

IT Analysis – Terminal decline at Heathrow - failing IT or management failing?

By Rob Bamforth, Principal Analyst, Quocirca Ltd

Big news, a state of the art, high tech system aimed at saving time and improving efficiency is launched fully live into a critical environment to a waiting public with instant worldwide media audience in attendance, and fails.

This month's debacle was the British Airways' / British Airport Authority's flagship, £4.3billion development of Heathrow's Terminal 5. But sadly that first sentence could have been directed at many systems in many different institutions in many different industries.

Whether for baggage processing, hanging on to the population's personal data or the monitoring of banks with aggressive business models - each has a business process where IT systems now play a crucial part. It's not quite the level of mission or safety criticality required to keep aircraft aloft or nuclear power stations from overheating, but IT in general is tightly interwoven into the businesses processes. They share a common dependency that is symbiotic, no longer parasitic.

So the first culprit to be suspected will be the IT system. Was it too new? Was it tested to be safe/secure/robust? Then the techno-quasi-religious battle lines will be drawn. The Java fans will say it was the use of clunky old mainframes and flaky desktop operating systems. The open source community will bemoan the adoption of proprietary closed software architectures, and the proponents of those traditional platforms will blame the overly trendy Web2.0 generation with a dismissive 'web-two-dot-oh-dear-me'.

There may be problems with some of the technology decisions and perhaps some of the solutions weren't as perfect as they'd been presented in slideware or in the response to tender. But no IT system is perfect, bugs in software and hardware failures always occur at some point, usually when most inconvenient, and there is always a risk that technology doesn't get used according to the manual.

Therefore the next culprit will be the unfortunate individual at the coal face. The handlers didn't operate the machines properly, some office junior copied a disc they shouldn't have, someone at the call centre mis-keyed in the data or somebody didn't bother to take the train as far as Newcastle. These people are easy to blame, after all they probably did something wrong, usually accidentally or with no malice aforethought, and they are often easy to track down and cheap to fire. Job done.

Well not really. So how about making 'heads roll' in top management? They congratulated themselves when the new project was announced, were visible early on the day it was launched, and managed to give themselves a huge bonus for their efforts - surely they are at fault?

Well they may be, but not directly, and getting rid of one chinless big cheese still doesn't fix the problem, even if it does make the media and general public feel better that the blame was lain somewhere.

None of these address the systemic problem that has occurred. The term systemic is cropping up with increasing regularity whether talking about the banking industry, power transmission, transport, IP networks, in fact any large project.

It refers to the overall total system which includes the technology or physical assets, the people involved and most critically of all, the processes that link it all together. Systems are now far more highly connected with unimpeded transmission of information across the technology and so many methods of instant communication between individuals.

People making considered and well informed decisions act as the 'dampers' or shock absorbers in highly connected systems, but an over reliance on people has become increasingly expensive - salaries, benefits and expectations rising - and since collaborative technology has allowed organisations to flatten something has been lost.

Not simply superfluous workers and flabby layers of middle management, but vital intelligence about the business process and the ability to deal with problems on the fly, including how to take decisive action in the event of the unexpected combination of error conditions.

Over confidence or reliance on the technology leads to uncontained and escalating failures when things inevitably go wrong in highly connected environments. Historically, organisations have employed professionals who blended business process experience with sufficient IT knowledge to build effective processes and systems that were then supported by, not blindly dependent upon, IT.

Today, a combination of off the shelf, rather than tailored 'solutions', flatter organisations and less empowerment or less willingness to take risks in the middle layers of larger businesses and institutions is becoming a systemic problem as the shock absorbers have gone.

The technology looks good, the people work hard, but it is not enough to bring stability in large and complex systems. Companies and large institutions have to find a way of re-applying control and vibration theory to their increasingly over-flexible, but under protected, major projects.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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