



Closing the culture gap

Five ways the new style of learning connects IT and the business





Table of contents

3 **Executive summary**

4 **The need for a new style of learning**

4 **DevOps: a use case with unique challenges**

6 **The solution: create a common culture**

6 1. Begin with the big picture

6 2. Speak the same language

6 3. Create a knowledge hub

7 4. Communicate in new ways

7 5. Make things measurable

8 **Key takeaways**

The rapid rise of cloud, mobility, Big Data, and socialization is driving rapid changes in today's business environment and the need for new, more agile processes like DevOps. IT must now respond faster to the dynamic business demands that come with disruptive technologies—while dealing with major generational shifts in the workforce, culture gaps, and silos that can limit organizational success. Collectively, these challenges drive the need for a new style of learning that helps build trust and competency at all levels of the business.

“Culture eats strategy
for breakfast.”

—Peter Drucker

Executive summary

While people, process, and technology are all critical components of any business initiative, companies often focus primarily on the process and technology elements—because those aspects are easier to plan and quantify—and hope the people component falls into place through strategic hiring.

That's a risky proposition, because the people component can be the most important aspect of the people-process-technology triad. And it's not just people that matter; it's also about bringing together the right mix of people, with the right training, in a common culture focused on shared goals and targeted business outcomes.

As management guru Peter Drucker observed, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Regardless of your strategic plans, if the people components do not come together like the parts of a finely tuned machine, your project can fail—or at best you will get diminished results. A case in point: While 80 percent of IT managers realize training is critical to project success,¹ and lots of companies are increasing budgets for learning and development, many projects still don't deliver the expected payoff.

Findings like these point to shortcomings in how we approach software education and learning. Today's idea economy needs to enable a more productive workplace. To do this, organizations look beyond basic classes that teach people how to use software tools. The focus shifts to business outcomes, a change that requires teams to come out of their silos, collaborate, share knowledge, and operate from a position of trust.

In this new era, we need a new style of learning that closes the culture gap between IT and the business.

¹ IDC. “Worldwide IT Education and Training 2013 Vendor Analysis.” Cushing Anderson, IDC Marketscape #239139, January 2013.

A multigenerational workforce

More than one-in-three American workers today are Millennials (adults ages 18 to 34), and they recently surpassed Generation X to become the largest share of the American workforce.²

Today's generations

- Millennial Generation: 1981–1997
- Generation X: 1965–1980
- Baby Boom Generation: 1946–1964
- Silent Generation: 1928–1945
- Greatest Generation: Before 1928

Going social

According to Brandon Hall Group, more than 80 percent of users are accessing social platforms on their mobile devices and 59 percent of companies are leveraging social learning activities.³ Taking note of these trends, forward-looking organizations are coupling social and collaborative activities with highly interactive virtual courses and learning processes.

The need for a new style of learning

Today's work environment brings challenges associated with multiple generations of workers who have differing preferences on how to communicate and how to carry out tasks. Of the five current generations, four are in the workforce, two of which are in the process of moving out, and the fifth is just about to enter.

Like the generations themselves, work styles now vary by a worker's comfort and familiarity with cloud, Big Data, mobile, and social technologies. All the while, the workforce as a whole is increasingly mobile, with growing numbers of workers connecting from home offices, remote worksites, and just about anywhere else. And as for the traditional office, well, they get there now and then.

The diversity of today's workforce doesn't stop there. Many enterprises now leverage the skills of large numbers of contractors and contingency workers—people who work in targeted areas and are not necessarily part of the larger corporate team. And all the while, the workforce is increasingly global—with different cultural backgrounds, terminology, language, and work styles.

Against this background, today's IT professionals face increasing pressure to deliver software and services in less time. In many cases, this work is accelerated by trends like agile software development processes and DevOps initiatives.

In this new world of enterprise IT, taking the time to attend offsite classes or week-long training sessions that help users master new software tools has become a luxury. And even at that, the people who need to be trained might be in different geographies and different time zones. That's another reason why one-size-fits-all education no longer suits everyone. Also, in an agile environment, training content ages quickly as the speed of application delivery accelerates. So while a comprehensive onsite class offers a solid starting point, you need a plan for ongoing software education and enablement to capture all the change in your business environment.

To ensure the successful adoption of new software technology, and to realize ongoing gains from your investments, you need to solve these enterprise software education challenges. Organizations that don't solve these challenges are likely to pay a price in terms of lost productivity, lower job satisfaction, and difficulties in executing on corporate strategies.

DevOps: a use case with unique challenges

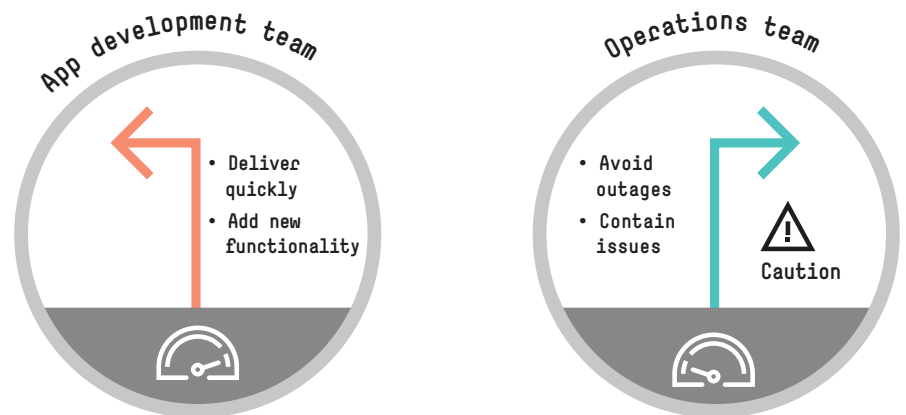
The current trend toward DevOps frameworks provides an interesting use case that covers the new educational challenges driven by cultural silos and procedural gaps. While we usually talk about the gap between IT and the business, DevOps has an additional dimension that emerges in the form of a critical culture gap between groups within IT—Development and Operations.

DevOps is a response to the ever-faster speed of business, which is forcing enterprises to streamline and accelerate the delivery of application changes and innovation. The DevOps approach emphasizes rapid, small, iterative development and deployment of applications to better react to and meet needs of the business and its end customers.

² Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.

³ Brandon Hall Group, 2014 Learning and Development Benchmarking Study.

Application development and IT operations teams travel different roads with different points of view.



Request



These separate roads slow the delivery of new apps and features to customers.

Figure 1. The new style of learning can help bring teams on different roads together

While there are various definitions of DevOps, most observers agree that this new approach to development and operations relies heavily on the people component of the people-process-technology triad. DevOps requires communication, collaboration, integration between groups within IT, and the integration of IT with the business.

DevOps requires a cultural shift that enables development and operations personnel to function as a single, unified team, focused on delivering business value quickly and efficiently. Through its ability to streamline processes across the IT value chain, DevOps brings a fundamental shift in the way people work, moving processes from a linear flow to a continuous approach. This shift requires shared trust, a common culture, and reliable competency between all stakeholders in the value chain.

This is easier said than done. Organizations face big challenges in their efforts to integrate and synchronize the work of development and operations teams. These challenges include different terminology and processes, different technologies, and different goals and metrics—for example, developers want to push through changes for new software features and fixes quickly, while operations personnel want to move more slowly in the interest of maintaining the stability of applications and systems.

The efforts to bring together development and operations are also stymied by a lack of trust between the different teams, fragmented communication, and siloed work streams. In a common scenario, development and operations teams have limited visibility into each other's work streams, and may even have limited interest in each other's work.

“Build new shared metrics that align with the business needs and impacts, but, more importantly, help people realize that they must work together.”

—Gartner⁴

On top of all of these challenges, the standard cultural issues apply across all the teams—such as generational differences, disparate work locations, and differences in individual learning preferences. In addition, learning must be continual to avoid competency gaps when staff members leave the organization and new team members come on board.

When successfully implemented, DevOps supports more frequent changes, faster delivery of software, and higher product quality. That’s a competitive advantage for the business—and education plays a big role in this shift. Just as DevOps embraces continual integration and testing, continual delivery and deployment, and continual operations, successful DevOps initiatives embrace ongoing enablement.

This new style of learning and software education supports high-performance teams during periods of change that impact teamwork—such as role changes, staff attrition, and new-hire onboarding. Ongoing enablement helps organizations keep trust and competencies high in terms of the processes and tools critical to the team.

The solution: create a common culture

When people think of education and training, particularly in the software education realm, they are often thinking about the nuts and bolts of learning an application. In truth, that is just one piece of a larger puzzle, be it a very important piece. Education and software training should also be used to close the culture gap, to help ensure that all players know how to put the software tools to work to achieve the targeted business outcomes.

So how do you get started? Here are five education-oriented steps you can take to create a common culture using a new style of virtual courses and learning—and make the most of your investments in people and technology.

1. Begin with the big picture

Include business goals and targeted outcomes in the educational process. Everyone needs to understand the big picture—where they are driving to, why other groups may be behaving in a certain way, and how the goals of each group are in alignment (and sometimes not in alignment). Training that begins at this level helps ensure that different teams have confidence in each other, which fosters cross-organizational cooperation and trust.

2. Speak the same language

Define common terminology and common processes to help ensure that all of your people are communicating in terms that everyone understands, following agreed-on processes, and moving in the same general direction.

3. Create a knowledge hub

Establish a single-source repository for terminology, processes, and support resources. Deliver information via “micro-content” that can be quickly consumed and updated, versus lengthy technical documents that few people will read. This single-source repository acts as a knowledge hub that enables rapid consumption of content and softens the impact of change. It can be especially helpful when staff members change or contingent workers, such as consultants and contractors, join the team and need to get up to speed quickly.

⁴ Gartner, “Seven Steps to Start Your DevOps Initiative,” September 16, 2014.



As processes evolve, a knowledge hub is easily updated to reflect current approaches. The goal is to give all applicable workers easy access to information that is always up to date, whenever they need it, so learning can be an ongoing process. Better still, training resources should be offered in various modalities to meet the needs of different users with different learning styles.

Similarly, virtual courses and training resources should be offered at different levels of detail, to meet the needs of different users. A knowledge hub can easily accommodate this requirement—it can house documentation for entire toolsets, including open source resources.

4. Communicate in new ways

Create a social and engaging learning environment that welcomes workers on their terms—from Twitter and Facebook to blogs and mobile apps. Leverage expert sourcing so lessons learned and content developed for the team are captured and remain accessible when experts leave the company.

Be sure that people can communicate in their preferred ways and through their preferred channels. As with their lives in general, people will engage more and build stronger relationships if they can do it on their own and in familiar ways.

5. Make things measurable

Establish a framework for gauging your success. To that end, define metrics that make sense for individuals, groups, and teams. The often-quoted adage “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it” applies here, just as it applies about anywhere else in the business. Metrics can also be incorporated into gamification to encourage engagement between teams.

These five steps help you create a culture of ongoing enablement that moves your organization beyond the pitfalls of traditional classroom training and drives higher adoption of new software tools. In today’s digitally driven world, things change at the speed of light, so people need to continually absorb what’s new. The new style of learning makes learning a part of the everyday work experience.



Key takeaways

To capitalize fully on your investments in software, you have to invest in people. It's not enough to focus on just processes and technology and expect the people problem to take care of itself.

A strategic focus on software education, coupled with tactical steps for moving forward, can help you create a common culture. That's the key to gaining the greatest value from your software investments and making the most of your business.

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