown them here in a diagram. The organisation's activities are defined in business processes, while the information systems process the information flow automatically. The architect, or at least the manager of these systems, is the CIO or IT director. From the size of the circles, you would assume that the three systems are in balance. Sadly, practice usually shows the opposite.

PICTURE

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Overlapping creates confusion

Usually too much attention is paid to the technology and the human side of things does not receive sufficient consideration. In particular, difficulties often occur in those places where activities overlap, because it is not clear who is responsible for what. In such an unclear situation things go wrong; either nothing happens or too much happens. Often the CIO is indeed able to say that he does control a large part of the business processes. All formal (ERP, BI, etc.) and informal (email, wikis, etc.) information flows run via his systems. However, it becomes more difficult when people enter the picture. On the one hand, people form part of the business processes and the technology. On the other hand, individuals process information in their own ways. This situation gives rise to tension.

Information expertise

The CIO gives the managers of the business processes ready-to-use information or manages information systems from which they themselves

are able to generate information. Yet for the CIO it is far more important and indeed more interesting to know what the organisation and above all the people are going to do with the information from those systems. Too little emphasis is placed on this.

Research has shown that recruitment policies devote too little attention to the information skills of new information workers.

First, the CIO needs to decide if he should be the one telling the business side what information they need to know. Some organisations designate a special department for this job (inside or outside the IT organisation) that focuses on the improved deployment and use of information. While many organisations recognise the importance of such a select group of motivated people, the idea tends to receive little attention from management.

Second, a great deal of information in organisations is still operationally and historically oriented. There is a tendency to look at the whole in a predictive fashion and with a focus on sensitivities. Yet it remains unclear who should do it, who provides support for it and in particular, whether the user is knowledgeable enough to address such complex information needs.

Information skills

Third, everyone knows information workers as a concept. Yet there are still too few high-profile examples of employees who can serve as a model of the ultimate information worker. Let alone that CIOs themselves know what knowledge and skills this person should possess. Research has shown that recruitment policies devote too little attention to the information skills of new information workers. Information skills allude to one's

ability to solve problems by seeking, finding and using information.

A fourth point is the deployment and use of information by people. In practice, it seems that few owners of information systems ask for feedback, so they do not know if the users are able to work with the information provided.

'Everything is open, unless'

A fifth and final point to emerge from the recent research is that every organisation recognises that information is the most important resource. Virtually all organisations believe in the 'everything is open, unless' principle. Yet it is still not enough just to provide the user with information. An employee's attitude towards the data and the prevailing information culture largely determines whether employees use information effectively. Especially in complex environments, help from an information expert is a necessity. ❖

BUSINESS PROCESSES, IT AND PEOPLE

We cannot be clear enough. CIOs are gaining an increasingly important role in organisations. No other function within an organisation is able to oversee the three areas in Figure 1, namely, business processes, IT and people, in their full capacity. No other function has a certain level of understanding of all three of them either.

IT must look for the human side again, both in the IT organisation itself and in the IT systems. It is only there that there is still much to be gained. The explicit support of senior management is a precondition here. Setting up a separate team is highly desirable. This group forms the link between formal information systems and individual users who always want even better business information.

Finally, a practical policy is needed regarding the information skills required of employees for being able to and continuing to be able to function in today's organisations. Effective deployment and use of data is after all one of the key competencies of an information worker/manager. Especially now that many companies are partly introducing virtual working, they must be alert to the information behaviour of the employee. Virtual working quickly shows when someone lacks mastery of these crucial information skills.