

Straight Talking – This is not about polar bears

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In a recent briefing to Quocirca regarding the “greenness” of a vendor’s new hardware device the assurance was firmly made by the product manager that “We’re not trying to save the polar bears or anything.” Which was perhaps a wise thing to say as it is a stretch in anyone’s imagination how a rack mounted mass storage device might rescue an at-risk *Ursus maritimus* from whatever nasty fate awaits it. If Spock were an IT analyst even his eyebrows might spasm uncontrollably with cynicism were such a claim to be made.

Fortunately therefore, there were no Vulcans in the room when just weeks later Quocirca was present at a different vendor’s customer pitch and there on slide three was a polar bear looking decidedly worried about the rather small size of the iceberg upon which it perched. Meanwhile yet another vendor, which goes as far as having the dreaded five letter “G” word as part of its moniker, stated during a recent conversation that their efforts weren’t at all focused on sustainability strategies, but rather *only on efficiency*. Clearly, no linkage there then.

Which reasonably leads us to the question “Is there really any value in GreenIT beyond marketing and greenwash?” Appreciating that this question could perhaps best be answered with a loud “Nyet” roared out somewhat like a terrified polar bear might, it is nevertheless worth delving into. Technology buyers, technology users, strategists and mere analysts alike will all have to evaluate the merits of the various “green” claims we have already been and will continue to be bombarded with in the coming years.

Let’s look at the case against there being any value, which is also the easiest to make. It is apparent to most everyone that just as the overuse of SOX as a marketing message was beginning to smell ripe, it was supplanted by an almost ubiquitous and sweet smelling emerald sheen. Much of this is so transparent in application and over-spun that it needs no further analysis here, but for one point: many IT departments are perhaps just as cynical in their embracing of greenwash as the worst vendor

marketeers. After all IT budget requests are more likely to get a green light (pun intended) if they are seen to be supportive of business level efficiency and Green CSR-led strategies. This is the old trick of loading up a business justification with long list of “Oh...and it does this too!” chicanery.

If we look at the case for it gets a lot more interesting, and a lot more challenging to deliver. First, it is worth pointing that the word “green” has been used a lot thus far, and the word “sustainable” hardly at all. This is very deliberate as there is an important distinction between the two given that *green* has simply become an almost meaningless synonym for “less”, “lite”, or “eco-something”. In comparison by *sustainability* we refer to the process of living and working in a manner that conserves resources and uses them in an efficient manner, and do so in a way that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own requirements. Furthermore, to contradict many previous writers it is easy being green, but it is a lot harder to be sustainable. So what can IT do to support sustainability?

Whether in the data centre, the IT-enabled office environment, or out in the broader business environment, reducing the resources a business consumes and reuses wherever possible is a perfect play for IT. For example, the concept of a paperless office has been around long enough to be the subject of a long regretted Bill Gates prediction while seemingly little progress has been made. However, there are many real alternatives to eliminating office print load. Quocirca’s [research](#) into Managed Print Services is a solid backgrounder to understanding this much-maligned area that can deliver rapid and measurable benefits.

Meanwhile both the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) and the IEA (International Energy Agency) say that efficiency improvements will deliver major benefits as far as reducing the emissions associated with energy production and consumption. In the short to medium term, the vast majority of businesses will be focused solely on the energy consumption

end of that equation. This is an area where IT can contribute strongly due to the relatively high energy appetite of data centres and IT loaded office spaces; as long as several important caveats are understood.

Firstly, energy efficiency is not the sole measure in comparing the environmental impact of a device. For instance Nitrogen Trifluoride (NF₃), a gas used by most manufacturers of flat screens (but not used to manufacture CRT displays), is estimated by the Australian scientific research organisation CSIRO to be up to 17,000 times worse than CO₂ as a greenhouse gas.

Secondly, energy efficiency ratings (like the well known Energy Star) are often relative, not absolute. Take for instance monitor screens: the standard defines an absolute energy consumption level for "sleep" and "off" modes, while the allowed consumption when the monitor is "on" varies in relation to the screen resolution. As an aside, the standard says that a monitor may consume 1 watt in "off" mode, meaning there is a small but real difference between "off" and "unplugged".

Lastly, a very commonly made mistake is to confuse energy efficiency with energy usage reduction, which is to say that energy efficiency is pretty much useless in the absence of absolute energy usage capping. Whether at the server level or at the data centre level, a lot of the "green" messaging is on the ability to perform the same amount of workload for less energy consumed (both by the servers themselves as well as by associated building environmental control systems such as air-con). This seems all well and good, if it weren't for the improbably named Khazzoom-Brookes Postulate which basically states that as energy cost per unit of work decreases it becomes more financially viable to perform more units of said work. So unless a business sets absolute targets on the energy usage of IT, efficiency efforts may be wasted at best, while at worst may actually encourage more wasteful use of IT services.

Most importantly IT should do what IT has always done best when governed well: support the strategic efforts of the business. If a business truly has a "sustainability" strategy it will fall to IT to help achieve it, from crunching the numbers that allow it to measure, manage and report performance; telecommuting to avoid travel;; through to analysis and management of

supply chain choices. While every CIO needs to get their own house in order as far as efficiency, resource consumption, and recycling goes they are only the tail on the sustainability dog and do not as ever wag the head. A *sustainable IT* strategy is one that intimately supports a *sustainable business* strategy and thus can only succeed when owned by the business, and not by IT. In the absence of that business leadership any effort by IT is laudable but lamentably doomed to deliver little real value – in short sustainable IT can only truly exist in the presence of a sustainable business strategy.

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.

Details of Quocirca's work and the services it offers can be found at
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