Solutions are Strategic. Technology is Tactical.

Lori MacVittie, 2011-11-04

And it all begins with the business.

Last week was one of those weeks where my to-do list was growing twice as fast as I was checking things off. And when that happens you know some things end up deprioritized and just don't get the attention you know they deserve.

Such was the case with a question from eBizQ regarding the relationship between strategy and technology:

> 66 Does strategy always trump technology?
>
> As Joe Shepley wonders in this interesting post, Strategy Trumps Technology Every Time, could you have an enterprise content management strategy without ECM technology. So do you think strategy trumps technology every time?

I answered with a short response because, well, it was a very long week:

> 66
> I wish I had more time to expound on this one today but essentially technology is a tactical means to implement a solution as part of the execution on a strategy designed to address a business need/problem.

That definitely deserves more exploration and explanation.

STRATEGY versus TACTICS

The reason this was my answer is the difference between **strategy** and **tactics.** Strategy is the overarching goal; it's the purpose to which you are working.

Tactics, on the other hand, are specific details regarding how you're going to achieve that goal. Let's apply it to something more mundane. For example:

| CHALLENGE	I AM HUNGRY
STRATEGY	Acquire and consume sammich
TACTICS	•Make a sammich •Order a sammich •Convince significant other to make me a sammich

The focus of the strategy may be very narrow – consuming a sammich – or it may be very broad and vague, as it often is when applied to military or business strategy. Regardless, a strategy is always in response to some challenge and defines the goal, the *solution,* to addressing the challenge. Business analysts don't sit around, after all, and posit that the solution to increasing call duration in the call center is to implement software X deployed on a cloud computing framework. The solution is to improve the productivity of the customer service representatives. That may result in the implementation of a new CRM system, i.e. technology, but it just as well may be a more streamlined business process that requires changes in the integration of the relevant IT systems.

The implementation, the technology, is tactical. Tactics are more specific. In military strategy the tactics are often refined as the strategy is imparted down the chain of command. If the challenge is to stop the enemy from crossing a bridge, the tactics will be very dependent on the resources and personnel available to each commander as they receive their orders. A tank battalion, for example, is going to use different tactics than the engineer corps, because they have different resources, equipment and ultimately perspectives on how to go about achieving any stated goal.

The same is true for IT organizations. The question posed was focused on enterprise content management, but you can easily abstract this out to an enterprise architecture strategy or application delivery strategy or cloud computing strategy.

Having a strategy does not require a related technology because technology is tactical, solutions are strategic. The challenge for an organization may be too much content or it may be that it's process-related, e.g. the approval process for content as it moves through the publication cycle is not well-defined, or has a single point of failure in it that causes delays in publication. The solution is the strategy. For the former it may be to implement an enterprise content management solution, for the latter it may be to sit down and hammer out a better process and even to acquire and deploy a workflow or BPM (Business Process Management) solution that is better able to manage fluctuations in people and the process.
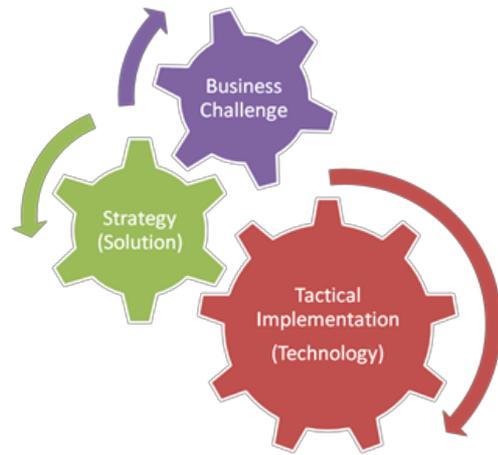
The tactics are the technology; it's the *how we're going to do it* as opposed to the *what we're going to do.*

CHALLENGE –> SOLUTION –> TECHNOLOGY

This is an important distinction, to separate solutions from technology; strategy from tactics. If the business declares that the risk of a data breach is too high to bear, the enterprise IT strategy is not to implement a specific technology but to discover and plug all the possible "holes" in the strategic lines of defense.

The solution to a vulnerability in an application is "web application security". The technology may be a web application firewall (WAF) or it may be vulnerability scanning solutions run on pre-deployed code to identify potential vulnerabilities. When we talk about strategic points of control we aren't necessarily talking about specific technology but rather

STRATEGIC TRIFECTA		
BUSINESS VALUE	→	BUSINESS CHALLENGE
ARCHITECTURE	→	SOLUTIONS
IMPLEMENTATION	→	TECHNOLOGY

solutions and those locations within the data center that are best able to be leveraged tactically to a wide variety of strategic solutions. The strategic trifecta is a good example of this model because it's based on the same concepts: that a strategy is driven by a business challenge or need and executed upon using technology.

The solution is not the implementation; it's not the tactical response. Technology doesn't enter into the picture into we get down to the implementation, to specific products and platforms we need to implement a strategy consistent with meeting the defined business goal or challenge.

The question remains whether "strategy trumps technology" or not and what I was trying to impart is what a subsequent response said much eloquently and concisely:

> 66 The question isn't which one trumps but how should they be aligned in order to provide value to the customer.
>
> -- Kathy Long

There shouldn't be a struggle between the two for top billing honors. They are related, after all; a strategy needs to be implemented, to be executed upon, and that requires technology. It's more a question of which comes first in a process that should be focused on solving a specific problem or meeting some business challenge. Strategy needs to be defined before implementation because if you don't know what the end-goal is, you really can't claim victory or admit defeat.

A solution is strategic, technology is tactical. This distinction can help IT by forcing more attention on the business and solutions layer as it is at the strategic layer that IT is able to align itself with the business and provide greater value to the entire organization.

- Does strategy always trump technology?

- What CIOs Can Learn from the Spartans
- Operational Risk Comprises More Than Just Security
- The Strategy Not Taken: Broken Doesn't Mean What You Think It Means
- What is a Strategic Point of Control Anyway?
- Cloud is the How not the What