IT Strategy:
No plan, no structure, no communication?

With this guide, companies can successfully implement even failed strategies.

CS

Campana
Schott

Travel brochures advertise destinations with beautiful rooms, clean beaches and crystal clear waters. But once you arrive, the hotel is a dump, the beach is dirty and the weather is terrible. The same can often be said of digitization projects: They start with impressive presentations, a lot of enthusiasm and ambitious goals - only to be implemented in a manner that is extremely haphazard and slow. Frequently, this is due to the fact that having the right strategy does not automatically lead to a successful outcome. What is needed is a plan for implementation, along with the appropriate structures and the right communication. Because - if those tasked with implementing the strategy are sent out before this requirement is addressed, then operationalization becomes a real challenge.

The reasons are easily found: Many times, the strategy is developed by company management or a top level team at the company's head office - without the involvement of those who are supposed to implement the strategy later on. This can lead to situations in which the strategy is based on assumptions that do not reflect the actual business situation. A good strategy does not just exist on glossy slides but also takes into account factors along the entire value chain. In this context, employees at the operating level can help to avoid omissions if they are involved from the start. Plus, this approach ensures that they are on board with the strategy from the beginning. And it reduces start-up times and inefficiencies later on.

Three action fields for successful strategy implementation

Based on our extensive experience and numerous projects, we have developed an organizational framework for strategy operationalization, which covers three action fields. When companies take these into account, they are on the successful road from

strategy to implementation. And in the event you have been tasked with implementing a project that is lacking a plan, structure and communication for the strategy - you can use these tips to make changes.

1. Develop your own plan

The implementation of a strategy must be managed properly. It sounds simple, but: a strategy must include the right structures and project governance before it can be implemented. Our experience shows that a combination of agile processes and classic project management approaches works best in these situations. A scheduled approach starts by compiling the interfaces and dependencies that must be taken into account during the course of the implementation process. Another component is an agile way of thinking and acting, in the course of which the organization continuously develops and improves. This is particularly important for projects that take a longer time to implement. At the same time, this also creates the conditions for long-term success.

Projects that are only sketched out by management can be far off when it comes to estimating costs and the time that is required for a successful result. This requires a reality check: The planning should be checked and adjusted by those who are going to operationalize the plans. In terms of the budget, it is important that all internal and external services and tasks are taken into account. Often, there are gaps because costs are under-estimated - for example expenses that are not directly incurred by the implementation team.

And there is another resource field that must be examined critically before the project even starts, namely the skills. Which skills, knowledge and experience are required so that the strategy can be implemented successfully? This process is used to figure out the composition of the implementation team and the supporters that are particularly important to ensure a successful outcome.

In addition, every project needs milestones. Successful strategy operationalization processes use quick wins as milestones. They help employees to identify the successes and benefits that have been achieved, and awaken their engagement. Because - quick wins have a positive effect on employee commitment. They see that the new strategy works, and that it is starting to pay off. Even missed quick wins are turned into a gain: Using the motto "fail fast, fail cheap"

2. Create structures so that the changes can actually be practiced

Large transformation projects create organizational challenges for the implementation teams and the entire company. That is why a role and organizational concept must be developed at the beginning. It identifies the structures that are required so that the transformation can actually be turned into practice. The requirements for the new organizational structure are broken down into roles, expertise and the required skills.

It also outlines the new organizational interfaces between departments that will result from the transformation. They must be explained and staffed with the right personnel to avoid undesirable gaps or expertise overlaps in the new structure.

The new organizational form can only function and become real if it is supported by structures. This includes a governance structure that monitors and manages the company as a whole. The insights that are gained can be used to service additional changes that are required for the organization - which is also the way to a self-optimizing organization.

3. Create a desire for change through communication

Successful implementation processes depend on engagement and commitment - not just in the implementing teams, but also from the other stakeholders. This is not just about ensuring that they support the strategy and its mission - in the best case, they become enthusiastic and express a real desire for change, which is something that implementation teams can actively work towards.

Clarity and common goals are some of the important basic requirements. The transparent communication of the strategy, its steps and it goals enables employees to understand the new course - and they are more likely to support it. The way to the goal becomes visible, and employees are able to recognize the progress and support the strategy. The so-called internal champions also play an important role. If the implementation process is actively supported at all hierarchy levels and in all divisions, knowledge is disseminated faster and acceptance increases.

A common basis is followed by concrete strategic sub-objectives, which are added to the employees' target agreements. In that way, their own contribution is made clear, the employees are directly included - and they are also entrusted with their own implementation tasks. Giving important roles to the persons affected by the change is beneficial for two reasons: First, it spreads the work over more people, and second, employees are more likely to support changes if they themselves have actively contributed to them.

Changes can only be established if they are practiced all the time. The implementation of a strategy does not end with the roll-out of the technical and organizational enhancements. It can only be established if employees are enabled to practice them over the long term. This means that training and contact persons should remain available after the changes have been introduced; just because an employee received training does not mean that everything works perfectly right away. It is precisely in stressful situations that people often revert back to familiar routines.

Conclusion

All this may sound quite complicated. But if companies take these methods to heart and consider the factors that are of relevance in the different action fields, they significantly increase the probability of a successful strategy implementation. The approach can be broken down into a simple formula: A successful strategy implementation requires a realistic **plan** - supported by **structures** that are required for implementation - and **communication** activities that involve the employees and task them with responsibility. Even if it is not possible to involve the entire company in the strategy development process for other overriding reasons, this triad increases the probability of a successful outcome and continued success after the implementation is complete. After all, holidaymakers only return if the infrastructure promised in the brochures actually passes the reality check.