Down Under

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Mobile technology - from *cool* toys to *effective* tools

This Column will focus on :

- *whether mobile devices have provided significant convenience for executives, and have they made you more effective?*
- *how these new executive toys can make a significant difference to your business by decreasing your cost base, reducing revenue leakage and increasing the quality of executive decision-making;*
- *how mobile senior executives can stop being a bottleneck in the business while still maintaining control and visibility of your business.*

There has been a proliferation of new technology efficiency devices over the last few years, from iPhone, Blackberry, Android, the new Windows phone, the first generation of the iPad and recent iPad clones or similar devices. They are lots of fun and wonderful new executive toys. We all just have to have one!

There is no question that they have made our life more interesting (and maybe in some ways more efficient), but have they "really" made us more effective in our business lives? Have they resulted in more revenue? Have they reduced our operating costs? Have they enabled us to make better executive decisions?

It could be argued that even the iPad is awaiting the 'killer app', and is currently just a cool iPhone without the ability to make telephone calls!

In this Column, I will focus on the usefulness of these mobile technology devices in the Small to Medium Enterprise (SME) market place and how they have the potential to make a significant difference in your business.

Senior executives' in an SME organization play a significantly different role than senior executives in a larger organization, such as a bank or insurance company. In the larger organization, senior executives have narrower more defined roles. They are the CFO, the operations manager, the marketing manager, the compliance manager and so on. Within an SME organization one senior executive can, and mostly does, have multiple roles and responsibilities.

An SME senior executive job description may encompass:

- planning for the future, while
- maintaining closeness to the business operations (as there are fewer 'sub' managers and fewer organisational levels between them and the operational staff), and
- maintaining a closer level of control over their business, and
- negotiating with suppliers and potential customers.

They are rarely at their desk because they are running between internal and external meetings. There are just never enough hours in the day!

SMEs are always looking at their business processes to make them more efficient and reduce costs (or at least to ensure they stay constant with growth). If they do not focus on costs there is a real potential for expense blowouts. It is interesting that most organizations focus on expenses when the the possibility of significant reduction in this area are limited and certainly will not provide you with a competitive advantage. A lack of focus on revenue leakage, on the other hand, can have far more devastating consequences on a business. I will provide a brief example of what can happen when revenue leakage is ignored later in this Column.

But only focusing on operational costs is not enough. There needs to be a focus both on the operational **and** management processes within the organization in order to create or maintain an effective competitive advantage.

To maintain a senior executive level of control and the necessary business understanding at an SME level you need to ensure that your business processes can function while you are 'on the run'. For this to occur, you need genuine effective mobility, or you risk becoming an executive bottleneck!

Whether your organization is large or small, you need to develop the business effectiveness to allow the organization to move from *reactive* to *proactive* to *predictive*. With the multiplicity of roles for SME senior executives this is even more essential.

Leakage of costs, revenue from existing deals, and potential future revenue, can all mean the difference between success, failure or irrelevancy.

It is totally understandable, of course, that SME C-level executives are always trying to find ways of making both themselves and their business more effective. The 'toys' mentioned above are often seen as solutions to these efficiency and effective issues. So far, they have been overwhelmingly disappointing.

Until now, there has been a lack of 'killer apps' married to the physical devices,

The trick has been to turn these wonderful mobility devices (or toys as I have referred to them, tongue-in-cheek') into effective productivity and management tools.

To be effective, it is not simply a matter of deploying transaction 'forms' or templates available to on-the-run C-level executives to 'tick and flick'. These forms must be integrated seamlessly into your business processes. Additionally, the deployment must be intuitive (executives do not 'do' training) and assist the executives in their various roles.

If the process is only an approval process, then the executive should just have to 'tick' a box. Here is a real life example.

An international manufacturing organization managed from Australia had a significant issue with its credit note business process. The business challenges:

- Credit Notes for warranties, promotions and sponsorships have a significant impact on the bottom line profitability for the organization.

- Historical reporting highlighted the loss of revenue retrospectively.

- The manual approach lacked systemic controls as well as "access anywhere anytime".

- There were no preventative controls to ensure proper review and authorization of credit note requests.

- All credit notes must be authorized by a C-level executive all of whom are highly mobile.

- Time zone differences plus travel itineraries meant that C-level executives became bottlenecks causing delayed responses for clients.

The solution was to deploy a mobile based browser interface to the Sales Director's iPhone when he was travelling. The same process is available through Microsoft Outlook when he is in his office. Resellers and local distribution branches access the process from their normal web browser.

The results were stunningly successful and achieved:

- Reduced revenue leakage through improved review, adjudication and approval business rules.
- Improved customer relationships because of improved response rates and better review of requests.
- Improved reporting as a result of identifying accurate "root causes".
- Reduced C-level workloads and stress resulting from automated approvals based on thresholds/tolerances.

While this is a typical example of the deployment of business processes via mobile devices it is not enough. They also need to enable senior executives to:

- provide timely advice and be consulted on important decisions when they are not physically present;
- have access to real-time business metrics for effective decision-making; and
- have mobile decision tools, for example, a pricing/profitability impact model to assist in negotiations with both suppliers and customers (this is not just Excel spreadsheets as it could have real-time costs and production/inventory availability inputs).

The marrying of these new business process 'apps' to mobile devices is the 'killer app' for businesses. And it is here now. You just have to sit up and take advantage of them now.

Over to you!

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