WHAT IS AN IT STEERING COMMITTEE?



A steering committee is a group of people that decide on the priorities of business within an organization, and then manage the general course of these operations. Of course, involving information technology in any business objective, including a steering committee can change the look, and sometimes the purpose. Enter the IT Steering Committee.

A 2012 industry study ranked the use of IT steering committees as the most mature IT management practice out of 15 practices. The study defined maturity as widely adopted and fully practiced. This article introduces the role of an IT steering committee and how to adopt a useful committee for your organization.

(This tutorial is part of our IT Leadership & Best Practices Guide. Use the right-hand menu to navigate.)

Defining ITSCs

Steering committees may already exist within your organization. But a steering committee specific to IT may be something new.

Many companies have developed specific IT steering committees (ITSC) in order to bring together both IT and business officials in order to make decisions that affect both vital areas. ITSC are often adopted to promote teamwork between the IT teams and direct business teams, in order to support growth and change that align with the overall business mission.

A steering committee is typically comprised of employees in positions of authority within the organization, as they're tasked with both the ability and authority to make strategic decisions. These members can include departmental heads as well as executives.

In contrast to teams of workers, members of a steering committee typically are not involved in performing the work. Instead, they have a significant stake in the work being completed timely, on budget, and within the agreed methods.

Goals of the IT Steering Committee

ITSCs can have various goals depending on your organization. For many, the primary goal is to **provide strategic direction**. This can apply to the entire organization, not merely the IT team and its products. ITSCs are likely to make decisions regarding prioritizing business and IT projects, discussing how IT services apply to non-IT business needs, and ensuring IT best practices, such as security and disaster recovery plans.

A secondary goal of an ITSC may be to **support projects** as defined by the committee. This could include providing guidance to specific teams who have requested IT support (e.g., if the project's ideas align with current IT practices or if proposed IT ideas are truly the best action for the business), offering advice to executives on IT strategies and spending, and determining the criteria for issues that the ITSC will consider in future.

Tips for Organizing Effective IT Steering Committees

Combining high-level IT and business leaders can often feel like butting heads: IT seemingly values things that business leaders may not prioritize, and vice versa. It's easy to feel like the ITSC isn't getting anywhere.

- **Define your purpose and revisit it often.** ITSCs often get off the ground with a lot of excitement and optimism, but after a few meetings may get off course. This makes sense – ITSCs aren't inherently organic. Project management experts recommend defining a specific purpose as a team, with should promote operational productivity through action. This mission may be enshrined in a committee charter. The committee should revisit it often to ensure topics under discussion fit within the mission of the ITSC.
- **Committee members are meant to hold opposing views.** Ideally, an IT steering committee should value two-way communication. The IT representatives should listen to the business team, understanding their needs for a path forward, and, if available, posit potential alternatives that may require less cost or manpower towards the same goal. Conversely, the business representatives should have the ability to turn down suggestions from IT that offer new, unproven technologies whose value-add is unclear.
- **Assign a chairperson.** Members in the group have been appointed to the committee because of their seniority and experience in a particular area, whether that's IT, sales, marketing, executive management, etc. This means that the members share a common purpose – the organizational mission – but whose agendas and methodologies may not align. Therefore, the appointed chair of the steering committee should hold the best interests of the organization or the specific program. Members of the committee can, and should, communicate varied viewpoints on strategy, but ultimately the decision-making rests with this chairman.
- **Meet regularly, with a minimum commitment.** Industry experts recommend regular ITSC meetings. These should occur in-person to ensure clear communication. Meetings should take place every 4-6 weeks, as defined at the start of the ITSC. Members should also commit to a minimum membership time, such as one year, to ensure smooth collaboration.
- **It's not an easy job.** Importantly, all members of the ITSC must keep in mind that the overall

purpose of the steering committee is to communicate and collaborate. All members want the best for the entire enterprise, they just have different outlooks on how to best achieve those business goals.

With a clear-cut mission and a reliance on business in the decision-making process, the ITSC can become a vital, collaborative way to ensure business needs are met.