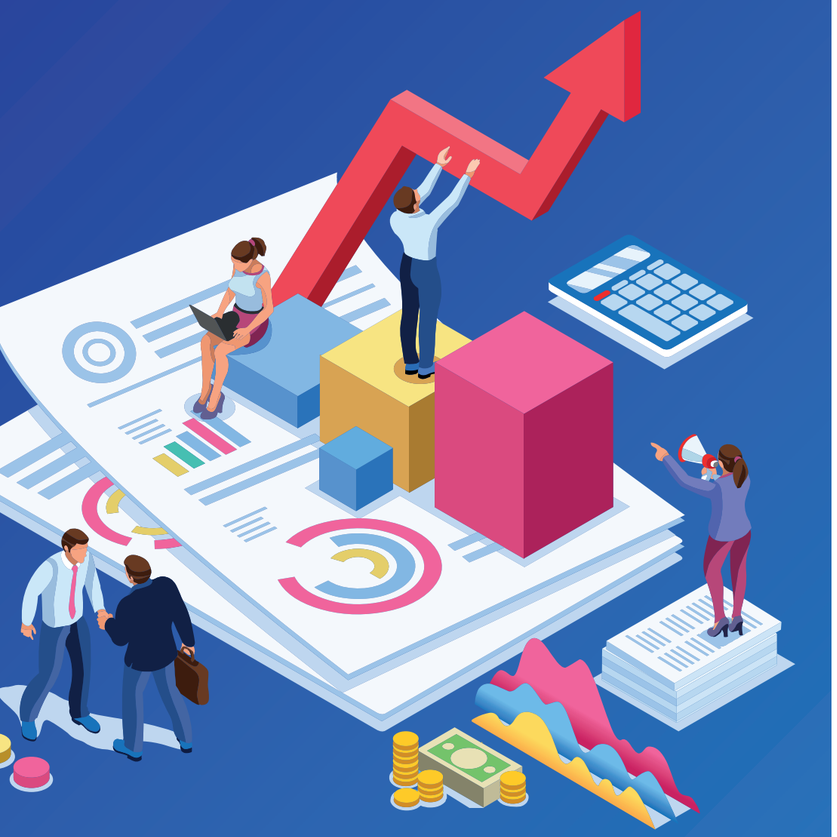

Are you building on resilient foundations or have you been distracted by the latest trends and tools?

Earlier this year, I asked the movers and shakers in my international network to share some thoughts about what is really important for the IT function to work on. I was delighted with the results and am sharing a summary of their thoughts here. Although this article is labelled as an IT4IT resource, it is applicable to multiple domains, including Enterprise Architecture, IT4IT, IT Service Management, IT Governance, and Quality Management.

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Customer and Product/ Service Centricity

Design Thinking is in. "Empathy" was mentioned several times – getting a much better understanding of what the customer wants. And making sure that the products and services focus on the job to be done. In increasingly more cases, we're not talking about internal "IT customers" but external customers who buy digital products and undergo a digital experience when interacting with the enterprise.

Lean, Data-Driven Organization

Another frequently mentioned topic was Lean. The value of Lean in speeding up the flow of work and reduce waste is clearly recognized. Short manufacturing lead time is the best predictor of quality, customer satisfaction and employee happiness. And working with small batch sizes is one of the best predictors of short lead times. So the message is clear: split work as much as possible into small work items.

DevOps – which is based on Lean – emphasizes the importance of having data to drive analysis and decisions. Use a disciplined approach, based on the scientific method: work with hypotheses and try to disprove them.

Generative Culture

The term "generative culture" was popularized by Ron Westrum in his research on organizational culture. He contrasts this kind of culture with bureaucratic and pathological cultures. Take for instance how organizations deal with responsibilities. In a pathological organization, responsibilities are shirked. In a bureaucratic organization they are narrow (silos). And in a generative culture they are shared. Other characteristics of a generative culture are high trust, failure leads to inquiry, not blame, high collaboration, experimentation is encouraged.

The phenomenon of the Andon cord illustrates generative culture. The Andon cord is commonly associated with the Toyota Production System.

The Andon cord is a mechanism by which a worker stops the production line because he or she has signaled a defect. You can imagine the weight of such a decision. Yet the first thing that the team leader does when the Andon cord has been pulled, is to thank the employee for stopping production and preventing further damage. Would you feel psychologically safe enough to do the equivalent on your organization? Now you know whether you work in a generative culture!

Engineering Mindset

The engineering mindset is another topic that is closely related to DevOps. In the IT industry, we are moving from doing work to building systems that do the work. I use “engineering” in this sense. The deployment pipeline is a good example of how releases are (partially) automatically put into production.

I often use the analogy of a cookie factory. Imagine a conveyor belt with cookies being transported from the oven to the packaging section. Suppose that you saw a broken cookie. What would you do? Remove the cookie and check the system to discover the cause. Perfectly normal. Yet what do we do in IT where we are not dealing with cookies but software releases? We fix the release. Can you imagine how strange with seems to somebody working in a cookie factory?

Ability to Deal With Uncertainty and Ambiguity

Finally, and I have written about this previously in my article lost cause paralysis, we are becoming increasingly aware that the organizational systems that we deal with, are not deterministic. There are simply too many variables to be able to predict what will happen. Behavior just emerges. Best practices don’t work because the context has changed. Dave Snowden’s sense-making Cynefin framework offers different strategies for dealing with systems that are obvious, complicated, complex or chaotic. Or simply unknown. It often ‘liberates’ people from the shackles of traditional command and controlbased thinking.

Summary

IT people tend to be attached – and distracted – by the newest trends and tools, and forget to ensure that they’re building on resilient foundations. Don’t make this mistake. The five topics mentioned here are non-trivial. Make sure that you’ve got the basics right first!

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