

# **22 Secrets That High Performance IT Departments Know:**

## **How Highly Effective Enterprise IT Groups Are Created Not Born**

*Learn How Your Organizational IT Practices  
Compare & How To Give Them A Boost (Even If  
They're Already Pretty Good...)*

By Josh Richards

## **Is Your IT Group Highly Effective?**

Highly effective IT groups tend to have a number of attributes in common. Through my involvement and study of hundreds of organizations, their IT groups, and their businesses I've learned what many, if not most, of these common attributes are. These success attributes are common whether the IT “group” consists of one person or many working alongside each other.

IT groups that lack these attributes tend to exist somewhere between reasonable day to day functionality but more costly & troublesome change roll-outs than necessary to daily fire fighting and lurking unmanaged risks... to complete and utter chaos.

To assess your own organization read through this list then attempt to quantify your current state. I suggest jotting down a “score” on a scale of 1 to 10 next to each attribute. This exercise will serve not only as good reflection for planning but also can be used to foster discussions with colleagues, bosses, partners, advisors, and staff.

Don't expect to be a rock star in all (even most) of these areas - yet. The point here is to identify those areas where progress may be needed.

Perhaps you believe your IT situation is already pretty good. That may be. But let me ask you... How much time do you get to brainstorm? To do strategic planning (versus tactical)? To educate yourself thoroughly in areas you're weak? How often do you (or your team members) cross your fingers when your time off period arrives hoping to not have to be “on-call”? How often do “wish list” items get tackled...and completed? How easy is it to justify new resource allocations? How many known risks are – honestly – adequately protected against? How many hours (and dollars) are spent fire fighting versus innovating?

### **Don't Stress About Your Current State – Analyze It Objectively And Unemotionally**

Don't get caught off guard if your assessment comes up a little short. These are characteristics that mature high performing IT departments tend to manifest. The keyword being “mature”.

None started with these already in place nor did they reach them in a straight line. Those that achieved success were: persistent, open minded, and methodical. It took focus & a willingness to stand back and look at the bigger picture... fire fighting be damned! And – don't worry – there were a lot of screw-ups along the way experienced by everybody else too. :-)

Thankfully you can avoid some of the distractions & mishaps others have been through already by just learning from their mistakes... and their successes. The latter can be found in the the remainder of this report.

## How To Start

It is generally best, though it requires some patience at the beginning, to incorporate these success attributes into your day to day thinking, planning, and enhancements. This tends to increase the sustainability far better than trying to overhaul everything simply for its own sake or all at once. (It also tends to make it more practical from a budgetary and basic resources perspective).

Keep this list handy, reviewing it so that you keep in mind opportunities for inclusion, in incremental ways, into new projects and initiatives. Feel free to prioritize a few but don't prioritize too many or you may find yourself bogged down without any end in sight. Some progress is more important than waiting to get everything perfect.

Make sure that the entire IT group is involved (if you are not the only one). Sharing this report with your colleagues and staff could be the start of that effort... and should serve to foster additional discussion and idea generation. The same goes for dialogue outside of your organization such as with your peers at other organizations and outside consultants.

Discuss these initiatives with non-IT folks within your organization, especially in terms of benefits to the business. Broaden the feedback loop & mitigate the silo effect (us vs. them) that otherwise can easily manifest. Re-enforce with other parts of the organization that you are always interested in improving and hearing their feedback (whether it turns out to just confirm what you already “knew” is beside the point – it will reduce resistance to the changes you want to make). This attitude will increase goodwill, improve the end result (which will make you look good), and reduce resistance to resource allocation (which will make your job easier).

By taking this holistic and big picture approach you should find yourself thinking more naturally about these items during essentially all of your on-going and future initiatives. In this way, it becomes a natural part of your approach to IT and thus becomes sustainable.

In fact, the real secret is this: the more successful IT groups strive to always improve in all of these areas... no matter how good they already are.

IT is anything but static. This is, in part, a major reason why “one off” initiatives (such as documentation efforts) rarely succeed in the long-haul. But if integrated into the natural processes, efforts, and thinking they – ultimately – take on a life of their own... with just a bit of a kick at the start to get the ball rolling uphill.

I hope that this report can be a part of that “kick”.

-jr  
Josh T. Richards

## The Twenty Two Secrets That High Performance IT Departments Know

(not in any particular order)

1. Automated status and performance monitoring of core network infrastructure. Including up/down state, responsiveness, and sufficient baseline and trending data to allow for easy identification of anomalies and shifting demands on infrastructure. Followed by same for all end-user facing devices, services, and their dependencies.
2. Change management policies and controls. When is it acceptable to make configuration changes? What types of changes should be reviewed by peers (or managers)? Are there different types of change classifications with different risk levels? How are the changes kept track of? Is there a clear way to roll-back? Is the roll-out and roll-back process articulated and written down?
3. A mixture of junior and senior IT professionals, including some that are business savvy. This insures the best use of everyone's time, the ability to delegate and escalate as needs dictate, encourages new and old thinking to mingle, and helps bridge the gap between technology and the business.
4. Request, To Do, Wish, and Trouble list tracking. Tools should be in place to accept, track, inventory, complete, and track feedback on things like feature requests, trouble reports, wish list items, rainy day items, and various small to medium tasks. Without this, things will be forever getting lost track of, forgotten, and IT will be hard-pressed to demonstrate competency, progress, and improvement. Good ideas and feedback will be forever lost in the stream of day to day activities.
5. Project planning, tracking, and feedback loop. All activities should be tied to business drivers and not simply internal IT department desires. That being said, if IT department desires are valid a sufficient business case should be feasible. If not, either the project is not worthy (on a relative basis to all other competing resource consumers)... or the IT department business case was not sufficient to make the case.
6. Discussions about undertaking new projects, making significant changes, and even routine day-to-day (recurring) tasks are regularly questioned. What is the business goal of what we're doing? Could there be a better way? Are we the right ones to be doing this? Should we be building tools to delegate this work to other individuals or even groups? Should we even be doing this in-house? Etc. Question everything. Continuously get better.
7. When mistakes and oversights are discovered the emphasis is on resolution and moving forward rather than blame. Understanding and analysis is for preventative planning. Responsibility is implicit – there's no benefit to further finger pointing. Transparency is the default position, including disclosure to others outside the group. The more prompt the better. This builds trust within the IT group and throughout the organization as a whole. Critical to IT achieving it's objectives.
8. The IT group understands the business and regularly interacts with individuals from other groups... for things other than technical support. Rather than IT being viewed as a single-minded (or worse: short-sighted) “silo”, it should be viewed as a collective of individuals who

- are talented, innovative, problem solving, eager to excel, and interested in elevating the status quo... that just happen to also spend much of their time on IT matters.
9. There is an understanding of and emphasis on being pro-active about infrastructure design over reactionary fire fighting. There will always be some unforeseen fires to fight but they should be the exception rather than the rule. The break-fix mentality is shunned. The problem solving skills of the IT group are used to tackle important problems faced by and impacting the business. The analysis, design, and planning skills of the IT group are used to prevent problems wherever possible rather than tackle problems when they arise. The IT group takes responsibility for its own each design decisions and choices.
  10. Outside advisors, consultants, and colleagues – formally (and informally) – are regularly drawn upon, adding to the in-house pool of knowledge, experience, and perspective. While still taking corporate integrity (confidentiality) into place, employees are encouraged to be open minded, participate in outside organizations, learn from third-party resources, and discuss problems and desires with those outside the organization. These additional sources of ideas, experiences, problem solving skills, etc. can only benefit the organization.
  11. Regular discussion about risks and trade-offs. A methodical (but pragmatic and functional) set of documentation exists that describes the known risks as of the time of report. This report is regularly revisited (quarterly or perhaps yearly) with an eye towards making sure that progress is being made against the known risks as part of various projects and initiatives. New risks, as they are identified, are added to this document. Non-technical management is regularly briefed on the contents to insure that resources are allocated and priorities are aligned.
  12. Clear and concise documentation exists covering core infrastructure: networks, servers, major applications. It is updated regularly and improves over time. It is used for training new individuals, as part of disaster recovery plans, when working with service providers, planning enhancements, etc. (read: we're not talking about eye-candy here – it must be functional)
  13. Documentation, even in a rough form, exists covering most day to day procedures and most routine but less often ones as well. Wiki and other content management systems are in place, encouraging updates by everyone with minimal overhead.
  14. Technical Support, software update, and hardware replacement contracts are in place with most third-party vendors. Uncovered items are either non-critical or supported through in-house sparing and redundancy activities. Contract and access information is documented.
  15. There is significant knowledge and skill overlap between individuals, even if one or more tend to specialize and serve as the senior technician in particular area(s).
  16. Department level and corporate level management is pragmatic and trusting yet holds the IT department to the same level of standards as all other groups.
  17. The IT group understands there are trade-offs and resource decisions to be made. While they may disagree and even grumble from time to time, they are, in general, satisfied that their voices are heard, that it is has been made clear how they must make their business cases for new projects, and they are pro-active about involving themselves in other parts of the organization.
  18. Strategy is emphasized over tactics. The best implemented tactical moves are highly ineffective if the strategy is wrong (or non-existent).
  19. For the server farms and networks, there is a staging/development/testing environment which

matches, as much as reasonably possibly, the production environment(s). Proposed changes are tested here whenever possible.

20. There is a distinction between operations and engineering roles. Where those roles are shared by the same people (or person), there is a means for designating when one is wearing their engineering hat (e.g. they are unavailable for lower priority firefighting for the day) versus when they are wearing their operations hat (e.g. they are on-call).
21. Vendor and industry best practices are considered but questioned. There are many so-called best practices and standards. The thing is – and the reason why so many are in conflict, inadequate, or overkill for a given organization – is that every situation and every organization is a bit different. While much can be learned from looking to others, including vendors, for examples and advice... ultimately each executive and IT manager must make the right choices for their organization.
22. An emphasis is placed on simplicity and solid pro-active engineering. Besides being an all around good philosophy when considering any changes, an eye is kept out for patterns such as recurring problems, unexpectedly difficult or impacting change roll-outs and transitions, etc. Often these are signs that existing implementations and assumptions should be re-evaluated. Common sources of these issues are: legacy applications, unusual configurations, “band-aid” fixes that have become (effectively) permanent, and pre-maturely rolled out changes that should be revisited to insure they are optimal.

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