

Talk is cheap but action is the key

It's not enough to think up great ideas — the crunch comes when these plans must be translated into efficient reality



DIRECTION NEEDED: Clinton In't Veld



IT'S ABOUT EXECUTION: Suzanne Ravenall

Pictures: JEREMY GLYN

Outsourcing delivers results

WHEN it comes to saving lives there can be no room for error. So when Netcare 911 implemented a R3.5-million Quintus customer relationship management solution and an emergency services computer-aided dispatch system, it outsourced the process to project management professionals.

"The project started in May with the initiation phase which involved contract negotiations with solutions providers, definition of individual vendor deliverables and test criteria," says Debbie Nelson, MD of project managers iLAB. "This was followed by the development of the business requirements and specification for the hardware components of the project."

The project team moved on site in July to set up a development environment to customise the basic systems to meet Netcare 911's defined success criteria.

The next stage saw the completion of the computer-telephony integration (CTI) work. This consisted of analysing the environment, configuring the switch and the CTI server, integrating the new solutions with the CTI environment, and testing.

"A disaster recovery project was spun off as a separate project and medical aid data was cleansed to remove inconsistencies that would otherwise result in a corrupted solution."

The call centre can now determine whether a call is an emergency or whether it can be routed to a 24-hour non-emergency advice line. Emergency calls are diverted to dispatchers who are able to direct an immediate response.

CORPORATE SA and the government are alike in being top-heavy with strategic thinkers and lightweight when it comes to people who can get things done.

The hard part is to stop people dreaming up new projects which they cannot complete.

Companies are forever launching innovation drives among staff. Sit with employees and ask for business-improvement suggestions, and you'll soon have dozens of projects. These may vary in scope from outsourcing the canteen to designing new business processes. But few of these ideas get taken up.

"People no longer want to roll up their sleeves. They all want to do the strategic thinking," says Suzanne Ravenall, chief executive officer of International Development and Change Services (IDCS). "For instance, billions of rands lie unused in state coffers because of a lack of capacity to implement projects such as Aids relief. There are charities with access to funds, but they cannot implement projects for lack of capacity."

Unlike most project-management companies which focus on the highbrow strategic think-tank function, IDCS is an "outsourcing operational implementation company". It takes a boardroom decision to the required outcome.

"Many companies employ high-level strategists, or contract with business consultants, but with little emphasis on execution of the board-level strategy they design," says Ravenall. She estimates that of people employed by any company, about 2% are focused on implementing a strategy to the required outcome.

Even when an organisation does have the capacity, there is often a failure in implementation.

Clinton In't Veld, chief executive officer of Xpert Group, says: "Organisations have a strategy and they have projects, so they 'think left and act right'. There's no real alignment between their

projects and their strategy."

"Their strategy talks about all the wonderful things they want to achieve and their projects are doing the complete opposite. This classic misalignment is what we call 'strategic drift.'"

In't Veld says the discipline of project management has caught on with most organisations but adds that projects start and end in the boardroom.

"Today, in the boardrooms of

many major companies, the same question is being asked before major projects are undertaken: 'Is our project portfolio in line with the company's strategic intent and will it deliver the business benefits we need to compete and survive in a changing global marketplace?'

"Typically, the time spent identifying the company's strategic needs is small relative to the input necessary to ensure actual

roll-out of strategic projects," says In't Veld.

"The 'ground forces' don't have a direction within which to work. There is an absence of accountability, coordination and no clear direction. The result, at best, is the haphazard implementation of some projects, partial implementation of others and the shelving of the balance, some of which may be critical to survival."

According to Ravenall, the glo-

ry is with strategic thinking. Implementation, on the other hands, tends to be drudgery, so the implementation process does not get managed.

"The excuse we hear is that management wants to let their people think for themselves in the implementation. Actually, that is an excuse for poor management. Every company has its core competency — ours is operational implementation.

"We have a toolkit of systems and processes that enables us to take any board-level decision and implement it. We take a function from a company and construct an automated checklist system which manages repetitive tasks. Everything has to be done by a certain deadline and if it is not, we have a failure-management system.

"We accept that failure occurs in an organisation, and we manage that failure in order to limit it

to 24 hours. We ensure management gets to hear about it so it can be rapidly resolved."

This practice of stopping failure in its tracks is taken further in the case of really serious failures, where management is informed within two hours rather than 24.

Ravenall claims this system, had it been in place, could have prevented many of the recent spectacular corporate failures such as Worldcom.