
Serious Shadow Games

Imprecise language sometimes becomes an occupational hazard. Too frequently even the sharpest technologists lapse into code speak, using abstract terms as if they were engraved in Webster's dictionary. Fueled by curiosity, a love of language and a quixotic desire for more clarity in discussions of technology, the JargonSpy is on a mission to find the genuine meaning and context of the terms that too many of us throw around. Finding the larger story behind the words we use is key to understanding the current struggle to make technology work. So, join in.

Our inaugural mission sends us into the domain of "Shadow IT," a term that has increasingly been used to describe the way that people in companies have started bypassing the information technology department and creating technology solutions for themselves. Fueled by their frustration with the solutions provided to them by corporate IT departments and by the power of readily available software tools via the Web, users have started creating their own solutions in the shadows.

The rise in Shadow IT falls in line with previous generations of do-it-yourself IT. When personal computers arrived, departments and individuals started doing for themselves with spreadsheets, word processors and databases running on the desktop. In the Internet era, business productivity Web sites sprouted like kudzu, reflecting the energy and excitement about the business potential of the new medium.

IT managers spotted these developments and gradually brought them into line with corporate policy--shutting down some parts, putting standards in place in others and adding new levels of security and management.

Now the engine driving activity in the shadows is the vast number of "as-a-service" offerings that give users more power than the bookshelves of lonely client software at their offices.

Consumer technology now has the ball for quality and ease of use in end-user computing. The services offered by Amazon , Google , Yahoo! , eBay and the other leading lights are the acknowledged examples for software-as-a-service companies. Setting up a wiki is just a click away on Wikispaces.com, PB Wiki or Google sites. Blogs are just as easy on Blogspot, Blogger or Typepad. You can get a whole project management environment in Basecamp or Central Desktop, or a social networking environment in Facebook or Ning.

Want to create an e-mail server? Go to Zimbra or Google Apps. If you are looking for raw materials for computing, you can get them from platform-as-a-service offerings such as Amazon Web Services that provide storage, computing power and e-commerce capabilities.

Salesforce.com has turned its software into a development environment that is being used by end users, IT departments and third-party software companies. Simple environments for creating Mashup applications from services, such as Yahoo! Pipes, JackBe, Connotate and Serena all pave the way for increasing amounts of "do-it-yourselfing," in the shadows.

The attitude that a company takes toward shadow IT makes all the difference. Too many IT departments want all this to just go away--as if by shining the light on shadow IT, all of the pesky applications will scuttle away and disappear.

Bad idea. This approach means taking a huge step backward. Most IT departments can't offer services of comparable quality. A user who is used to running his own wiki or

collaborating with teams of people using Basecamp or Facebook is not eager to go back to a less powerful solution or to one that is intermediated by IT.

Sometimes the IT department has a legitimate problem with shadow forces: The service level agreements for many of these "as-a-service" offerings contain thorny issues around who owns what and provide no guarantees of uptime or availability. For the most part, everything goes well operationally in the as-a-service world but a drumbeat of outages has shown that there is progress to be made in reliability.

The more productive attitude toward shadow IT is to recognize it as a valuable playground for end-user computing. Some of what is found in the shadows should just be adopted by IT. Do we really need to run our own mail servers? Some of us do, but many more of us don't. Sometimes the most cost-effective solution that brings the technology back under the corporate umbrella is to use the service offering on a private, white-label basis.

Wikispaces.com will let you run a private version of its services under your own domain, and many other as-a-service offerings work the same way. For much of the other activity, IT should start helping by creating an approved environment for experimentation by end users and then populating that environment with Web services that provide access to the systems of record. End users can then start mashing up applications to meet their own needs.

In this model, the IT department becomes like a chemist, providing tools for users to experiment, helping set standards, guiding the use of technologies to ensure security and compliance and, most of all, becoming a smart observer who notes what works best. When good ideas occur in the shadows, IT can make them more robust and scalable and introduce them to users who would benefit from them.

Of course, by this time, the era of shadow IT has ended. None of this is going on in the shadows anymore; it is too damn important for that.