# TECH FOR YOU

# Developing IT Strategic Plan and Identifying Areas of Specialisation[1]

Information Technology (IT) has become all pervasive and is a key enabler in enterprises of all sizes and this is so even in enterprises providing services. CA firms are impacted by IT in two ways: firstly by automation of their client's operations resulting in most of the client's data turning digital; and secondly CA firms have to use IT in their own offices to provide services. Thus, IT by default rather than by design has become critically relevant for CA firms. Technology deployment by design from a strategic perspective by CA firms could act as catalyst of growth and key differentiator to not only provide current service offerings to existing clients but also develop innovative delivery capabilities for new service offerings to existing /new clients. This can empower CA firms to stay ahead of the curve by enhancing capabilities and transform the way services are provided.

## Strategic Planning
Strategy is defined as the long range blueprint of an organisation's desired image, direction and destination what it wants to be, what it wants to do and where it wants to go. Strategic planning is a critical element for articulating a shared vision, and for building the necessary framework necessary to work together on common goals. A good strategic plan will provide clarity on how strategic goals will be achieved. It outlines long-term goals and details the specific strategies and goals that are to be pursued. The strategic planning process has to be iterative and provide a roadmap for transition from the present situation to the future vision.

The Strategic Plan has to be a living document and should be re-visited to review accomplishments against set objectives, so that feedback is provided that will influence future planning and decision making.

## Strategy issues
The key issues to be addressed in designing a strategic plan are:
- Who are we? What do we want to be known for?
- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be and why?
- What needs to be done to get there and how?
- How do we know when we get there?
- How do we keep the momentum going?

## IT Strategic Plan
The objective of IT strategic plan is to continuously infuse technology so as to provide better and more efficient service to clients and improve internal processes. The commitment to use of IT has to be key strategy in the firm's business plan. This has to be based not on technology for technology's sake but on an overall understanding that technology can be used to improve staff efficiency and effectiveness and therefore services to the clients.

The IT strategic plan has to be in line with the overall strategic plan and ensure that IT is deployed for meeting business requirements so as to sustain and extend the business strategy. This requires that IT resources are managed and directed in tune with the business strategy and priorities while being transparent about benefits, costs and risks. A well-developed IT strategic plan improves key stakeholders' understanding of IT opportunities and limitations, requires assessment of current performance, identifies current IT capabilities, capacity and human resource requirements, and clarifies the level of investment required in IT.

The IT strategic planning has to be a standard practice and has to be managed at principal/partner level. The IT strategy has to be linked with the overall strategy of the firm and encompass all key service offerings and designed to build new business and value-added capabilities by leveraging the effective use of IT as required. IT strategic planning has to be documented and regularly updated as per the overall goals of the firm.

The mission statement of the firm would provide the context in which the goals and strategies are formulated, outlines the scope and direction, and provides the framework within which IT Strategic plan would be prepared. Specific technology projects and initiatives would be undertaken accordingly. For example, one of the goals regarding the use of IT in carrying out the firm's mission could be: "We will use appropriate technology to provide effective tools for providing effective timely services to our clients." To achieve this goal we will:
- Encourage office-wide participation in identifying the right type of technology and tools required.
- Enhance the quality of services by appropriate use of technology to facilitate the sharing of information

within the firm and with the clients as required.

- Provide opportunities for staff to research and develop new approaches and techniques to optimise the use of IT and provide necessary training;
- Develop and maintain an IT plan that encompasses the Technology infrastructure, IT process architecture, applications and relevant best practices for using IT in all key areas of services.

### Identifying areas of Specialisation

Based on overall business strategy, the CA firm may decide to specialise in specific areas which offer new opportunities of services. In case of areas of specialisation identified for their future potential, it is necessary to consider in detail the current starting point - existing clients, staff, systems and supporting infrastructure - and to identify the gaps between the current situation and the future needs. Depending on individual circumstances the solutions may involve a drastic change, resulting in replacement of all key systems in a relatively short time scale. In the most of cases, however, a more evolutionary approach will be more appropriate involving replacement and modification of existing systems within a less challenging time scale. In planning for transition to future, it is critical to consider the following key factors:

**a) IT Skills and Competencies**

An analysis should be made of the current level of IT Skills at both the management and staff level. An inventory of current IT resources of the firm and IT environment of all the major clients has to be made to arrive at the typical IT infrastructure and required skill-sets. The policies, procedures and practices of the firm in various areas of operation need to be evaluated against requirements of client and future direction of the firm's services. The challenge will be to identify the IT Resources, competencies and the skills needed for the future development of the practice of the firm using IT. IT strategic planning has to be in line with the firm's long term goals and the future strategic requirements. Critical decisions have to be taken on staffing levels, responsibilities and skill requirements.

**b) Applications and Data**

The existing mechanism of delivering services and related procedures need to be evaluated from the perspective of automation. The types of software applications used and processes in the firm have to be reassessed to confirm whether they are in tune with the future IT strategy. Duplication of jobs needs to be identified so that they could be automated. Care must be taken to develop an integrated timetable for change which takes into account the abilities of staff, IT resources available, IT resources required and practices of the firm. A change management process has to be implemented mapped keeping in mind the overall objective of providing best services at optimal cost.

**c) Technology Infrastructure**

Based on the requirement assessment of IT of the firm, it is essential to identify areas of development of IT for ensuring appropriate IT solutions for the future. IT resource planning and related budgets need to be carefully assessed considering the rapid technological changes and importance of serving both the present and future clients. The required infrastructure solutions need to be put in place and the staff trained to ensure that services offered meet the client requirements.

**d) Delivery of IT Services**

The way the firm provides services to clients, internal processes adapted and the means of delivery of such services has to be assessed and new methodologies and means of delivery of services must be developed in tune with the capabilities of implemented IT. A thorough review of the practices needs to be undertaken to update them in tune with the IT deployment of the firm. It has to be ensured that IT solutions implemented are in tune with the overall IT strategy and goals of the firm.

**e) User Culture and Training**

Developing and implementing identified IT Solutions and services is not just about acquiring the right technology but more about training people in required processes. At all stages in the process it will be necessary to consult as appropriate and to be aware of the extent to which managers and staff are themselves going to have to adapt in order to ensure the success of the implemented strategy. Issues concerning culture, working practices, policies and procedures, documentation and training needs must be an integral part of the IT planning process. The overall aim in reviewing each of these areas is to identify the gap between the current knowledge and skill levels based on present environment and that which has been identified as best suited for the firm serving its future needs in the most cost effective way.

### Conclusion

The most critical aspect in developing IT strategic plan in a CA firm is to review the current technology and application infrastructure in terms of future requirements and implement a migration plan by adopting the right strategies. This will require developing the future IT Vision that would deliver needed services to clients which support and align projects with the overall Business Plan and the needs of the firm. Developing IT strategic plan requires investment of time at partner/principal level and involvement of all key staff and identifying areas of specialisation.■