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HOW SMALL BUSINESSES CAN DEVELOP THEIR IT ROADMAP



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There's no one-size-fits-all IT roadmap, only the one that suits your company best.



Small businesses don't always develop their IT strategies with a clear sense of direction. In some respects, it can't be helped. When you're trying to shout over the biggest and loudest voices in your sector, new technology invariably seems a lesser priority than new business. Developing your IT roadmap requires research, money, and – perhaps most importantly – time. When you've got bills to pay and investors bearing down on you, wanting to see what you've made of their investment, it's easy to put it on the backburner.

Easy, perhaps, but still inadvisable. When you create an IT roadmap for the next three to five years you are, to some extent, creating the future of your small business.

By Tristan Watkins
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1. ROADMAP REASONING

Larger businesses develop thriving IT strategies because they commit time and attention to developing their roadmap: to maintaining and improving their present technological infrastructure, and to creating a clearly delineated plan for its future. They recognise that, with the right enhancements and additions, their systems can take the company to the next level.

There's no reason that small businesses can't do the same. Your size and turnover don't determine the quality of your annual roadmap – only your foresight and commitment. When you strategise correctly, you're better informed, better prepared, and able to make better investment decisions. Those decisions can make your IT infrastructure stronger and more efficient, enabling you to improve delivery, agility, and customer satisfaction. What's more, creating a roadmap is often much easier on your budget: if you only buy technology when you absolutely need it, you may well end up buying it at inopportune times.

When you have a plan for acquiring the best tools, you have a plan for acquiring – and keeping – a clear competitive edge. But how to create this plan?

2. IT INGREDIENTS

Accountability is the key to a successful three to five year IT roadmap. For your technology plan to succeed, you and your employees must take responsibility for several of its constituent parts.

As the business owner, your first task is to create a defined strategy statement. This has more to do with the wider business than with the IT department: your goals and priorities must be firmly in place before you set about trying to achieve them – or indeed, before you place any expectations on various teams and departments.

From there, it's time to think practically. It's worth collaborating with the IT department here to identify opportunities for process improvement: a little tactical investment is better than a great deal of scattershot investment. Find out what your most time-consuming processes are, and then figure out how you might use technology to automate or streamline them. Because business priorities change and technological progress marches forward, it's important to make sure you repeat this process regularly: today's best practice is tomorrow's old news.

From there, the business and IT leadership should create a series of technological projects to cover the next three to five years. These must aim to make the potential improvements you identified a reality, and each should have a realistic timeframe. For every initiative, there should be (at least) a short summary statement, and for initiatives that need to come to fruition over the next six to twelve months, you should have more detailed justifications.

Each project should then be assigned to an employee, who will take full ownership of and responsibility for it.

3. FUNDING YOUR FUTURE

Of course, an IT roadmap must be grounded in financial reality: any transformation you undertake should be done with your budget firmly in mind. And though you might not have the funds available at the moment, that's no reason to avoid investing in the hardware and software that matters most to your business.

One of the more compelling arguments against IT roadmaps is the changeability of modern technology. Why invest in a tool that's likely to be improved upon next year? Plans rarely turn out exactly as you anticipated; how can you know what your business requirements are going to be in a year's time, let alone three to five?

When you lease software instead of paying for it upfront, however, you can come up with good answers to these questions. By forfeiting outright ownership (or, in the case of software, access to a perpetual license) you can instead gain the tools you need for a pre-determined contractual period, upgrading at the end to newer, better versions, for a comparable price. By making your investments in technology temporary rather than long-term, you can scale your IT systems to your immediate and far-ranging business needs.

Of course, it's vital to do your due diligence, and any leasing agreement you sign should be run by your accountant first.

4. ROUTES (AND ROUTERS)

There's no one-size-fits-all IT roadmap, only the one that suits your company best. As your requirements change (and they will) you will likely have to adjust your plans. A lot can change in three to five years, so the best strategies will at once have a clear sense of direction – and plenty of room to manoeuvre.

Give your technology strategy the resources and attention it requires. Set achievable short and long-term goals, identify opportunities for improvement, and secure the finance needed to bring them to fruition. When you take your IT department forward, the entire business tends to move along with it.



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